

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# THE PROPHETIC STYLE

WERE we to set ourselves down to frame conjectures as to what subjects we might expect to find in prophecy, we should be led into many extravagances. Each one would view the matter in a different light, and according to the relative importance of different events in his estimation, he would sketch his conjectural outline of what topics he thought likely to fill up the page of prophecy. If set to compile a history of the past, from the beginning of the world, according to our notions of what such a narrative ought to deal with, we should each form a different history, a different selection of facts, a different line of narrative. So, in prophecy, our ideas of what ought to be found there, would be widely diverse from each other; and as different from what we actually have in Scripture, as from each other.

Suppose that we were commencing the study of the prophetic oracles as a new and unknown book, it is of importance, before entering fairly upon it, to obtain some general idea, or even some loose hint, regarding the nature of the book, and the line of argument or narrative we might expect, as a sort of guide to enable us to make good some footing upon the yet untrodden territory. As we reject all guidance which depends merely upon our own fancies, we must look to something else for assistance here. We turn, then, to the analogy of the past, as a more sober and trustworthy guide in this conjectural path. Taking our stand upon the scriptural narrative of the past, we may soberly endeavor to shape out a somewhat similar course in history of the future, though in a very general way. Here we are upon lawful ground. If asked, then, to form a conjecture as to the probable subject of the prophetic oracles, we should say the likelihood is, that between the history of the future and of the past there will be a strong *general* analogy, a likeness between

the subjects, between the selection of events, between the line of narrative, and between the style of both. We rise from sacred history, and we go to prophecy, expecting to find just a different part of the same general narrative, another page of the same volume.

What, then, do we find in Scripture history? Its grand subject is, the *corporate* history of the Church of Christ. We say corporate history, or history of the Church as a body; because, although we are presented with many individual characters, yet these are generally set before us as representatives of the Church at that period to which they belong; and the whole bearing of the narrative is upon the history of the Church as a body, its origin and progress, its different stages and dispensations, its straightenings and enlarge-ings, and, above all, its connection with one mighty Personage, who is most mysteriously brought in at every turn, as the center point round which all seems to revolve. This is the main stream of Scripture history; but it is not the only one. We have, likewise, the history of the Church's enemies, or rather, in conformity with Scripture language, we should say "enemy;" as "the seed of the serpent," however numerous, is generally personified, and alluded to under the name of that nation or king who at any particular period happened to be at the head of the enemies of the Lord.

Turning, then, to prophecy, we should expect to find these same two streams flowing on through its pages,—the history of the Church as a body, and the history of the world as a body, in so far as the latter has any direct bearing upon the former. And so we do find it. There are some, indeed, who, in interpreting unfulfilled prophecy, set out with the principle that it is the history of the Church alone which we are to look for there; and that, with the history of the world, prophecy has very little to

do. Now, in opposition to this, I remark, that such an exclusive narrative could not be written. As well might you attempt to write the story of a battle, by relating the actions and achievement of one side alone. Grant that the prophetic vision is mainly of the Church; yet the ground of the picture is the world; its scenery is the world; many of the personages represented must be of the world; and therefore both must be thrown upon the canvas together. All Scripture history, and all prophecy already fulfilled, establish this opinion. The first piece of *history* on record is the notice of the serpent (Gen. 3:1). There the history of our race may be properly said to begin. The first *prophecy* is of the *serpent* as well as the woman's seed. Tracing prophecy downward, we observe the same principle acted on. We need only cite the prophecies of Nineveh, Babylon, and Tyre, amid many that might be adduced. These are predictions regarding the Church's enemies. In accordance with this peculiarity of structure, we can trace a similar peculiarity of style. Out of the parallel events in the *past* history of the two parties referred to, is constructed the language in which their *future* history is written; and many of the peculiarities of prophecy can only be fully explained by a minute reference to, and comparison of, these parallel events. Take, for instance, "the Assyrian," spoken of in Isaiah 10:5,—“Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of mine anger!” The literal Assyrian king is first introduced as the rod of Jehovah's anger against Israel; but scarcely has the prophet brought him before us, and briefly alluded to the chief occurrences of that period in which he was concerned, than he hurries us past the events of that age, and, under the name of “the Assyrian,” prophesies of his people's enemies, under all their manifold forms, as fit representatives of the pride, oppression, and irreligion of their first Assyrian head.

Take, as another example, “Edom,” and “Bozrah,” as alluded to in Isaiah 63:1: “Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?” There the event predicted is evidently the second coming of Christ, or, rather, we should say, the appear-

ance of Christ in behalf of His chosen people, after the destruction of the anti-Christian host. Edom is all along, both in history and prophecy, taken for the enemy of the Jewish Church, as Esau (who is Edom) was the enemy of Jacob; and Bozrah is the capital of Edom, or Idumea. Edom is the representative of the great apostate nation, who, disregarding the brotherly covenant, persecutes and seeks to destroy Jehovah's people; and Bozrah is the representative of the chief city of this persecuting power; the heat of God's sorest judgment and selectest wrath, where there is the treading of “the wine-press of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.”

Take, again, Babylon, the name most frequently used in Scripture for the enemy of the Church in each successive age; the fullest, largest, and most significant type of this which Scripture affords us; round the very name of which are gathered images of gloom and grandeur, of glory and desolation, such as her imperial successor of the West has never yet paralleled. Babylon, the city of confusion, the seat of universal monarchy, the citadel of superstition and tyranny, the capital of Nimrod and Nebuchadnezzar, enemy of Jehovah, persecutor of His Church, raiser of His temple, destroyer of His city, enslaver of His people! It was pitched as Satan's metropolis and temple, right against the city and temple of Jehovah; and for centuries God permitted it to stand, as a type of His Church's future enemies, to furnish out of its name and history a name and language for them all. Then it was swept with the broom of destruction, tower and battlement, corner-stone and foundation, leaving no fragment of its existence behind it but the memory and name, that its desolation might afford materials for a language to the prophets, in picturing the ruin of a still mightier enemy to come. When God reared for himself again a people and a city in other lands, Satan again upreared his city in defiance, exchanging the Euphrates for the Tiber, the plain of Shinar for the seven hills of Latium. But to show that this new enemy was one and the same with the ancient enemy of the East, He sent forth His prophets and apostles to inscribe upon the gates

and walls of the new city, "Babylon the Great," thereby not merely identifying her with Babylon of old, but proclaiming how much she was to outdo her model in all for which she had been infamous. And now she stands before us at this day, true representative of her eastern progenitor, the mother of harlots, counterpart to the city of Semiramis, but a more relentless oppressor of the saints, darker prison-house of the Church, true personification of the evil one, seat of fouler superstition than the Chaldean astrology, of more hateful idolatry than the worship of Bel and Nebo, city of more daring pride, saying, not merely, "I will ascend above the stars of God," but, "I will be above all that is called God, or that is worshipped: I will sit in the temple of God, showing myself that I am God;" assuming all power above and below, changing times and laws, speaking great swelling words against the Most High, unpeopling earth of God's chosen Israel, and peopling heaven with the sainted pandemonium of Rome!

From these instances we may obtain much insight into the method after which prophetic language is constructed. A proper attention to these parallel lines of prophecy in the history of the Church and the Church's enemies, would enable us to discover, not merely the meaning, but the peculiar force and fitness of the historical allusions which are interwoven with all prophecy, and which constitute the basis of its language, the roots of *themata* of its vocabulary. We are not to content ourselves with knowing that such a name refers to the Church, and such another to her enemy, that Israel means God's people, and the Assyrian means her persecutor. We must go closely to the particular events alluded to, and observe the exact condition of the Church, and the exact position of her enemy, at the time and in the circumstances to which allusion is made. For as each new name and period of the Church set her before us in a different posture, so do the corresponding name and period of her persecutor bring before us a new form of Satan's hostility, a peculiar and distinctive feature of his enmity. And, moreover, as in the former we find the peculiar state of the Church

at the time, so in the latter we have the peculiar judgment with which God, for her correction, saw fit to visit her, by letting lose the enmity of that power with which she was brought into contact.

We see, then, how much prophecy partakes of the structure, characteristics, and especially of the language of history, and how a right interpretation of prophetic language depends much upon a right knowledge of the historical events which are wrought into its style with such curious art and delicacy of texture.

But it is maintained, that, even admitting the analogy between the structure and style of these two departments of Scripture, still prophecy is less definite and less regular in its composition than history. That there are some parts of prophecy of which this is true, I allow; but we can, on the other hand, point to many a portion of it where the details are as minutely brought out, and where the language is as precise and regular, as in any page of the most exact history. Take, for example, the prophecy of Moses regarding his nation, in the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy, in which their whole future history, from his own time down through all their captivity and sufferings, to the time of their restoration, is so minutely and distinctly predicted. Or read the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> chapters of Jeremiah, which we may regard as the continuation, or filling up of the prophecy of Moses. It takes up the future story of the Jews at the very time when Moses breaks off—the period of their restoration to their own land from their long captivity. It points to a time of sore trouble still destined for Jacob (30:7), out of which he is to be saved triumphantly, and after which he shall return and serve David the king. It tells us that Jerusalem shall be "builided again upon her own heap," though of a new compass and extent, "from the tower of Hananeel unto the gate of the corner," and from "the hill Gareb compassing about to Goath" (31:38). All these events and circumstances it predicts as plainly and definitely as if narrating a past event which had taken place before the prophet's eyes. Many other instances, from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the minor prophets, might be adduced to the same effect.

We might say that at least one half of prophecy is of this definite character. It is not, then, essential to prophecy to be either indefinite or irregular. In other words, indefiniteness and irregularity are not *peculiarities* of prophetic style. In so far as either of those characters may pertain to it, they do so only in common with other parts of Scripture.

Then again, there are some who maintain that prophecy is necessarily obscure, if not altogether inexplicable. Their statement is, that figurative language being essential to its structure, obscurity must follow. In some parts, this, to a certain extent, may be the case; but I am well persuaded of two things: first, that there are many passages where the obscurity of the figurative style, in which it can be plainly traced to other causes;—and, secondly, that many of the most highly figurative prophecies are as plain as if they contained no prophecy at all; nay, the very figure complained of fixes down the meaning with a plainness and precision which shows that its intention was not to obscure, but to illustrate. I may allow that figures can be employed for the purpose of obscuring a subject; that this is their usual object, I deny. Their common use is to give force and beauty to the style.

The chief difference between literal and figurative language may perhaps be said to be the indefiniteness of the latter; such an indefiniteness, I mean, as does not at once, and by the very name of the word, suggest the one precise idea or object intended, as in such Hebraisms as the following, “cedars of God,” *i.e.*, mighty cedars,—“son of the burning coal,” *i.e.*, a spark,—“eyelids of the morning,” *i.e.*, dawn. Such figures or paraphrastic expressions, of which all language originally consisted, may to a certain extent be charged with ambiguity, till by familiar usage, or by the substitution of *one* word to express them, they have established themselves in the dialect and ideas of a nation. They may be called indefinite, till common use has stripped them of all but the precise idea intended, has sunk them to the level, and stiffened them into the cold precision of ordinary diction. But then, such an indefiniteness can only be called obscurity when

there is no key to the exact meaning; for wherever by any hints of the author, or by the position in which the words occur, their significance becomes plain; then their very indefiniteness ennobles and adorns the composition, fitting them especially for embodying their sublimity and splendor of prophetic visions, which language less elastic and expansible could not have grasped. A great deal of obscurity has been ascribed to the prophets which does not really belong to them, and much that is both unmeaning and untrue has been spoken about the “necessary obscurity of figurative language.” The re-marks just made will show the incorrectness of such an assertion, and that figures are generally used for the very purpose of strengthening the style, and conveying the sentiments intended, with more exactness of description and more vividness of coloring. As one illustration, take any two prophecies upon the same subject, the one figurative, and the other literal, and see whether the one be less plain than the other. Look at the two predictions in Ezekiel regarding the future condition of the Jewish nation, the one figurative, in 34:11-29, the other literal, 36:27; read them together, and see if the figure of the one throws over it a mystery from which the other is free.

What liberties do some interpreters take with the prophetic word! They find in every page almost what they call figurative language, and, under this idea, they explain away whole chapters without scruple or remorse. They complain much of the obscurity of the prophetic language. It is an obscurity, however, of their own creating. If they will force figures upon the prophets when they are manifestly speaking with all plainness and literality, no wonder that darkness and mystery seem to brood over the prophetic page. The truth is, there is less figure and more literality in Scripture than many will allow; and, as a general rule for its interpretation, I know not a safer one than that we are to interpret literally until cause be shown for our departing from it. The literal is the basis of the figurative, and the key to its translation. The former is the rule, the latter the exception. Proceeding, then, upon this

principle, that we must take all as literal till we are forced from it by something inconsistent or absurd, we shall find a far smoother and straighter way through the fields of prophecy than most men will believe. If we take the waters as we find them, we shall enjoy them clear and fresh; but if we will always be searching for some fancied figure at the bottom, or casting in one when we do not readily discover it, we need not be astonished nor complain that the stream is turbid and impure.

How plain, for instance, is that description in Isaiah 11:6-9, of the blessed condition of the renovated earth, and the share which even the lower creation is to have in this glad event! How can any one reading it not call to mind the peace of Eden, with all its rejoicing creatures, brought back to the harmony and happiness of their primeval being, or fail to contrast with that condition, thus foretold, the miserable state in which the apostle paints them, when he tells us that “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now?” [Rom. 8:22]. Who, in reading this plain prophecy, can fail to realize the time when Eden and its scenes shall revisit the earth; and when, as once, beneath its overshadowing verdure, the newborn creatures took their pastime, and tasted their sinless enjoyment; so again, beneath the shadow of that “Branch which is to grow out of the root of Jesse,” “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them?” [Isa. 11:1, 6]. Yet even this plain passage has been subjected to an allegorizing process, in order to compel it to yield another meaning. It is said to signify the harmony which will one day subsist between men of the most turbulent passions and discordant dispositions! When we ask, with astonishment, if words so definite and simple *can* have such a meaning, we are told that it is a far more noble and sublime idea that men of evil passions should be softened, than that the beasts of the field should become harmonious in their natures! It may be so. It may be a sublime meaning, but it will be difficult to prove it to be *the* meaning of the passage. Attempts of this kind to bring out a

“spiritual and sublime meaning” from language so plainly literal, destroy the simplicity of Scripture. Instead of elevating, they degrade it, and, moreover, cast over it an air of puerility and feebleness which are ill redeemed by the fancied “sublimity” of the idea extorted from its imaginary figures.

We see, then, that as figurative language is not necessarily obscure, but the reverse, the charge of obscurity brought by some against all figurative prophecy is unfounded. Nay, further, the mystery complained of is generally one of their own creating; and the true cause of their finding so much darkness in that which an apostle calls “a light in a dark place,” is their peculiar way of forcing a figure upon every chapter or verse where by any possibility they can manage to do so. They proceed upon the principle that prophecy is not to be brought under the rule of interpretation adopted with regard to the other parts of Scripture, but to be considered as almost universally figurative, with occasional but rare exceptions. Now, we maintain that prophecy is to be interpreted upon the same general principles as we apply to the other books of inspiration, and that with it, as with the rest, we are to set out with this simple rule—“literal, if possible.”<sup>1</sup>

But are we not to be allowed to spiritualize prophecy? In so far as we understand the meaning of this vague expression, we answer, undoubtedly. We may spiritualize prophecy *in the same way and to the same extent* as we spiritualize history, but no other. In this respect we maintain that prophecy and history stand not merely on an analogous, but on precisely the same footing. The history of the future is to be made available in the same way as the history of the past. To spiritualize history is perfectly allowable, nay, highly profitable, *provided you have first interpreted it*, but not before. So, to spiritualize prophecy is most proper, most profitable, *provided you have first interpreted it*, but not before. Many seem to think that *spiritualizing is inter-pretting*. I

<sup>1</sup> It would be better to commend the more objective rule of “always literal,” according to the categories of “plain literal” and “figurative literal.” B.E.H.

cannot think so. To adopt, or at least to carry out such a system, would soon land us in the dreams of Origen, if not in the wild mysticism of Behmen or Swedenborg. As an instance in point, let me refer to Dr. Chalmer's noble sermon on, "The New Heavens and New Earth." The words of his text are those of the apostle Peter, in his second epistle. "We, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" [II Pet. 3:13]. A common reader would at once gather from these words the idea which the writer most eloquently and conclusively demonstrates to be the true one, that in the future state there is to be a material earth for our material bodies. Some, however, by means of the spiritualizing process we have just described, have endeavored to extract a meaning by which all reference to materialism is avoided. In the sermon referred to, the writer very graphically depicts, and in the very depicting refutes most effectually, this spiritual meaning. The idea of these interpreters regarding man's future state is described to be "that of a lofty, ærial region, where the inmates float in ether, or are mysteriously floated upon nothing!" And while one class of these interpreters would thus explain away the words "earth and heavens," another, not going so far, would yet stumble on the epithet "new," maintaining that it must mean a different globe altogether, forgetting that Scripture speaks also of a "new man," thereby meaning, not a different man, but the same man made new; not one individual annihilated and replaced by another, but the same man made new; the same individual fashioned aright and purified.

We freely consent that prophecy should be spiritualized, that is, should be made to give forth a spiritual utterance; and not prophecy only, but the whole Bible. Only we would first interpret it. Now here is the point at which so many stumble. They confound *spiritualizing* with *interpreting* Scripture. They think that when they have contrived to wedge in a spiritual observation (often by main force) between every verse or clause, they have succeeded in explaining it. It will generally be found that those who so spiritualize Scripture

do little else than *graft* their own ideas upon it, instead of gathering the meaning of the Spirit from it, they force a sense into it, instead of drawing one out of it. Every verse, from Genesis to Revelation, may be spiritualized, and yet not one be interpreted.<sup>2</sup>

Such expositors are in the habit of using the term "spiritual" as synonymous with "figurative," and as a contrast to "literal." Now, a moment's thought will show any one that a literal interpretation may be as spiritual as any other. The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is one of the most literal of all prophecies, yet one of the most spiritual of all. The opposition is not between spiritual and figurative, but between figurative and literal; spiritual is distinct from both, and in addition to both. It may be based upon either, but it cannot be called a language by itself. We cannot admit such a thing as a spiritual style; we claim for prophecy just two styles, the literal and the figurative, including in the latter, of course, the symbolical. The literal is the basis of the whole. The figurative rises out of the literal, and the symbolical rises out of the figurative, and seems but a higher degree of it; and as the literal is the basis of the figurative, so it is the key to its explanation. From the literal we see the way in which what was once figurative sank to the level of the literal, and how what is at present figurative rose above that level. We have in the literal a standard by which we can measure and calculate the variations of language. In the figurative we have the first step above the former, the index of the

<sup>2</sup> Jerome's commentaries exhibit many a singular specimen of the above-mentioned plan of exposition. Yet fanciful as he generally shows himself, there are some places in which he betrays his want of confidence in this system, and his approval of something more literal. I quote the following passage from his remarks on Jeremiah 19:10:—"Quamquam sibi Judæi auream atque gemmatam Hiersusalem restituendam putent, rursumque victimas et sacrificial et conjugia sanctorum, et regnum in terris Domini Salvatoris; quæ licet non sequamur tamen damnare non possumus, quia multa ecclesiasticorum virorum et martyres ista dixerunt."—*Opera*, vol. iv. p. 272.

variable quality; and from these data we can proceed to estimate all the rest.

We have gained another step, then, in our investigation into the structure of the prophetic style; viz, that spiritualization is not a peculiarity of prophecy, but belongs to it only in common with all the other parts of Scripture. Now, it is of vast importance to show that this is not peculiar to the prophecies, because they must thus fall to be dealt with in the same way as the other books of inspiration, and to be interpreted upon the same principles. This will much lessen our difficulties, and clear away a mass of confusion which the opposite idea had heaped up as an almost impassable obstacle in the way of prophetic students. As Lucké well observes, in his book on the Apocalypse, "The interpretation of the Apocalypse proceeds essentially upon the same hermeneutic principles whereon the interpretation of the other books of the New Testament proceeds. There is no peculiarity of the Apocalypse obvious and noticeable, whereby the generally sufficient fundamental laws of New Testament interpretation can become essentially changed or taken away." To this we would add, that, as prophecy is to be dealt with in the way of *criticism* as the rest of Scripture is dealt with, so also it is to be dealt with in the way of *exposition*. All its minute clauses and phrases are to be as closely sifted and precisely expounded as are the minuter expressions of other parts of the Divine record.

If these remarks be received and proceeded on, they will go far to overthrow the loose ideas which many entertain of the prophecies, that as they are written in the highest style of poetry, and with the boldest figures, therefore we are not to apply to them the more exact principles of interpretation, but must make considerable allowance and deduction for the largeness of *poetical* license, and the laxity of *poetical* diction.

Such a view of prophetic Scripture is low indeed. It is a low view even of uninspired poetry, to speak of it as either needing or adopting such a license; and any one who has read Milton, for instance, as he ought to be read, would reject such an idea as an insult to

that mighty name, well knowing what an exactness of truth there is preserved in every accidental figure and allusion, what fullness of meaning there is condensed into every expression, and that it is only the careless reader that finds anything superfluous or needing to be accounted for by the idea of poetical license. It is, we say, a low view even of uninspired poetry, to regard it otherwise than as a finer mold of truth; but to speak of such a license as practiced by the prophets, is a most degrading view of inspiration, a most irreverent charge brought against the Word of "the only wise God." The rich language, and the exuberant imagery of prophecy are not to take their place in the rank of loose metaphor and bold hyperbole. *There*, human language labors for words of fit dimension to contain, and of worthy form to set forth, the conceptions of the Infinite Mind.

The figures of the prophets are not disposed of according to the taste or fancy of the writer; but they are the fittest, fullest, exactest forms for containing and conveying Divine truth to man. They may be ornamental, but they are far more than this. They are not like Gothic projections which adorn but do not strengthen the fabric; they are like the pillars of Grecian architecture, for support and strength even more than for beauty.

According to this low view, whole sections of Scripture may be read without any exact meaning being affixed to them. The last eight chapters of Ezekiel are explained by many so as to bring out nothing but one idea, viz., that the Christian Church was to be perfect in all its parts, just as the "fictitious" temple described by the prophet, was exact and complete. As well might they say that the various rules of measurement given us by Moses, are only intended to tell us that the Jewish Church was perfect in *its* kind. Those to whom God has given some reverence for His Word, and who looks with awe upon its every jot and tittle as more solid and enduring than the everlasting heavens, will be afraid to deal with it so lightly. Those who, amid the multitude of human works and human words, have been accustomed to prize God's Word, and to search

for it as for gold among the sand, will count its every particle sacred and precious. If they understand it not, they will prize it still, and hold it fast till God send them a teacher in His own time, which He is never unwilling to do.

But how are we to obtain the proper insight into these figures, and how are we to open out all their fullness of meaning? The first thing to be done for this end, is to examine the *materials* out of which they are constructed. The figures of common language are formed out of the objects with which we are brought usually into contact, just as words themselves were originally figures taken from the different objects of nature. But the language of Scripture, especially of prophecy, is of a more hallowed texture; it, no doubt, in part consists of the common forms of language, but there is wrought into it much of more sacred materials. The objects with which the prophets were brought into contact were of a peculiar nature, and their style, of course, especially its more figurative parts, almost entirely took its form and coloring from these peculiar objects. Even common objects, being always presented to them in a peculiar light, and in a peculiar connection, entered into the composition of their style in a peculiar way, and carrying along with them their peculiar associations.

It is to the facts and events of Scripture history, the characters of Scripture person-ages, the records of Scripture places and nations, the rites and ceremonies of Scripture worship, that we are to look for the storehouse out of which the prophets drew their figures and symbols; and by these we must interpret all their peculiarities of style. To the events of Providence and the services of the sanctuary, under the Jewish economy, the prophets seem to resort as furnishing materials for the only language through which they could adequately express themselves. They appropriate Jewish words and allusions; they embody Jewish history and ordinances in their style, and thereby construct to them-selves a peculiar language—a rich and noble dialect—the fullest and most beautiful, the exactest and most expressive that mortal has ever attained to. The language of heathen poets has been lauded as

exquisite; and we deny not that it is worthy of uninspired men; but it is poverty and meagerness in comparison with this. And why? Not merely because they were uninspired men and pagans, but because they lacked the rich materials to which the prophets had access. Their language embodied merely the common events of life, the common objects of nature, and the fables of a puerile and unclean mythology. And the prophets had all natural objects and events to resort to and draw from, but they had more. They had the history and the ordinances of God's people; which history seems to have been recorded, with the design of furnishing materials for a language to the prophets of Jehovah, by which they were enabled to express ideas, and declare events, which in no other way they could have succeeded in making known. More especially we would say this of the Apocalypse, which, being the latest book of prophecy, has the advantage of all others in this respect. It is written throughout in the language of the Old Testament, both historical and prophetic. All the Jewish ordinances are there, and all Jewish history. It seems as if the whole fabric of the old dispensation had been taken to pieces after it had served its time, in order to have its different parts applied to the building of another and more stately edifice, in combination with new materials. Its worship, its feasts, its sacrifices, its altar, its sanctuary, its high priests, its outer and inner courts, its times and seasons, are all transplanted here. The history of God's ancient people, their Egyptian bondage, their desert sojournings, their possession of Canaan, their capture of its cities, their imprisonment in Babylon, are gathered together, to build up the prophet's style; all sought out from their various places, and, with exquisite art and care, polished and perfected, so as to form themselves into one harmonious composition, one splendid mosaic, from which the various ideas of the Divine mind, and the various events of futurity, might fitly be reflected to the eye of man.

The whole fashion and texture of the book are Jewish. Its style, its structure, its scenery, are Jewish. Its scenes are laid in Palestine, in the

holy city and temple. Each prophetic vista is hung with Jewish drapery, and all the light is transmitted through Jewish transparencies from the seven-branched lamp of the holy place. The scene shifts from the outer court of the temple and its worshipping crowds, to the inner court with its priests and incense-altar; and from the inner court to the Holy of Holies, trodden by the solitary high priest, and filled with the Shekinah glory. We have the redemption of the inheritance, the trumpet of jubilee and judgment, the sealed tribes, the feast of first fruits, the palms of the feast of tabernacles. These are not mere names. They are all introduced with consummate art. They are so inserted, as on the one hand to serve as links joining together the different parts of the book in exact order, suggesting time, locality, and connection; and, on the other, as hooks whereon to fasten the events which form the antitypes, and which thus by the mere mention of the type are fully embodied in the prophecy.

As one example of this style in the Apocalypse, we may take the fifth and sixth chapters, where "the sealed book" is brought in. A common reader would be content with taking the word "sealed" in its usual acceptation of "closed up," and the whole vision as meaning merely that Christ was the opener of the events to His Church. But a reader aware of the peculiar style of the book, would at once go back for an interpretation of the symbol, to Jewish rites and history. Knowing the exactness of each symbol, he would conclude, in the first place, that Christ being presented to us as *the Lamb*, is not to be regarded in the character of revealer, but in that of Redeemer. The prologue to the vision, as given us in the fifth chapter, and especially verses nine and ten, confirms this. There the Church in heaven is represented as rejoicing in the prospect of the Lamb's taking the book and opening it, as an action preparatory to, and an earnest of, the redemption of the inheritance of the earth. Then we find that the "sealed book" was, among the Jews, the sign of an inheritance, mortgaged by its owner, but not alienated. Christ, appearing here, therefore, with the seven-sealed book, must be regarded in the

character of Redeemer of the inheritance, according to the ordinance of the goel, or redeemer, as described in Leviticus 25 and exemplified in the Book of Ruth, and in Jeremiah 32. The opening of the seals is the action of Christ as Redeemer, appearing with the title-deeds of the inheritance, to dispossess the usurper, and reclaim the inheritance for those to whom He stands in the relation of Redeemer. The seals are, as it were, the bonds upon the estate; and as they are opened one by one, blow after blow comes down upon the usurper, till the spoilers of the earth are spoiled, the inheritance is redeemed, and Christ "takes to Himself His great power and reigns."

Connected with these remarks, we would also notice not merely the materials thus collected, and the sources from which they are drawn together; but the exact and appropriate distribution and arrangement of these. Each scene has its appropriate figures, modeled according to the characteristic features of that scene. To illustrate our meaning, let us take Ezekiel's prophecy of Tyre, at least that part of it embraced by the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter. Tyre was a commercial city "the merchant of the people for many isles;" and, therefore, in the prophecy regarding her, she is spoken of as a ship, and the various imagery of the prophet is arranged accordingly, and can only be rightly understood by adverting to this idea. As such she is described in most glowing language. Her structure is perfect; her timbers are of the fir-trees of Senir; her masts of the cedars of Lebanon; her oars of the oaks of Bashan; her benches of the ivory of Chittim; her sails of the fine linen of Egypt; her awning of the blue and purple from the isles of Greece; the chief maritime cities furnish her with seamen; her own sages are her pilots; all nations, near and far, pour in their produce, of various kind, from every various clime. Unrivalled in power and wealth, she floats before us the mistress of the seas! Around her are gathered the tributary fleets from a thousand shores, loading her with all goodly merchandise; the sea is peaceful; the winds are at rest; her moorings are fast; the splendor of sunshine is over her; "she is replenished and made glorious in the midst of

the seas." In a moment the scene changes, and the stately vessel is seen far from her safe anchorage and out at sea; her rowers, filled with the mad love of change, hurry her out into the "great waters" to taste the fancied freedom of the deep; the storm drives over her, the east wind comes up against her, and she is a wreck! The cry of her pilots is heard afar off, and multitudes crowd the shores, gazing on the sudden wreck, and bewailing her calamity. With all her merchandise within her, with all her pomp about her, she goes down in the mighty waters, amid the wailing of those that stand upon the shore, lamenting and saying, "What desolation is like Tyrus, like the desolation in the midst of the sea!"

What an appropriate assemblage of figures; what completeness of painting; what unity of design! Nor is this last illustration at all inconsistent with the preceding remarks, that the imagery of the prophets is Jewish. They are perfectly consistent with each other. The language regarding Tyre is still Jewish language, shaping itself according to the situation and circumstances of the people addressed. The materials of the web are still Jewish, though the embroidery is Tyrian; the coinage is still of the fine gold of the sanctuary, though the image and superscription may be struck according to the event or nation which they are intended to symbolize.

The last point upon this subject which I would notice, is what may be called the *filling up* of prophetic language; a point of vast importance, and the only key to the solution of many of those difficulties which have perplexed the students of Scripture. The structure of prophetic language is of such a kind as that, while describing some more particular and immediate scene, it is capable of expanding to such a compass as to embrace far more extensive scenes of a kindred nature. By this peculiarity, which must at once strike every reader, the mind is continually forced away from the immediate scene, onward to other events, capable of *filling up* the language to its full and natural extent. The way in which the Spirit has thought fit to present to us the events which prophecy predicts, is different from what

many would have expected. Yet it is the fullest and most perfect which could be devised, affording all needful minuteness, yet saving all unnecessary repetition. Single events are not predicted by themselves, but kindred events are *classified*; not according to time, but to similarity of character and issue. The prophet does not stand full in front of a long line of events, and describe them one by one; but he takes his place at the commencing point of a whole series which are stretched lengthways before him, like a long mountain-range. Placed at this point, and looking along the line, he sees event after event rising above each other. He sets out with describing the first of this range,—that which lies immediately at his feet; he dwells more minutely upon this, as one who, before taking the measurement of the rest, would fix his line firmly in the first; while at the same time he takes care to employ such language, and throw in such imagery, as can only be properly applied to the *last*. The reason of this is very obvious. To a certain extent, all of these kindred events are the same, and, in describing the first, he strikes off the main features of the rest. All that remains after this, is to bring out that wherein they differ, and wherein the one exceeds the other. In the first event, the initial and derivative sign is given by which all the rest may be calculated. The description of the first makes known the *genus*; those parts of it which cannot be applied to the first, point out to us the *species* of the others. By means of this exquisite art and Divine wisdom, the prophecy suits all ages; every successive generation can say that it does apply in a certain degree to it; though all can see that its fullness of accomplishment—the summation of the whole series—is reserved for the last days.

The prophecies of Messiah furnish us with a specimen of such progressive prophecy. Each successive age more fully developed the character under which, and the purpose for which, He had been from the first made known, and more fully filled up the language of all prophecy regarding Him. Yet, hereafter, in the day of His glorious manifestation, shall we behold the yet fuller accomplishment of all.

Then shall He whom our first father heard of as the Seed of the woman; whom Enoch foretold as the Avenger; whom Job knew as the Redeemer; whom Abraham rejoiced in as the Promiser; whom Jacob trusted in as the Angel of the Covenant; whom Balaam spoke of as the Star of Jacob; whom Joshua worshipped as the Captain of the Host; whom David sung of in his "last words," as "the pleasant theme of the Psalms of Israel;" whom Solomon typified as the Prince of Peace; whom Pilate crucified as "the King of the Jews;" whom John wrote of as "the Word," and of whom he prophesied as "the First and the Last, the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star:" then, we say, shall He,—the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth,—show forth the fullness of these characteristics, and, recapitulating all of them into Himself, fully make good and manifest His claim to each.

Again, the predictions regarding Babylon present us with a like specimen. The prophet sets out with describing literal Babylon, as if to affix that as the family name to the whole line of kindred objects which were to be foretold. As he proceeds in his description, his language swells, his imagery enlarges, till his eye is withdrawn from the literal city, and led forward to its kindred successors,—from Babylon literal, to Babylon mystical; passing from pagan to Papal, from Papal to infidel Rome.

Each age has been contributing its events to fill up the molds of these prophetic symbols and figures; but they are not yet full. To show us that they are not, John, in his last prophecy, was commissioned to take up the theme, and present to us in prospect the more terrible fulfillment of all. He retains the family name, but he invests it with images of deeper gloom. He takes up and embodies the imagery of the old prophets, in their description of the ancient Babylon. He traverses all history for materials; and, after recapitulating and condensing in one awful scene the various burdens of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; after, like some master of his instrument, running through the diapason of prophecy complete, he sums up the whole with joyful thanksgiving for the mighty

deliverance, as if to signify that now, at last, the burdens of prophetic judgment were filled up and accomplished. In a moment we feel as if relieved from an oppressive sense of terror, and listen with joy to the voice of solemn praise, as it rises from the multitude, like notes of jubilee—"Alleluia! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready" [Rev. 19:6-7].

I must not, however, protract the subject. It admits of very wide and various illustration, and is worthy of being far more thoroughly investigated than has yet been done. Whether in our mechanical and restless age there may not be many hindrances, many things unfitting us, both morally and spiritually, for appreciating the peculiarities of the prophetic style, and entering with kindred sympathies into its deep fullness of meaning, I shall not undertake to say. Certainly the tendencies of the age are not with us. Its current runs against us. Even its deeper and more thoughtful literature is but poorly helpful. Its mold is unsuitable. The German style of thought is now widely leavening both Britain and America; and the issue of this is matter for suspicion and fear, in so far as pure Bible exposition is concerned. It is a style entirely self-revolving, in which, as one of their poets has described it, the soul is,

"Chasing *its own dream* for ever,  
On through many a distant star;"

turning in upon its own actings, instead of out upon God's; making man's interior self the great region of research, not God's manifested self; dealing with spiritual truths as with abstractions or ideas, not as connected with Divine personality and life.

In spite of all the admiration in which it is fashionable to hold German critics, and with the full admission that their researches have not been unrewarded, their system of criticism, as a whole, cannot but be regarded as a failure, if not something worse. Its results have been inconsiderable for good, but vast for evil. Dwelling in the region of their own thoughts, they have lost the power to grasp, and the taste

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to appreciate the thoughts of God. They may be interpreters of words, but they are not expounders of thought, in so far as Scripture is concerned. In the former they excel, in the latter they fail. They have not brought forth the fullness, the richness, the vastness of Scripture language; they have rather diluted and emptied it. They have taken their own thoughts as their standard in measuring, their law in interpreting the thoughts of God. Hence, in prophecy, where the language is doubly pregnant with the thoughts and purposes of God, they have totally broken down. Few of their works on prophecy are possessed of much value beyond that of verbal criticism. And it is sad to see their American imitators rapidly coming up to them, if not outstripping them, in the race of irreverence and error.

It is the deep digger into Scripture that is its best interpreter. It is the man who, in studying God's Word, and entering into His mighty thoughts, is becoming more entirely assimilated to God himself; it is he who alone is able fully to expound His Word, especially in its prophetic revelations. The nearer we come to think as God thinks, to feel as God feels, to view all things from the point from which He showed them to His prophets, the more shall we understand the prophetic visions, and appreciate the prophetic style. To catch up the exact notes of the prophetic harp, to survey with understanding the prophetic picture, needs no depth of self-revolving thought, no exuberant redundancy of classic lore. It needs but a more entire assimilation of soul to the mind of God. It needs but a nicer spiritual ear, a truer spiritual taste, and a finer spiritual eye.