



THE LAST DAYS

23

RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

‘Eschatology’ is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological ‘system’ scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular “Left Behind” system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

THE LAST WORDS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

FROM “THE PAROUSIA”

BY JAMES STUART RUSSELL



The canon of the Old Testament Scriptures closes in a very different manner from what might have been expected after the splendid future revealed to the covenant nation in the visions of Isaiah. None of the prophets is the bearer of a heavier burden than the last. Malachi is the prophet of doom. It would seem that the nation, by its incorrigible obstinacy and disobedience, had forfeited the divine favour, and proved itself not only unworthy, but incapable, of the promised glories. The departure of the prophetic spirit was full of evil omen, and seemed to intimate that the Lord was about to forsake the land. Accordingly, the light of Old Testament prophecy goes out amidst clouds and thick darkness. The Book of Malachi is one long and terrible impeachment of the nation. The Lord Himself is the accuser, and sustains every charge against the guilty people by the clearest proof. The long indictment includes sacrilege, hypocrisy, contempt of God, conjugal infidelity, perjury, apostasy, blasphemy; while, on the other hand, the people have the effrontery to repudiate the accusation, and to plead ‘not guilty’ to every charge. They appear to have reached that stage of moral insensibility when men call evil good, and good evil, and are fast ripening for judgment.

Accordingly, coming judgment is ‘the burden if the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.’

Lest I come and smite the earth, that is, the land, of Israel, the body of the Jewish nation (that were of the earth, earthy), with a curse. They by their impiety and impenitence in it had laid themselves open to the curse of God, which is a separation to all evil. God was ready to smite them with that curse, to bring utter ruin upon them, to strike home, to strike dead, with the curse; but he will yet once more try them, whether they will repent and return, and so prevent it; and therefore he sends John Baptist to preach repentance to them, that their conversion might prevent their confusion; so unwilling is God that any should perish, so willing to have his anger turned away.

— **Matthew Henry on Malachi 4**

Chap. iii. 5: 'I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.,

Chap. iv. 1: 'For, behold, the day cometh that shall burn as an oven [furnace]: and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.'

That this is no vague and unmeaning threat is evident from the distinct and definite terms in which it is announced. Everything points to an approaching crisis in the history of the nation, when God would inflict judgment upon His rebellious people. The day, was coming —'the day that shall burn as a furnace'; 'the great and terrible day of the Lord'. That this 'day' refers to a certain period, and a specific event, does not admit of question. It had already been foretold in precisely the same words by the Prophet Joel (ii. 31): 'The great and terrible day of the Lord', and we shall meet with a distinct reference to it in the address of the Apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 20). But the period is further more precisely defined by the remarkable statement of Malachi in chap. iv. 5: 'Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord.' The explicit declaration of our Lord that the predicted Elijah was no other than His own forerunner, John the Baptist (Matt. xi. 14), enables us to determine the time and the event referred to as 'the great and terrible day of the Lord.' It must be sought at no great distance from the period of John the Baptist. That is to say, the allusion is to the judgment of the Jewish nation, when their city and temple were destroyed, and the entire fabric of the Mosaic polity was dissolved.

It deserves to be noticed, that both Isaiah and Malachi predict the appearance of John the Baptist as the forerunner of our Lord, but in very different terms. Isaiah represents him as the herald of the coming Saviour: 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God' (Isa. xl. 3). Malachi represents John as the precursor of the coming Judge:

'Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me; and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts' (Mal. iv. 1).

That this is a coming to judgment, is manifest from the words which immediately follow, describing tile alarm and dismay caused by His appearing: 'But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?' (Mal. iii. 2.)

It cannot be said that this language is appropriate to the first coming of Christ; but it is highly appropriate to His second coming. There is a distinct allusion to this passage in Rev. vi. 17, where 'the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains,' etc., are represented as 'hiding from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, and saying, The great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?'. Nothing can be more clear than that the 'day of his coming', in Mal. iii. 1 is the same as 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord' in chap. iv. 5, and that both answer to 'the great day of his wrath' in Rev. vi. 17. We conclude, therefore, that the prophet Malachi speaks, not of the first advent of our Lord, but of the second.

This is further proved by the significant fact, that, in chap. iii. 1, the Lord is represented as 'suddenly coming to his temple.' To understand this as referring to the presentation of the infant Saviour in the temple by His parents, or to His times spent in the courts of the temple, or to His expulsion of the buyers and sellers from the sacred edifice, is surely a most inadequate explanation. Those were not occasions of terror and dismay, such as is implied in the second verse, 'But who may abide the day of his coming?' The expression is, however, vividly suggestive of His final and judicial visitation of His Father's house, when it was to be 'left desolate,' according to His prediction. The temple was the centre of the nation's life, the visible symbol of the covenant between God and His people; it was the spot where 'judgment must begin,' and which was to be overtaken by 'sudden destruction.' Taking, then, all these particulars into account, the 'sudden coming of the Lord to his temple,' the dismay attending 'the day of his coming,' His coming as 'a refiner's fire,'

His coming 'near to them to judgment,' 'the day coming that shall burn as a furnace,' 'burning up the wicked root and branch,' and the appearing of John the Baptist, the second Elijah, previous to the arrival of 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord,' it is impossible to resist the conclusion that the prophet here foretells that great national catastrophe in which the temple, the city, and the nation, perished together; and that this is designated, 'the day of his coming.'

However strange, therefore, it may seem, it is undoubtedly the fact that the first coming of our Lord is not alluded to by Malachi. This is distinctly acknowledged by Hengstenberg, who observes: 'Malachi passes by the first coming of Christ in humiliation altogether and leaves the interval between his forerunner and the judgment of Jerusalem a perfect blank.' (1) This is to be accounted for by the fact, that the main object of the prophecy is to predict national destruction and not national deliverance.

At the same time, while judgment and wrath are the predominant elements of the prophecy, features of a different character are not wholly absent. The day of wrath is also a day of redemption. There is a faithful remnant, even among the apostate nation: there are gold and silver to be refined and jewels to be gathered, as well as dross to be rejected, and stubble to be burned. There are sons to be spared, as well as enemies to be destroyed; and the day which brought dismay and darkness to the wicked, would see 'the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings' on the faithful. Even Malachi intimates that the door of mercy is not yet shut. If the nation would return unto God, He would return unto them. If they would make restitution of that which they had sacrilegiously withheld from the service of the temple, He would repay them with blessings more than they could receive. They might even yet be a 'delightful land,' the envy of all nations. At the eleventh hour, if the mission of the second Elijah should succeed in winning the hearts of the people, the impending catastrophe might after all be averted (chap. iii. 3, 16-18; iv. 2, 3, 5, 6).

Nevertheless, there is a foregone conclusion that expostulation and threatening will be unavailing. The last words sound like the knell of doom (Mal. iv. 6): 'Lest I come and smite the land with a curse!'

The full import of this ominous declara-

tion is not at once apparent. To the Hebrew mind, it suggested the most terrible fate that could befall a city or a people. The 'curse' was the *anathema*, or *cherem* which denoted that the person or thing on which the malediction was laid was given over to utter destruction. We have an example of the *cherem*, or ban, in the curse pronounced upon Jericho (Josh. vi. 17); and a more particular statement of the ruin which it involved, in the Book of Deuteronomy (chap. xiii. 12-18). The city was to be smitten with the edge of the sword, every living thing in it to be put to death, the spoil was not to be touched, all was accursed and unclean, it was to be wholly consumed with fire, and the place given up to perpetual desolation. Hengstenberg remarks: 'All the things that can possibly be thought of are included in this one word;' (2) and he quotes the comment of Vitranga on this passage: 'There can be no doubt that God intended to say, that He would give up to certain destruction, both the obstinate transgressors of the law and also their city, and that they should suffer the extreme penalty of His justice, as heads devoted to God, without any hope of favour or forgiveness.'

Such is the fearful malediction suspended over the land of Israel by the prophetic Spirit, in the moment of taking its departure, and becoming silent for ages. It is important to observe, that all this has a distinct and specific reference to the land of Israel. The message of the prophet is to Israel; the sins which are reprobated are the sins of Israel; the coming of the Lord is to His temple in Israel; the land threatened with the curse is the land of Israel. (3) All this manifestly points to a specific local and national catastrophe, of which the land

of Israel was to be the scene and its guilty inhabitants the victims. History records the fulfilment of the prophecy, in exact correspondence of time, place, and circumstance, in the ruin which overwhelmed the Jewish nation at the period of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Interval between Malachi and John

The four centuries which intervene between the conclusion of the Old Testament and the commencement of the New are a blank in Scripture history. We know, however, from the Books of the Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, that it was an eventful period in the Jewish annals. Judea was by turns the vassal of the great monarchies by which it was surrounded—Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Rome—with an interval of independence under the Maccabean princes. But though the nation during this period passed through great suffering, and produced some illustrious examples of patriotism and of piety, we look in vain for any divine oracle, or any inspired messenger, to declare the word of the Lord. Israel might truly say: 'We see not our signs, there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long' (Psa. lxxiv. 9). Yet those four centuries were not without a powerful influence on the character of the nation. During this period, synagogues were established throughout the land, and the knowledge of the Scriptures was widely extended. The great religious schools of the Pharisees and Sadducees arose, both professing to be expounders and defenders of the law of Moses. Vast numbers of Jews settled in the great cities of Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, carrying

with them everywhere the worship of the synagogue and the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Above all, the nation cherished in its inmost heart the hope of a coming deliverer, a scion of the royal house of David, who should be the theocratic king, the liberator of Israel from Gentile domination, whose reign was to be so happy and glorious that it might deserve to be called 'the kingdom of heaven.' But, for the most part, the popular conception of the coming king was earthly and carnal. There had not in four hundred years been any improvement in the moral condition of the people, and, between the formalism of the Pharisees and the scepticism of the Sadducees, true religion had sunk to its lowest ebb. There was still, however, a faithful remnant who had truer conceptions of the kingdom of heaven, and 'who looked for redemption in Israel.' As the time drew near, there were indications of the return of the prophetic spirit, and premonitions that the promised deliverer was at hand. Simeon received assurance that before his death he should see 'the Lord's anointed;' a like intimation appears to have been made to the aged prophetess Anna. Such revelations, it is reasonable to suppose, must have awakened eager expectation in the hearts of many, and prepared them for the cry which soon after was heard in the wilderness of Judea: 'Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!' A prophet had again risen up in Israel, and 'the Lord had visited His people.'

Footnotes

1. See Hengst. *Nature of Prophecy*, Christ. vol. iv. p. 418.
2. Hengst. *Christology*, vol. iv. p. 227
3. The meaning of this passage (Mal. iv. 6) is obscured by the unfortunate translation earth instead of land. The Hebrew, like the Greek, is very frequently employed in a restricted sense. The allusion in the text plainly is to the land of Israel. See Hengst. *Christology*, vol. iv. p. 224

The Parables of the Tares, and the Drag-Net

BY JAMES STUART RUSSELL

Matt. xiii. 36-47: 'Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world [age]; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gath-

ered and burned in the fire; so shall it be at the end of this world [age]. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a [the] furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear... Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was east into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was full, they drew to the shore, and sat down, and gathered the

good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world [age]: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.'

We find in the passages here quoted an example of one of those erroneous renderings which have done much to confuse and mislead the ordinary readers of our English version. It is probable, that

ninety-nine in every hundred understand by the phrase, 'the end of the world,' the close of human history, and the destruction of the material earth. They would not imagine that the 'world' in ver. 38 and the 'world' in ver. 39 40, are totally different words, with totally different meanings. Yet such is the fact. *Koinos* in ver. 38 is rightly translated world, and refers to the world of men, but *aeon* in ver. 39, 40, refers to a period of time, and should be rendered *age* or *epoch*. Lange translates it *aeon*. It is of the greatest importance to understand correctly the two meanings of this word, and of the phrase 'the end of the aeon, or age.' *aion* is, as we have said, a period of time, or an age. It is exactly equivalent to the Latin word *aeuum*, which is merely *aion* in a Latin dress; and the phrase translated in our English version, 'the end of the world,' should be, 'the close of the age.' Tittman observes: as it occurs in the New Testament, [this phrase] does not denote the end, but rather the consummation, of the aeon, which is to be followed by a new age. So in Matt. xiii. 39, 40, 49; xxiv. 3; which last passage, it is to be feared, may be misunderstood in applying it to the destruction of the world.' (Synonyms of the New Test. vol. i. a. 70; Bib. Cab. No. iii) It was the belief of the Jews that the Messiah would introduce a new aeon: and this new aeon, or age, they called 'the kingdom of heaven.' The existing aeon: therefore, was the Jewish dispensation, which was now drawing to its close; and how it would terminate our Lord impressively shows in these parables. It is indeed surprising that expositors should have failed to recognize in these solemn predictions the reproduction and reiteration of the words of Malachi and of John the Baptist. Here we find the same final separation between the righteous and the wicked; the same purging of the floor; the same gathering of the wheat into the garner; the same burning of the chaff [tares, stubble] in the fire. Can there be a doubt that it is to the same act of judgment, the same period of time, the same historical event, that Malachi, John, and our Lord refer?

But we have seen that John the Baptist predicted a judgment which was then impending—a catastrophe so near that already the axe was lying at the root of the trees—in accordance with the

prophecy of Malachi, that 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord' was to follow on the coming of the second Elijah. We are therefore brought to the conclusion, that this discrimination between the righteous and the wicked, this gathering of the wheat into the garner, and burning of the tares in the furnace of fire, refer to the same catastrophe, viz., the wrath which came upon that very generation, when Jerusalem became literally 'a furnace of fire,' and the aeon of Judaism came to a close in 'the great and dreadful day of the Lord.'

This conclusion is supported by the fact that there is a close connection between this great judicial epoch and the coming of 'the kingdom of heaven.' Our Lord represents the separation of the righteous and the wicked as the characteristic of the great consummation which is called 'the kingdom of God.' But the kingdom was declared to be at hand. It follows, therefore, that the parables before us relate, not to a remote event still in the future, but to one which in our Saviour's time was near.

An additional argument in favour of this view is derived from the consideration that our Lord, in His explanation of the parable of the tares, speaks of Himself as the sower of the good seed: 'He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man.' It is to His own personal ministry and its results that He refers, and we must therefore regard the parable as having a special bearing upon His contemporaries. It is in perfect harmony with His solemn warning in Luke xiii. 26, where He describes the condemnation of those who were privileged to enjoy His personal presence and ministrations, the pretenders to discipleship, who were tares and not wheat. 'Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God; and you yourselves thrust out.' However applicable to men in general under the gospel such language may be, it is plain that it had a direct and specific bearing upon the temporaries of our Lord—the genera-

tion that witnessed His miracles and heard His parables; and that it has a relation to them such as it can have to none else.

We find at the conclusion of the parable of the tares an impressive *nota bene*, drawing special attention to the instruction therein contained: 'Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.' We may take occasion from this to make a remark on the vast importance of a true conception of the period at which our Lord and His apostles taught. This is indispensable to the correct understanding of the New Testament doctrine respecting the 'kingdom of God,' the 'end of the age,' and the 'coming aeon,' or 'world to come'. That period was near the close of the Jewish dispensation. The Mosaic economy, as it is called—the system of laws and institutions given to the nation by God Himself, and which had existed for more than forty generations—was about to be superseded and to pass away. Already the last generation that was to possess the land was upon the scene—the last and also the worst—the child and heir of its predecessors. The long period, during which Jehovah had exhausted all the methods which divine wisdom and love could devise for the culture and reformation of Israel, was about to come to an end. It was to close disastrously. The wrath, long pent up and restrained, was to burst forth and overwhelm that generation. Its 'last day' was to be a *dies irae* 'the great and terrible day of the Lord.' This is 'the end of the age,' so often referred to by our Lord, and constantly predicted by His apostles. Already they stood within the penumbra of that tremendous crisis, which was every day advancing nearer and nearer, and which was at last to come suddenly, 'as a thief in the night.' This is the true explanation of those constant exhortations to vigilance, patience, and hope, which abound in the apostolic epistles. They lived expecting a consummation which was to arrive in their own time, and which they might witness with their own eyes. This fact lies on the very face of the New Testament writings; it is the key to the interpretation of much that would otherwise be obscure and unintelligible, and we shall see in the progress of this investigation how consistently this view is supported by the whole tenor of the New Testament Scriptures.

"His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" — John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1 NKJV)