

THE DISPENSATIONAL POSITION OF JOHN'S GOSPEL; or, THE FIG, THE OLIVE, AND THE VINE

BY DR. BULLINGER, JULY, 1899

The most cursory reader of Scripture must be aware of the special and unique position occupied by the Gospel of John. Its contrast with the other three Gospels is most marked. It stands out by itself; while the other three form a group by themselves, and are generally known as "the Synoptic" Gospels, because they give a similar synopsis of the Gospel history.

John's Gospel is unlike them in nearly every respect; though agreeing, of course, with them in the facts and truths recorded.

The three Gospels were, doubtless, written at an early period; while the general consensus of scholars places the Gospel of John towards the end of the first century; the generally accepted date being in the last decade of the first century. It is placed by many even later than the Apocalypse.

And then its relation to the Epistles' is also remarkable. For, while, like the other Gospels, it relates to the presentation and rejection of Christ, and thus stands in connection with the Old Testament, completing its history; yet on the other hand its contents seem to have a certain connection with church teaching as contained in the Epistles.

This latter fact has hindered some from receiving the truth concerning the Mystery, and caused them to hesitate; while it has perplexed many who clearly see and firmly hold that Revelation of the Secret purpose of God in His Church—the Body of Christ.

With the view of removing this hindrance and this cause of perplexity we desire to offer the following remarks:

We must carefully distinguish between a fact and the conclusion which may be drawn from it. The one is true, the other may be erroneous. But we cannot have a true conclusion unless we note, and admit, and give due weight to the fact from which it is drawn and on whom it is based.

1. Now the first great fact is that to which we have already alluded, viz., the date when John's Gospel was written; viz., towards the dose of the first century, some sixty years after the events recorded in it.

Now from this great fact is it not clear that neither the Apostle Paul nor any member of those churches to whom he wrote, had ever seen the Gospel of John at the time those Epistles were addressed to them?

Doubtless, the Gospel history in its great outlines was well known. The promise of John 14:26 was fulfilled, and the apostles remembered what had been said unto them. The other three Gospels, we may well believe, were written and their contents more or less generally known. But, John's Gospel, as we have it now, containing many private

conversations (e.g., John 4., 9., 11., 17.), was never seen or known by the Apostle Paul, or the churches to whom he wrote.

From this conclusion follows another: viz., that it is possible therefore to have a model church (1 Thess. 1:7) without the special teaching of John's Gospel. That is to say, the teaching conveyed to those churches by Paul's ministry personally, and by his Epistle, contained "all the truth" necessary to build up a perfect church in all its complete ness.

This conclusion can hardly be questioned.

Our first point, therefore, is this, that, if there were today a company of Divinely saved souls and they possessed only Paul's Epistles addressed to the churches, they would have "all the truth" necessary to build them up as a church. But if they had only the Gospel of John they would be without definite teaching as to man's ruin; Yahweh's righteousness; the two natures, and the conflict between them; union with Christ in death and Resurrection, the completeness and perfection of our standing in Christ; the doing away of ordinances in Christ; the difference between the Law and the Gospel; the nature and use of spiritual gifts; the nature and order of Resurrection as taught in 1 Cor. 15; the Lord's supper; the mystery connected with Israel's blindness; the Mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ; its position, nature, and growth; its holiness of walk and its missionary activities (1 Thess.); the mystery concerning those who are "alive and remain;" the Resurrection of 1Thess. 4; and the Rapture as distinct from the day of Yahweh, and given by special revelation from the Lord Himself (1 Thess. 4:15); the mystery of iniquity as revealed in 2 Thess. 2, showing the nature and character of the revelation of Antichrist; and many other truths all important and absolutely necessary for the building up of the Church of God.

In other words, while there is no vital truth of John's Gospel which is not contained in the Epistles, there are many important Church truths which are not in John.

2. The second great fact is, that, after the Church is taken up, there will be multitudes saved in various companies for various positions in glory. It is impossible to read Rev. 7, 14, 15, and 19, compared with Isa. 26:9, without being convinced of this fact. The conclusion to be drawn from this fact is, that, those companies of saved ones must feed on the Word of Yahweh, as all other of the redeemed have always done. They will need its counsels, and comfort, and guidance, and instruction.

They will have the church Epistles, just as we have, today, the Old Testament histories. which are written "for our learning." But the church Epistles, for them, will be historical, and just what the Old Testament history is for us now. They will contain much matter concerning a time and circumstances which will then have passed away, and with which they have no practical or immediate concern. But they will need, besides this, some special Scriptures which shall meet and supply their need, and contain "all the truth " that suits their then circumstances without being encumbered and mixed up with certain church truths and church teaching, which will then concern only what is past and gone. And they will have it, and find it in a very special manner in the Gospel of John.

So that while the truths of John's Gospel may be found in the Epistles, the special

church-truths are not found in John.

When the Church has been removed, Yahweh's dealings on the earth will be with Jew and Gentile as such.

Yahweh will be again dealing with His people Israel, and the godly remnant will need special Scriptures for that time. The Law, with the "Song of Moses " (Deut.32), will tell them of Yahweh's goodness and of Israel's rebellion. The Psalms will put suited words into their mouth; while the Gospels will exhibit their rejection of Messiah, and the Epistles will give the Dispensational history of the Olive tree. But the Church of God will then have been removed, and the Gospel of John will come in as a precious link, taking Israel up where the Fig tree was cut down, and telling of that true Vine in whom then will be all their hope and all their desire.

As it is the Gospel of John which contains this teaching of the Vine, and sums up all the Old Testament revelations concerning it, so is it the key to the special position which this Gospel holds with relation to the other books.

These three Trees (and a fourth—the Bramble) give a striking illustration of the great land-marks which stand out in Israel's history. They are the same four as those mentioned in Jotham's allegory in Judges 9:7-15. The FIG TREE, the OLIVE, the VINE, and the BRAMBLE.

"And, when it was told Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried aloud,—and said unto them—Hearken unto me, ye owners of Shechem, and may God, hearken unto you. The trees, went their way, to anoint over them, a king,—and they said unto the olive tree—Reign thou over us. But the **olive tree** said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, which, in me, gods and men do honour,—and go to wave to and fro, over the trees? Then said the trees unto the fig-tree,—Come! thou reign over us. But the **fig-tree** said unto them, Should I leave my sweetness, and mine excellent increase,—and go to wave to and fro, over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine,—Come! thou, reign over us. But **the vine** said unto them, Should I leave my new wine, that rejoiceth gods and men,—and go to wave to and fro, over the trees? Then said all the trees, unto **the bramble**,—Come, thou, to reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If, in truth, ye are about to anoint me to be king over you, come, take refuge in my shade,—but, if not, there shall come forth fire out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon" (Jud. 9:7-15).

These four contain the whole dispensational history of Israel.

THE FIG TREE

The earliest of all the trees named in the Bible is the FIG TREE. It is specially typical of Israel as to national position. The synoptic Gospels set this forth. Israel, as to national position, was like the Fig tree planted in a vineyard (Luke 13:6)—a place of blessing and advantage. It has special reference to Israel's moral and spiritual failure under the old covenant. The Lord came seeking fruit, but none was found; three years were given

to it (the three years of His ministry), and at length orders were given to "cut it down " (Luke 13: 6-9), and, nationally, Israel soon "withered away" (Matt. 21:19, 20; Mark 11: 13, 14). In Judges "sweetness" and "good fruit " are given as the special characteristics of the Fig tree. But it was just these which were wanting when the Lord came. It is just these which are lacking in Israel today.

THE OLIVE TREE

The OLIVE is characterized by "fatness," and that "wherewith by use they honor God and man." This sets forth Israel's covenant privileges. Israel had "fatness " indeed, and privileges such as no other nation had. The Olive is specially associated with "the house of God" (Ps. 52:8).¹ But religiously, Israel did not "honor God." Hence, its privileges were taken away, some of its branches were "broken off," other branches are now "grafted in," and partake of the "fatness" of the olive tree. It is not "cut down" and "withered away," as Israel's political position has been. The Olive is the only evergreen of the three. Its wood, leaves and fruit are all good, telling of the blessings of Yahweh's everlasting covenant with Abraham and his seed, of His free grace, of His spiritual gifts, and of His eternal faithfulness. All these are included in the teaching of the Olive, and all are in striking contrast to man's Fig tree pretensions and failure. No! the Olive tree stands, and by-and-by the natural branches will be grafted in again. Israel had the privileges once, some of which are described in Rom. 3:1, 2: 9:4, 5; the great privilege being that "unto them were committed the oracles of God"; but now, Gentiles (as such) have this, among other of Israel's privileges, and to-day the Gentiles dispense to Jews "the oracles of God."

THE VINE

3. The VINE speaks of Israel's spiritual blessing. Read Isa. 5 and Psa. 80. Yahweh brought this Vine out of Egypt. He "planted it." He "prepared room for it." He did everything for it. But this Vine failed. Its hedges were taken away and the vineyard was trodden down. There is henceforth no blessing for Israel apart from Christ. He is the true or very Vine. All others were but types and shadows, He is the real Vine, well-pleasing to God, in Whom "He delighteth."

All spiritual blessing for Israel is bound up in Him. Without Him nothing can be done. He said "I am the true Vine," not the true Fig, or the true Olive; but the true or real Vine.

NATIONAL POSITION. The nation has, like the FIG TREE, been "cut down " and is "withered away," and it will never be restored under the same conditions, or under the old covenant. "Let no fruit grow on thee hereafter for ever" (Mr. 11:14; Mt. 21:19) The kingdom has been taken from them, and will be given (as it has already been given in Yahweh's purpose) to a nation and a generation who will bring forth the fruits thereof. For "fruit" is the characteristic of the Fig tree. Yes, out of that old nation there will be a new one. A nation will be made out of a remnant of it (Matt. 21:43); a nation which will be

¹ But, I, am like a flourishing olive-tree, in the house of God, I have put confidence in the lovingkindness of God, for times age-abiding and beyond.

"born at once." This nation will have a new covenant and a new political position altogether. This Fig tree will now soon put forth its leaves, for its summer is coming, yea, is "nigh at hand" (Mat. 24:32-33; Mark 13:28-29; Luke 21: 29-31).

COVENANT PRIVILEGE. The branches have been broken off, but the OLIVE TREE is not cut down or cast away. Some of its branches are only broken off. Others from a wild-olive tree have been grafted in, and presently the broken-off branches will be "grafted into their own olive tree," and their covenant privileges will be restored; their "fatness" renewed and used for the "honor of God and man." This Covenant was made with Abraham before there was an Israel; and all its privileges are included in the Olive.

SPIRITUAL BLESSING. The VINE has been wasted and devoured (Ps. 80:13), and trodden down, and no rain waters it (Is. 5:5-6). But Yahweh of hosts will "return and visit this vine." His right hand will be upon the Son of Man whom He has made strong for Himself. He will turn again, and cause His face to shine and Israel will be saved (Ps. 80:14, 19)

As the Vine (connected with spiritual blessing in the world), Israel has wholly and altogether failed. It is characteristic of the Vine that its wood is of no use, not even to make a pin on which to hang anything (read Ezek. 15 on this subject). It has no power to stand alone, It needs support itself, but cannot give support to others. No! Israel, as the Vine, has failed. All spiritual blessing now and henceforth must and will be found only in and through "the true Vine," the real Vine, to which all others pointed; "the man of His right hand." All who do not derive their blessing from Him and partake of blessing through Him will be "cast out " and "cut off." But all who partake of strength and blessing in Him will stand for , ever! and yield that wine which shall cheer both Yahweh and man.

But now note specially the places of the Scripture where these trees are mentioned, and where their lessons are imfolded.

1. We have the Fig tree in the three synoptic gospels.
2. The Olive in Romans, and
3. The Vine in John.

It is in the Three synoptic Gospels we have the record of the dispensational history of the causes of the "cutting down" of the Fig tree, and the miracle of its "withering away." Now, in this present interval, it is in the Church epistles (Rom. 9-11.) that we have the Olive tree, and the record concerning the "breaking off" of the natural branches and the grafting in of others.

While it is in the gospel of John that we have the Vine and its branches, the special scriptures for the teaching of those who will specially need it in the days after the church has been removed. In that gospel, those companies of the saved will learn the precious truths which will be their support and their stay in the day of the great tribulation: "through" and "out of" which they will be brought.

But concerning this Great Tribulation and the causes of it, we have further teaching from Jotham's Allegory. The three trees we have been referring to would not be king over the other trees. But there was a fourth tree. There was one that would, and that was

THE BRAMBLE!

The Bramble was willing to reign over them, and its words are prophetic. "Come and put your trust in my shadow." Ah! there was One who said: "Come unto me," but they replied: "We will not have this man to reign over us." He came in the Father's name, and they received Him not. But another is coming in his own name, and him they will receive (John 5:43). Yes! They will make a covenant with him, and he with them (Dan. 9:27). They will trust in his "shadow," but it will prove to be only a shadow; for "a fire shall come out of the bramble and devour them, and that will be the Great Tribulation, the Day of Yahweh.

But the Bramble itself shall be burned up and destroyed. For "of thorns men do not gather figs: nor of a bramble bush do they gather grapes" (Luke 6:44). No! only of the true vine can it be said, and of His people He will yet say: "From me is thy fruit found" (Hos. 14:8).

We thus learn the true dispensational position of the gospel of John, and have the key to its teaching: and if we rightly divide it we shall not use the truth of John 15 to upset the truth of Romans 8 as to our own present standing in Christ: nor set those two chapters in opposition, and then seek to explain away the difficulty which we have ourselves created through failing to rightly divide the word of Truth.