

2. the Old Age of John the Apostle

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the obscurity of the apostles' later lives and the uncertainty surrounding the early church history, highlighting the significance of St. John's role during the period described in the Apocalypse.

Scripture: Matthew 24:1, John 21:18, Acts 1:12, 2 Timothy 4:6, Revelation 1:9

Topics: "Early Church History", "Apostolic Tradition"

Description

Daniel Steele delves into the mysterious and uncertain history of the apostles after the ascension of Christ, highlighting the obscurity surrounding their deaths and the lack of concrete information about their lives post-Acts of the Apostles. He discusses the various traditions and falsehoods that emerged during this period, such as the tales of John and Peter's activities in Rome, emphasizing the importance of discerning historical truth from embellished accounts. Steele reflects on the significance of the destruction of Jerusalem for those rooted in Judaism, marking it as a pivotal moment in the transition of the Christian church as the new seat of God's presence on earth, ultimately leading to the emergence of St. John's work during a time of conflict and anticipation described in the Apocalypse.

Transcript

After the ascension of Christ, the history of the apostles whom He had trained is left in the utmost obscurity. Except James, who was early killed with the persecutors' sword in Jerusalem, we know not when, or where, or how any of the Eleven died. The Acts of the Apostles briefly speaks of them collectively in its first few chapters, then it drops all except Peter and John. Soon it drops the beloved apostle and describes Peter's career only. Then it takes up the biography of Paul and continues it through the remaining fifteen chapters to his imprisonment, where the narrative abruptly and tantalizingly ends.

Ask any ecclesiastical historian to designate the point where the records of the early church leave him to grope in Egyptian darkness, and he will unhesitatingly put his finger on the period following the end of the Acts of the Apostles, of which Neander says that "we have no information, nor can the total want of sources for this part of church history be at all surprising." Says Dean Farrar, "The facts of the corporate history of the early Christians, and even the closing details in the biographies of their greatest teachers, are plunged in entire uncertainty."

Of this period Renan says: "Black darkness falls upon the scene; and a grim and brooding silence, like the silence of an impending storm, holds in hushed expectation of 'the day of the Lord' the awe-struck breathless church. No more books are written; no more messengers are sent; the very voice of tradition is

still." We doubt the truth of the last clause. The voice of tradition was not still. It tried to fill the vacuum with its swarms of puerile conjectures and manifest falsehoods.

It represents John at Rome reduced to the humble occupation of a fireman tending the furnace fire of a woman's bath-house, and on one occasion immersed in a caldron of boiling oil and handling deadly serpents without bodily harm; and Peter the apostle to the Jews for twenty-five years poaching in Paul's Gentile preserve in Rome, when there is not an atom of Scriptural proof, nor a particle of credible, contemporaneous testimony to this statement to be found in history, sacred or profane, during the first Christian century. (See Bibliotheca Sacra, Vols.

XV and XVI, "Was Peter in Rome and Bishop of the Church?" for a negative answer which cannot be controverted.) We should be glad to believe the touching and beautiful tradition of John's reclaiming for Christ a convert who had so far apostatized as to become the leader of a band of robbers, but the story lacks a historic basis, as does the story of his hasty exit from a bath, lest the structure should fall upon his head by reason of the presence of the heresiarch, Cerinthus. It was widely believed after his burial that he was not dead, but sleeping in his grave till Christ should come.

Tradition alleged that "the dust was stirred by the breath of the saint." This vain tradition was not needed as a fulfillment of Christ's words, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" He did tarry among the living till Christ came. It is impossible for us to realize fully what was involved in the destruction of the Holy City for those who had been trained in Judaism. It was nothing else than the close of a divine drama, an end of the world. The old sanctuary, "the joy of the whole earth," was abandoned.

Henceforth the Christian church was the sole appointed seat of the presence of God. When Jerusalem fell -- an event most favorable to Christianity -- Christ came, and with His coming came also the work of St. John. During the period described by John in the Apocalypse, the period of conflict and fear and shaking of nations -- "things which must shortly come to pass" -- before the last catastrophe, St. John had waited patiently, having doubtless fulfilled his filial office to the mother of the Lord in his own home in Galilee and the end of her earthly sojourn.

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