

"THE MAN OF SIN."

A. J. GORDON.

In a recent lecture on the "man of sin" mentioned in 2 Thess. 2:3, we took the ground that the mysterious power there foretold is that of the Papacy, springing up and holding sway in the Christian Church, alleging that this was the view strongly held by the Reformers, and by the best expositors from their time onward.

An honored brother, the editor of The Truth, who is strongly wedded to another view – viz., that the words refer to a future infidel, Antichrist, sitting in the rebuilt Temple at Jerusalem – heard with astonishment that we used the following language, and wondered how any one laying claim to accurate scholarship could make such an assertion: viz., "The Greek for 'the temple of God' in 2 Thessalonians never, in a single instance elsewhere, means the literal Temple, but is always applied to the Church of God, which temple believers are. We used precisely these words, and are most glad to be called upon to reiterate and substantiate them.

Let us say at the outset, that in interpreting difficult passages of Scripture, we know of no sure method of finding their meaning except to give attention to the exact words and phrases employed, and then to collate these with the same expressions in other parts of Scripture; and so, by "comparing spiritual things with spiritual," to find out the teaching of God. Those who hold loose views of inspiration, say that the thought is the main thing; and that this phrase is equivalent to that phrase, provided it contains the same general idea. We do not admit this. We believe that the Bible is written "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Spirit teacheth;" and that the Spirit is infinitely accurate in the use of language. Holding this in view, the interpreter can move

forward with confidence; to him the words of Holy Scripture are "nails fastened by the master of assemblies," and he can hang his expositions upon them without fear of their giving away.

Now, in seeking to determine the character and seat of this mysterious "man of sin" predicted in Thessalonians, we use just this method, comparing the words here employed to describe him with the same words used in other parts of Scripture. And we have the uttermost confidence that this will give us the true solution of the secret. Let us seek to determine them,

I. – THE SEAT OF THE "MAN OF SIN."

"He, as God, sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God."

The Greek phrase here employed for "temple of God," is "ton naon tou Theou." Now, from Matthew to Revelation this expression occurs seven times only. The following are all the instances:

1. "This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days." (Matt. 26:61.)

2. "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you." (1 Cor. 3:16).

3. "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy." (1 Cor. 3:17).

4. "For the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." (1 Cor. 3:17).

5. "And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:16).

6. "For ye are the temple of God, the living one." (2 Cor. 2:6).

7. "So that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God." (2 Thess. 2:4).

Of the first six of these passages, not one refers to the Jewish Temple, and, therefore, we believe that the seventh cannot. Our critic quotes the first, indeed, as so referring; but remembering that this was the language which Christ's enemies imputed to him, we have only to turn to his own words as recorded in John 2:19, to find the real meaning of what he uttered. It is there said, "But this he spake of the temple of his body." Thus we see that Christ's meaning corresponds exactly with that of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians – the temple of God being the body of believers, individually and corporately, as "the habitation of God through the Spirit," or, in other words, the Church of God, including the Head and the members, as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is the primary and literal usage of the phrase, thus far employed in the New Testament. And can we believe it possible that in this passage in Thessalonians the Holy Spirit uses the expression "the temple of God," with a totally different meaning from that which it bears in every other instance in the Gospels and Epistles? Is it credible that Paul in this place signifies the Jewish temple, when in every other use his language clearly means the body of the believer, or the Church of Christ? And this inquiry is especially pertinent when we remember that Paul, in the same Epistle to the Corinthians, wherein he five times calls the Church, individually and collectively, "the temple of God," has one clear reference to the Jewish Temple (1 Cor. 9:13), but in alluding to it employs a totally different term, simply to heiron, the word constantly used by Christ and his disciples of the Temple in Jerusalem.

If, now, we turn to the Revelation, we find this term three times employed: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God," (3:12); "And the temple of God was opened in heaven," (11:19). By general consent, these texts refer to the Church glorified, or the heavenly Jerusalem, and there need be no controversy about them. The other passage is the eleventh chapter,

first verse: "Rise, measure the temple of God," etc. This, our critic considers, plainly points to the literal Temple at Jerusalem. But Alford holds that the naos tou Theou is here to be taken symbolically, and that so taken the words "can only bear one meaning, viz., the Church of the elect servants of God." With him agree the most eminent expositors of the Apocalypse, ancient and modern, from Mede to Elliot.

These citations exhaust the list of texts in which this inspired phrase occurs. Admit, if need be, that the last one is doubtful, and can, therefore, throw no certain light upon the significance of the others; then, excepting this as uncertain, the case would stand thus: First, that in applying the phrase naos tou Theou in 2 Thessalonians to the Jewish Temple, we give a name to that Temple which, in every other determinable instance in the New Testament, belongs to the Church of Christ, individual or corporate, on earth or in heaven; and, secondly in so applying language we give a name to the Temple at Jerusalem which the inspired writers of the New Testament, while making scores of allusions to that Temple, never in a single instance, apply to it. Undoubtedly the Jerusalem Temple was and is called "the temple of God," in popular phraseology; but we must interpret by the Spirit's language, not by the peoples language. And so interpreting, we contend that to apply this inspired phrase as our critic and those of his school do to the Hebrew Temple, is an instance of exegetical violence exactly like that of which they complain in those who take the Greek word for "leaven" uniformly meaning corruption in the New Testament, and make it signify, as used in the parable of Matthew 12:33, the gospel in its diffusion through society.

Thus we have measured "the temple" exegetically, as it stands before us in this Epistle to the Thessalonians, and it will be seen that we have not measured it "according to the measure of a man;"

that we have not brought the passage to the test of current phraseology, but have tried it by the rule and the plummet of the Spirit's own words – words which are employed, we believe, with more than human accuracy.

II. – THE ORIGIN OF THE "MAN OF SIN."

Led by our investigation thus far to look for the Evil One in the Church of God, we find all the other language of the prophecy pointing in the same direction.

The first stage in the predicted development of the wicked one is that of apostasy. Speaking of the return of Christ, Paul says, "For the day will not come except there come a falling away first." The Greek word for falling away is He apostasia – the apostasy. The word is very clear in its meaning, and, as used in Scripture, invariably signifies a spiritual defection. The exact noun is employed once in the New Testament, Acts 21:21, where Paul is charged with teaching the Jews apostasy from Moses by abandoning circumcision. It would [R639 : page 4] be impossible to find a word to describe more accurately the beginnings of the Papacy, which consisted in a forsaking of the simple faith and worship of primitive Christianity for Jewish rites and Pagan ceremonies. In 1 Tim. 4:1 we have the same words in its verb form: "But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith" (R.V.) This refers not to the very last times, but "to the times subsequent to those in which the Apostle was writing." (See Alford.)

And when we note the salient features of this predicted falling away – "giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats," etc. – [R639 : page 5] it requires no stretch of ingenuity to discover in them the great outlines of the Roman apostasy. And

remembering that "the apostasy" is antecedent to the revelation of the "man of sin," preparing his way, and furnishing the condition out of which he emerges, we feel sure that we are on the right trail in finding the realization of this in the early corruption of the Apostolic faith. No blatant infidelity assailing the Church from without, no development of Jewish Antichristianism, can at all answer to the language. It is evidently a spiritual defection, the germs of which were already planting in secret, and which in later times were to appear in a manifest lapse from the faith. Thus, as a rigid verbal examination of the prophecy gives us the Church of Christ as the seat of the "man of sin," so the same method points, we believe, unerringly, to the Church of Christ as the place of his origin and development. Let us consider further: –

III. – THE PERSON OF THE "MAN OF SIN."

He is called the "man of sin," and this expression is qualified by another, "the son of perdition."

As before, we search the Scriptures to learn what use the Spirit has elsewhere made of this phrase, and we find it employed in only a single other instance – John 17:12, where it is applied to Judas Iscariot. But how suggestive again of the character of an apostate, for which we have already been led to look! Judas was a minister of Christ before he became revealed as the "son of perdition." He was not an infidel, denying Christ, but an apostle confessing Christ, to the very end. He communed at his table while meditating his betrayal; he saluted him with "Hail, Master," just at the moment he gave him the traitorous kiss. It is not atheism, but hypocrisy, not the open iniquity that reviles the Lord, but the mystery of iniquity that confesses him while betraying him, which we find in this typical person, whom the Holy Spirit sets before us to describe the predicted "man of sin." We said that he was an apostle; we may add – what may startle the English reader of the

New Testament – that he was a bishop. For not only does Peter say in the first chapter of the Acts, that "he was numbered with us, and had obtained part in this ministry," and that one must be chosen "to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas fell," but he quotes the words, "which the Holy Spirit by the mouth of David spake concerning Judas" – "His bishopric let another take." Now, here is wisdom in a mystery. For who does not know that the apostasy – the one before which all others in the history of the Church pale into insignificance – appeared when the Bishop of Rome and his successors began to betray Christ while professing to serve him, perverting his doctrines and ordinances by mixing them with Pagan and Jewish corruptions, while yet formulating and defending much of pure orthodoxy. It was not the apostasy of open denial, but of false profession – exactly that which Paul warns against when setting forth the duties of a bishop, in his epistle to Titus, admonishing him of such as "give heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men that turn from the truth, who profess that they know God, but in their works deny him."

Was Judas grasping for the temporal power of Christ in delivering him up, as so many have conjectured in explaining his conduct? Did he hope thus to bring on a crisis, and force the Lord to assert his kingship, and set up those thrones which he has promised to his disciples, as sharers with him in his reign? Here we have no intimation of Scripture, and can therefore express no opinion. But remembering that Satan has now entered into Judas, and that he was acting under his inspiration, this would not be an improbable conjecture: for this was exactly the temptation which the Devil set before Christ as he was entering upon his public ministry – the temptation to prematurely grasp his temporal power. "The Devil taketh Him into an exceeding high mountain, and showeth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said unto Him, All these things will I give thee if thou wilt

fall down and worship me." These kingdoms were Christ's by the Father's promise, but not yet. There must first be the cross, and the rejection by the world.

"The sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow," is the divine order both for the Lord and for his mystical body. "Fear not, little flock," he says; "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." But to be content to be a little flock in this dispensation, waiting the Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom in the next, to accept our present calling of preaching the gospel, in order to gather out "a people for his name," and patiently to wait till the Millennium for the universal conquest of the gospel – this has ever been the severest test of the Church's faith. And the constant problem has been to find some way of breaking over the bounds of this divine election. The Ritualist, by his sacrament, would bring all into the Church, without regard to a regenerated heart; the Broad Churchman, by a godless catholicity, would include the Greek and Roman apostacies, the Rationalistic schools, and the Brahma Somaj in one comprehensive Church; and the Evangelical, by his sincere assurance of "the conversion of the world," would prove by his computations that only a brief time is required before every one will become Christian under the preaching of the Gospel. What are all these theories but an unconscious grasping after a present universal dominion and glory for the Church?

Now, when "the Prince of this world" offered all the kingdoms of the earth to Christ, he declined the gift. Instead of receiving a present throne by yielding to the Evil One, He accepted a present cross and a present rejection, by yielding to his Father. But what the son of man refused, the Roman bishop, a few centuries after, accepted from the "princes of this world" and from "the Prince of this world." At the price of the spiritual chastity of the Church,

he received the temporal power of the kings of the earth, and that shout of triumph, which belongs only to the Redeemer in his millennial glory, was taken by the apostate Bishop of Rome as early as the third century – "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ." This we believe to be the wicked one of whom Judas was the prototype – a bishop who, while communing with Christ, is consorting with the rulers of this world, enriching himself with their silver and gold at the price of crucifying the Son of God afresh, and putting him to an open shame.

– The Watchword.
