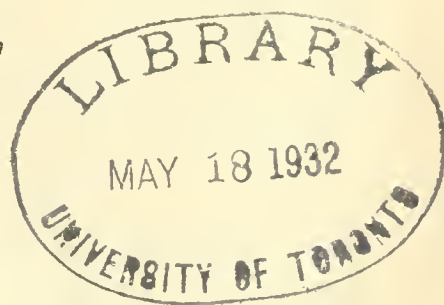


THE FALL

of the

TEMPLE

A STUDY IN THE HISTORY
OF DOGMA



By

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THE FALL OF THE TEMPLE.

A STUDY IN THE HISTORY OF DOGMA

BY CHARLES KASSEL

THERE seems deeply rooted in human nature a proneness for ascribing to the wrath of Heaven the misfortunes which befall our enemies—nay, we even attribute to the avenging lash of Deity the ills which afflict those who merely differ from us in religion. If an angry tide sweeps a city into the sea thousands are ready to deplore the calamity as a visitation of Providence; and if one who has scouted their creed be drowned or mangled, these devout souls, who see the finger of God in every one's woes except their own, readily trace a connection between the scoffer's death and his impiety.

In no historic occurrence, perhaps, has the Christian world discovered so plainly the hand of Providence as in that tragic spectacle which has appealed so strongly to the imaginations of theologians—the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple: a spectacle well calculated to inspire awe, in view of its appalling proportions, its dire consequences to the Israelitish people and its nearness in time to the event which has cast so deep a shadow over the whole field of theologic thought—the Crucifixion!

It would tax the deftest pen to conjure up before the mind a faithful picture of the Holy City, gleaming with the stately piles which went down in that pageant of blood and fire. Even the proud capital of the Romans—the boast of their poets and orators—shone with a luster less bright. “The whole city,” observes the Reverend Charles Merivale in his *Romans Under the Empire* (Vol. 7, Chapter 59, pp. 229-230, Longmans, Green & Company's edition, 1896), “upon which mighty despots had lavished their wealth, as far surpassed Rome, at least before Nero's restoration, in grandeur, as it fell short of it in size and population.” In the death-grapple between monotheistic Judea and polytheistic Rome all this splendor became a memory and a tale! “The most soul-stirring strug-

gle in all ancient history." exclaims the historian just quoted in describing that mighty conflict; a conflict direr than any of those in which the older temples on Moriah had fallen—direr than any which, during the great Crusades of the Middle Ages, reddened the historic soil of Jerusalem. During five months the remnant of the Jewish nation, gathered from every quarter within the walls, held out against the legions of Titus. All the horrors of sword and flame were let loose upon the city and upon the people. Daily the corpses of the dead were crimsoned with the blood of the living, while about both fell ruins smoldering from the deadly brands of the besieger. At last, driven inch by inch from the outer precincts, those whom sword and fire and famine had spared took station within the courts of the Temple, resolved that the ancient kingdom should witness its last hour upon the hill which for more than a thousand years had been the seat of its religion and the worshipping place of its priesthood and its people! Here the final scenes of the great siege took place and the souls of thousands rose with the flames which levelled the noble pile to a mass of ruins. The last dread sacrifice had been enacted before the Golden Altar! Tongue and pen and brush have vied with one another in painting the mingled grandeur and horror of the spectacle!

The number of those who fell martyrs to the faith and to the traditions of their people will never be known. The imagination of Josephus, sickened by so much blood and so much suffering, raises the number to more than a million—a figure too vast for belief; but even the conjecture of the most modest historians, who place the number of the dead at far beyond a hundred thousand, makes that disaster one of the awfulest hecatombs in all the annals of war! Even after resistance was wholly at an end, eleven thousand perished from starvation, and of those who remained the old, the sickly and the infirm were put to death and ninety thousand were sent as slaves to labor in the imperial mines or to battle with the wild beasts in the amphitheaters. "The overthrow of Judea, with all the monuments of ancient but still living civilization, was the greatest crime of the conquering republic. It was commenced in wanton aggression and was effected with a barbarity of which no other example occurs in the records of civilization." (Merivale, *Romans Under the Empire*, Vol. 7, Chapter 59, p. 251.)

Thus, as the theologians insist, went out in gloom as a punishment from on high the nation which had held aloft for centuries the torch of religious truth! Even Schaff, in his monumental *History of the Christian Church*, though observing that "history records no

other instance of such obstinate resistance, such desperate bravery and contempt of death," (Vol. 1, p. 397) can not refrain the opinion that the fall of the City and of the Temple, and the extinction of the Jewish nation, was but the revenge of an angry God for the rejection of the Christian faith and its founder. "Thus, therefore," he says, "must one of the best Roman emperors execute the long-threatened judgment of God, and the most learned Jew of his time describe it and thereby, without willing or knowing it, bear testimony to the truth of the prophecy and the divinity of Jesus Christ, the rejection of whom brought all this and the subsequent misfortunes upon the apostate race." (Vol. 1, p. 379.)

It is as pleasing to fancy that the afflictions of our enemies spring from the judgments of God as it is disagreeable to reflect that our own may flow from the same cause; and the pious theologian may easily fall into the thought that so grave a catastrophe as the destruction of Jerusalem was but a mark of Heaven's anger at the rejection by the Jews of their noblest teacher, even though to reach this conclusion he be forced to assume that the Almighty wrought through a nation which scarcely six years before was regaling its populace with the spectacle of Christian martyrs pitch-smearred and burned by scores to light the gardens of Nero! From the viewpoint, however, of the less sectarian thinker who strives to trace in that epoch the finger of Providence, the events following the holocaust at Jerusalem, far from lending strength to the dogma of the theologians, might well be construed as startling indications of Divine displeasure at the razing of the Holy City and the desecration of the Temple—unless, indeed, we indulge the belief that God punished the Jews through the Romans and then visited dire penalties upon the Romans for punishing the Jews!

For ten years following the destruction of Jerusalem, during which Vespasian wielded the rod of state, Rome enjoyed a period of almost unbroken quiet. "The reign of Vespasian, extending over one decade, passed away in uneventful tranquility, ruffled only for a moment at the termination of the Jewish war, by one or two arbitrary attempts at usurpation, which were firmly quelled but with no excessive or feverish violence." (Merivale, Vol. 7, Chapter 60, p. 289.) Providence—it might be urged with no mean show of truth—was reserving its wrath until the imperial mantle should fall upon him whose barbarity had drenched Jerusalem in an ocean of blood and whose vandal hand had laid in ruins the majestic Temple of the Jews. It is a remarkable circumstance that during a scant reign

of two years and two months the empire of Titus was visited by a succession of disasters graver than ever befell a people before or since in so brief a period—one of these, at least, without a parallel in all previous history. Vesuvius had slept since the dawn of recorded time. Cities had gathered at its foot, and the people, if they suspected the volcanic nature of the mountain towering near them, deemed its fires long since spent. On the 24th day of August, however, A. D. 79—but one month and eleven days after the sceptre of Rome had passed into the hands of Titus—the great catastrophe occurred which buried three Roman cities under a deluge of fire. From out the grim crater, during the eruption, vast columns of lava belched forth, and, spreading fan-like across the sky, fell in deadly showers upon the heads of the fleeing thousands, already maddened with the terror of the spectacle. The awful roar of the angry mountain, the fearful rocking of the earth, the seething and hissing of the sea as the burning skies poured themselves into its depths, must have smitten the doomed multitude with the belief that universal conflagration was at hand! For three days darkness hung like a pall over the desolated cities, broken only by the fierce lightnings that still played about the cone from which all that death and ruin had poured, and the fine volcanic dust which accompanied the eruption and spread over the hemisphere in each direction reddened for months the sunsets of the world.

This huge disaster, which fills so somber a page in history, would alone have made the brief reign of Titus the gloomiest in all the chronicles of Rome; but others little less terrible and even more deadly were yet to come. At the capitol a fire burst forth which raged for three days, and, spreading from quarter to quarter, destroyed the fairest structures of the city—a fire rivaling that of Nero in its proportions. Upon the heels of the fire a pestilence broke out which took off almost as great a number as had the flame and sword of Titus at Jerusalem. But still the anger of God was unappeased. The unfortunate emperor had been preserved through all these calamities that no jot or tittle of their horrors should be lost upon him. Now, fate flung its last curse! A malady, mysterious as it was fatal, began to undermine the health and strength of Titus. “He had tried in vain all the remedies suggested by physicians and afterwards by priests. With superstitious feelings kindled at the Eastern altars he sought to propitiate Heaven by strange rites and sacrifices.” (Merivale, Vol. 7, Chapter 60, p. 300.) But to no avail. He died on the 13th of September, A. D. 81.

Remembering the dire afflictions which Rome suffered during

the interval between the elevation of Titus and his death we can scarcely wonder that the Roman people should have asked one another what crimes their nation had committed that such calamities were visited upon them. The troubled character of that short reign has been the comment of every historian. Even Schaff, but a few lines beyond the passage already quoted, mentions the circumstance. "He ascended the throne," this writer observes, "in 79, the year when the towns of Herculaneum, Stabiae and Pompeii were destroyed. His reign was marked by a series of terrible calamities, among which was a conflagration in Rome which lasted three days, and a plague which destroyed thousands of victims daily." (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1, p. 396, note 1). It did not occur to this complacent theologian, however, to even remotely attribute the "terrible calamities" of Titus' reign to the wrath of Heaven for the saturnalia of butchery and vandalism in the Jewish capital, though so ready to ascribe the fate of Jerusalem to the anger of God with the "apostate race." Merivale, however, though himself an eminent Christian divine, was more fair. "The conqueror of Jerusalem," he says in the fine narrative to which we have so often referred, "learned, perhaps from his intercourse with the Eastern spiritualists, to regard with religious awe the great events in which he had borne a part and to conceive of himself as a special minister of the Divine Judgment. As such he was hailed without hesitation by Orosius, who expounds the course of Providence in Roman affairs from the point of view of the Christians. The closing of Janus on the fall of the Jewish city appears to this writer a counterpart of the announcement of universal peace at the birth of Jesus. He passes lightly over the calamities of Titus' reign, the fire, pestilence and the volcanic eruption, as well as his own premature decease, all of which, had he lifted a hand against the Christians, would have been branded as manifest tokens of Divine vengeance." (*History of the Romans Under the Empire*, Vol. 7, Chapter 60, p. 302.)

All who mingle largely with their kind know how deeply religious faith colors every thought. Few, however, appreciate the powerful influence upon the mind exercised by the belief, when fanatically entertained, that a race or an individual is one against whom the hand of the Eternal is lifted. The outcast from Divine favor becomes in the eyes of the blind zealot an object of hatred and one against whom any crime may be justified; precisely as in the centuries gone, the wild rabble which gathered about the blazing pyre of the heretic thought it no wrong to add to the tortures of the

victim. The psychological importance, therefore, of such a belief is immeasurable.

It would be beside our aim, however, either to deny that Deity hovered with arm outstretched across Jerusalem beckoning Titus onward to his work of death and ruin, or to assert that the Central Power of the Universe stirred the fires of Vesuvius or let loose upon the Romans the genii of fire and pestilence. It has been our purpose merely to show how much broader a basis history affords for the latter than for the former theory, leaving the reader to determine whether either is in truth worthy a large and generous mind. Those whose views have been molded by theology may still cling to the belief that the Maker of all, to revenge the kindly and forgiving Galilean for the fate suffered at the hands of a corrupt priesthood whose prestige and privileges He threatened, brought low with sword and flame the great common people of Judea who "heard Him gladly." The partisans of ancient Israel, on the other hand, who deem the acts of Titus mere wanton ruin and murder, may still see in the catastrophes of his reign unmistakable evidences of divine displeasure. The more thoughtful, however, who refuse to believe that the Creator contrives afflictions to scourge His erring children, will decline to attribute to the anger of God either the horrors that Titus wrought or the horrors that Titus suffered.