

Rise of Papal Rome

As the year 457 B. C. was an important date in Jewish history, so 538 A. D. is a milepost in the history of the Christian church. The former, dating from the decree to restore and build Jerusalem, marks the beginning of one great prophetic period, the 2300 days of Daniel 8:14. The latter, which witnessed the setting up of the papacy, is the date from which to reckon that other prophetic period, "a time and times and the dividing of time," or the twelve hundred and sixty days of Daniel 7:25. It is the period during which the little horn, which plucked up three of the ten divisions of the Roman Empire, should bear sway. It is to the beginning of this period, the year 538, that the thirty-first verse of Daniel 11 brings the history.

The fully developed papacy was not the work of one nor of two years any more than the universal power of Babylon, Medo-Persia, or Greece was an immediate acquisition. As those kingdoms grew in power, so papal Rome grew in power. According to Revelation 13:2, the dragon gave the beast his power and his seat and great authority. The work of Constantine and Justinian in gaining power for this new organization was parallel to the conquests of Cyrus, Alexander, and Cæsar in their conquests for their respective nations. The seat of the pagan Roman government was removed to Constantinople, thereby giving room for the papacy to be seated on the throne in the city on the Tiber. As territory and a capital were gained gradually, so the authority of the papacy was a gradual acquisition. Each of the four universal kingdoms had a distinct policy, which was followed throughout its existence. Likewise the papacy had its policy just as clearly defined. The working of this policy in its inception is best seen in Alexandria. It was there that the two streams, paganism and Christianity, mingled their waters. The papacy had birth on the banks of the Nile: Egypt was the mother who nursed it, and as it grew, it breathed in the miasma of its surroundings. First, Christians interpreted the Bible according to pagan thought, and paganism appearing to be vanquished, in reality became the conqueror.

Then the teachings of the Word were changed. In order to compromise with pagans, idol worship was introduced into the Christian church; the second commandment was dropped from the Decalogue, and the tenth was divided to preserve the number. The fourth, the keystone to the law of God, a memorial of creation and redemption, was so altered as to exalt the enemy of God above God himself. Later, the whole Bible was discarded, and as that detector of sin was suppressed, vileness and iniquity became uncontrollable. This, however, was not the whole policy of the papacy, but only one of the stones in the foundation of the structure that was being reared.

The head of the church, who was likewise a civil ruler, was exalted more and more above his fellows, until a complete ecclesiastical hierarchy was formed. By decree of a general council the head of the church was declared infallible. But even before, this faith in the new church, and especially in the head of the church, took the place of faith in Christ. The Virgin Mary and saints became mediators for sinful man, and forgiveness was granted by the head of the church. Righteousness by works led to long pilgrimages, penance, and relic worship. Everlasting punishment was held as a threat above the heads of the common people. The darkness deepened. The inquisition was instituted to force men's conscience. Kings upon their thrones were compelled to recognize the superior authority of the power of Rome, and failure to do so meant the removal of their crowns. Subjects were absolved from allegiance to their sovereigns, and so complete was the obedience of nations to Rome, that no man dared lift his hand in opposition.

A darkness beyond comprehension settled over all the world. The light had been extinguished when God's Word was banished. "The noontide of the papacy was the world's moral midnight."

The power which should speak great words against the Most High, and wear out the saints of the Most High, was allotted 1260 years in which to work; but so cruel was that power that the time was shortened, lest none should survive the persecution. It was Egyptian or Babylonian bondage for the Christian church. But even as God had some in Egypt and Babylon who were followers of the light throughout the period of darkness, there was ever a little company of believers who held the Scriptures dear to their hearts, and who obeyed the commandments.

The Waldenses could trace their ancestry back to the days of Paul, and from Asia Minor, where that apostle first preached, to the wild retreat in the mountains of Italy, there were faithful Sabbath keepers. The power on the throne might change the day of worship, but there were always some who obeyed God rather than man. As Gabriel told Daniel, "They that understand among the people shall instruct many; yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by captivity, and by spoil." Though thousands fell because they dared lift the voice against the powers that be, yet God watched their numbers and counted each one who gave his life.

There is no more wonderful record of deliverance from bondage than that which God wrought for his church at the close of the period of persecution. Israel's deliverance from Egypt, when a multitude marched through the Red Sea on dry land, was marvellous; the deliverance from Babylon was a wonder in the eyes of the world; but the birth of Protestantism-the deliverance from the darkness of the Middle Ages-surpassed all others.

In the twelfth of Revelation, where the same deliverance is mentioned, it is stated that the earth helped the woman-the church. And it did indeed. Powers that were wholly unaccountable for the good they were doing, were used by the Father to break those bands that Satan had placed around the truth. The suppression of the Bible had led to the suppression of all learning. There were no schools for the masses; there were no books, no papers; physicians were forbidden to practice medicine, lest they should take money which would otherwise go into the coffers of the church. Should any man dare to advocate learning, or cross the beaten paths made by the church, he was led to the stake. But it could not always be so. God made use of the Moors who had accepted Mohammedanism to help deliver his people. Schools were established by them in Spain and western Asia. The sciences were taught, and from these schools the light of learning broke into Egypt.

Wycliffe, called "the Morning Star of the Reformation," in the fourteenth century, translated the Bible into English. He wrote tracts showing the fallacy of the papal system. He, in England, like Daniel of old, was in close touch with the king, and the light of the gospel was having its effect. To the ruler on the throne, and the students in the universities, Wycliffe gave the gospel. His followers, known as Lollards, were bitterly persecuted, but never wholly exterminated; and it is their descendants, who, as Puritans, brought Protestantism to America.

Huss and Jerome in Bohemia lifted their voices against papal dogmas, and later Luther, the German monk, proclaimed liberty of conscience and salvation alone by faith in Jesus Christ. He had found a copy of the Bible chained in a cell of one of the German

monasteries, and the spark there kindled, lighted a fire which Rome was unable to extinguish.

The Word of God became the lesson book for the German nation. Luther was assisted in his work of reform by Melanchthon, the noted teacher in Wittenberg. Other schools were established throughout Germany; teachers were educated, and before the death of Luther the German nation sat at the feet of Protestant teachers; so rapid was the work when the Word of God was opened to mankind. The Reformation marched on to victory. Rome retreated into narrower and still narrower bounds, not before the sword, but before the onward march of truth. Into every nation of Europe the light shone, and America was founded upon the principles which had their birth in Germany.

The papacy quivered before the blow; and had each nation accepted the Reformation as it came to it, it would have been but a short time until history would have been at an end. God was in the Reformation, offering to modern nations the same deliverance which was held out to the Jews when they were granted an opportunity to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. The everlasting covenant was repeated, but men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries treated it as the Jews did the decree to leave Babylon. When once the principles of the Reformation-liberty of conscience and the equal rights of all men-were presented to a nation, and were refused, that nation sank back into the arms of the papacy, and carried to its completion the principles of that government.

Such was the history of France. The experience of that nation stands as an object lesson to the world. Truth had been proclaimed within her borders, but again the papacy rose up to do according to his will. It is in that country that verses 36-39 of chapter 11 were exactly fulfilled. Having rejected light, the intensity of the darkness into which men fell was beyond description.