

"The Man of Sin"

by

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The fourth opinion is that of the reformers, that we have here a prediction of popery. Besides the early reformers, this opinion is also advocated by Hooker, Hurd, Newton, Turretin, Benson, Bengel, Doddridge, Macknight, Michaelis, and Wordsworth.

According to these interpreters, ὁ κατέχων is the Roman emperor, and τὸ κατέχον the Roman empire. This opinion was that of the early fathers,¹ and was generally adopted with various modifications by Romanists and Protestants. Now, in the Protestant view of the subject, the prediction was verified. No sooner was the restrainer removed than Antichrist was revealed. As long as the Roman emperor continued heathen and resided at Rome, no ecclesiastical power was permitted to exalt itself. But no sooner did the emperor remove from Rome to Constantinople, than popery arose; and after the dissolution of the Western Empire, the power of the pope mightily increased.²

If ὁ κατέχων be the Roman emperor, we may understand the reason of the reserve of the apostle. Paul refers to a conversation which he had on this point with the Thessalonians, and appeals to their previous knowledge. If he had directly stated that the restraining power was the Roman emperor, he would have been regarded as an enemy to the Roman government because he taught the destruction of the empire, and would have involved the Christians in persecution. Prudence required a discreet silence on this point. This reason for reserve was recognized by the early fathers. "If St. Paul," observes Chrysostom, "had said that the Roman empire will soon be dissolved, the heathen would have destroyed him as a rebel, and all the faithful with him, as persons who took up arms against the state. But St. Paul means the Roman empire; and when that shall have been taken away, then the 'man of sin' will come."

But the great point is: Is there a sufficient resemblance between this prophecy and Romanism, so that we may conclude that they are related to each other as prediction and fulfilment? Now, certainly the points of resemblance are both numerous and striking. An

1 Quis nisi Romanus status?--Tertullian, *De Resurr.* c. 24.

2 Olshausen has a singular observation on the relation of ὁ κατέχων to the Roman empire. His objection to this is, that the Roman or Germanic empire was destroyed by Napoleon in 1806, and that, as Antichrist and the advent were to arise immediately after this dissolution, ὁ κατέχων cannot be the empire, unless the German, that is, Roman empire, would be again restored, as it was restored by Charlemagne in 800, after the destruction of the Western Roman empire in 476.--*Commentary on the Thessalonians*, pp. 492, 496, Clark's translation.

apostasy is predicted, and there is in Romanism a falling away from the pure gospel to the traditions of men. The man of sin is represented as opposing and exalting himself against all that is called God or is an object of worship. And this is considered as receiving its fulfilment in the pope exalting himself above all human and divine authority, claiming the title of "king of kings and lord of lords," and asserting his power to dispose of the kingdoms of the earth.³

It is further said that he sits in the temple of God, showing or exhibiting himself as God. The temple of God is here understood to be the Christian Church, and the pope places himself in it as its supreme head. He shows himself as God by claiming divine attributes, as holiness and infallibility, assuming divine prerogatives, as the power of pardoning sins, and using such blasphemous titles as "our Lord God the pope," "another God on earth."⁴ Every pope, on his election, is placed on the high altar of St. Peter, and receives the adoration of the cardinals. It is further observed that the coming of Antichrist is after the working of Satan in all power, and signs, and wonders of falsehood; and this is considered to find its fulfilment in the false miracles of popery, in the impositions of relics, indulgences, and purgatory, in the substitution of angels and saints as mediators in the place of Christ, and in the pretended power of working miracles which the Church of Rome still claims. God is represented as punishing sin by sin,--"sending to them the working of error that they might believe the lie."

The popish legends, which have gained such credit as to be admitted among their ceremonies, and especially the monstrous doctrine of transubstantiation, are regarded as the fulfilment of this part of the prophecy.⁵ And besides, in the other passage, where Paul predicts the apostasy of the latter times, the marks which he gives find their counterpart in the corruption of popery: "Giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats" (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Paul represents the system as working in his days. "For the mystery of lawlessness already works" (2 Thess. 2:7). It works secretly (*ἐνεργεῖται*); it is a mystery (*μυστήριον*), something concealed and unknown until it is revealed. According to Paul, the germs of the antichristian system were already in the Christian Church; the leaven of corruption was at work. And we find both in the Acts (20:29) and in Paul's epistles frequent allusions to false doctrines and superstitious practices.

Now it is to be observed that there is a close resemblance between those false doctrines and superstitious practices and the doctrines and practices of Romanism,--as, for example,

3 In the remarkable words of Gregory the Great, in opposition to the patriarch of Constantinople: "Whoever calls himself universal bishop is the precursor of Antichrist."

4 *Dominus Deus noster papa; Alter Deus in terra.* These and such like titles are quoted in Jewel's *Apology*, Poole's *Annotations*, Newton *On the Prophecies*. See also Barrow's *Treatise on the Pope's Supremacy*; Stillingfleet *On Popery*, chap. xviii.; and Luthardt's *Saving Truths of Christianity*, pp. 395, 396 (second edition), translation, T. & T. Clark.

5 See Macknight's *Commentary*, and Wordsworth's *Greek Testament in loc.*; comp. also Bishop Newton's *Dissertation on the Man of Sin.*

the worship of angels (Col. 2:8), the abstinence from certain foods (1 Cor. 8:8), bodily mortification (Col. 2:23), the traditions and doctrines and commandment of men (Col. 2:8, 22); so that, as Bishop Newton observes, "the foundations of popery were laid indeed in the apostle's days, but the superstructure was raised by degrees, and several ages passed before the building was completed, and the man of sin was revealed in full perfection."⁶

The complete fulfilment of the prophecy, on this view of the subject, is still future. The destruction of Antichrist, that is, of Romanism, is also predicted: "Whom the Lord Jesus will destroy by the spirit of His mouth, and annihilate by the brightness of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:8). Various explanations of these words have been attempted. "The spirit" (or breath) "of His mouth" has been understood to denote the preaching of the pure gospel, the diffusion of the word of God by the Reformation, and the revival of evangelical doctrines, which will gradually undermine popery and lessen its hold on the minds of men. And by "the brightness of His coming" is meant the lustre with which Christ will cause the true doctrine to shine, or rather the final destruction of popery by the coming of Christ to judgment. As this portion of the prophecy is unfulfilled, it would be better not to hazard any explanations. The interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy is probably beyond the powers of the human mind. The fulfilment is the only correct interpretation.

To this view of the subject various objections have been raised. There are two which merit consideration.

1. Even admitting all the striking coincidences, yet the idea of popery does not and never did fulfil the prophecy in ver. 4. So far from the pope opposing and exalting himself above all that is called God or is an object of worship, his abject adoration of and submission to *λεγόμενοι Θεοί* and *σεβάσματα* has ever been one of his most notable peculiarities.⁷ But to this it may be replied, that the arrogance of the pope, his maintenance of superiority above all the kings of the earth, his assertion that he is as God on the earth, his claim of infallibility, which has lately been conceded to him, are a distinct fulfilment of the prediction.

2. If the papacy be Antichrist, then has the manifestation been made, and endured now for nearly 1500 years, and yet that day of the Lord has not come, which by the terms of our prophecy such manifestation is immediately to precede.⁸ But it is not asserted that the day of the Lord follows directly on the advent of Antichrist, but merely that Antichrist will precede. Besides, it may be that there is a development of Antichrist, and that his final destruction by the coming of the Lord will not occur until his full development. Thus, for example, the spiritual power of popery may be unfolding itself; the mystery of lawlessness may be still working, as was lately seen in the introduction of two new dogmas into the Romish Church,—the immaculate conception of the Virgin, and the personal infallibility of the pope. The career of Antichrist has not yet run.

6 Newton *On the Prophecies*, Dissertation xxii.

7 Alford's *Greek Testament*, vol. iii., Prolegomena, p. 66.

8 *Idem*.

Upon the whole, the points of resemblance between this prophecy of Paul and popery are numerous, varied, and striking; so that, although a positive conclusion on such a subject may appear to many unwarranted, yet the presumption is that the prophecy of "the man of sin" is a prediction of popery. Such an opinion may be considered as uncharitable and unjust, when popery is viewed as it presently exists, divested of its power to persecute, and as it is seen in the culture, refinement, and piety of many of its adherents. But when the wickedness and horrible atrocities of the popes and their agents before and at the time of the Reformation, and the general corruption of the whole system, are taken into consideration, such an opinion may be founded on truth, and so be neither uncharitable nor unjust.