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## *THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.*

### VI. RELATION OF THE CHRISTIAN BOOKS TO CON- TEMPORARY THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE.

It is necessary to have some clear idea with regard to the symbolism employed in the Seven Letters, especially the angels, the stars, and the lampstands or candlesticks. Not that it is proposed to discuss the symbolism of the Apocalypse as a whole, or the religious and theological intention of the writer. Our purpose is much more modest—simply to try to determine what was the meaning which ordinary people of that time, for whom the book was written, would gather from the symbolism employed in the letters. It is proposed to employ the same method in this case, as in all our other investigations—to regard the book as written in the current language, familiar to the people of the time, and not expressed in a peculiar and artificial Christian language: the term “artificial” is required, because if the Christians used a kind of language different from that of the ordinary population, it must have been artificial.

Nor are the thoughts—one might almost say, though the expression must not be misapplied or interpreted in a way different from what is intended—nor are the thoughts of the Christian books alien from and unfamiliar to the period when they were written. They stand in the closest relation to the period. They are made for it: they suit it: they are determined by it.

We take the same view about all the books of the New Testament. They spring from the circumstances of their period, whatever it was in each case; they are suited to its

needs ; in a way they think its thoughts, but think them in a new form and on a higher plane ; they answer the questions which men were putting, and the answers are expressed in the language which was used and understood at the time. Hence, in the first place, their respective dates can be assigned with confidence, provided we understand the history and familiarize ourselves with the thoughts and ways of the successive periods. No person, who is capable of appreciating the tone and thought of different periods, could place the composition of any of the books of the New Testament in the period of the Antonines, unless he were imperfectly informed of the character and spirit of that period ; and the fact that some modern scholars have placed them (or some of them) in that period merely shows with what light-hearted haste some scholars have proceeded to decide on difficult questions of history without the preliminary training and acquisition of the knowledge imperatively required before a fair judgment could be pronounced.

From this close relation of the Christian books to the time in which they originated, arises, e.g., the marvellously close resemblance between the language used about the birth of the divine Augustus and the language used about the birth of Christ. In the words current in the Eastern Provinces, especially in the great and highly educated and "progressive" cities of Asia, shortly before the Christian era, the day of the birth of the (Imperial) God was the beginning of all things ; it inaugurated for the world the glad tidings that came through him ; through him there was peace on earth and sea : the Providence, which orders every part of human life, brought Augustus into the world, and filled him with the virtue to do good to men : he was the Saviour of the race of men,<sup>1</sup> and so on.

<sup>1</sup> The last expression became stereotyped for all Emperors : so also the phrase about doing benefits to men : the earlier ones are more peculiarly the property of Augustus. The fullest text of the most important inscription was published in *Mittheilungen des Instituts, Athen*, 1899, p. 288 ff.

All this was not merely the language of courtly panegyric. It was in a way thoroughly sincere, with all the sincerity that the people of that over-developed and precocious time, with their artificial, highly stimulated, rather feverish intellect, were capable of feeling.<sup>1</sup> But the very resemblance—so startling, apparently, to those who are suddenly confronted with a good example of it—is the best and entirely sufficient proof<sup>2</sup> that the idea and narrative of the birth of Christ could not be a growth of mythology at a later time, even during the period about 60–100 A.D., but sprang from the conditions and thoughts, and expressed itself in the words, of the period to which it professes to belong. But so far are people from recognizing the true bearing of these facts, and the true relation of the New Testament to the life and thought of its own time, that probably the most fashionable line of argument will soon be that the narrative of the Gospels was a mere imitation of the popular belief about the birth of Augustus, and necessarily took its origin during the time when that popular belief was strong, viz., during the last thirty years of his reign.<sup>3</sup>

but much of it had been published long before; and the thoughts and ideas can be traced in many other channels. Copies of that great official inscription were erected in many of the leading cities of Asia about 9–5 B.C.

<sup>1</sup> The character of the great cities in Asia Minor, and their educational system, are described in *EXPOSITOR*, Dec. 1901.

<sup>2</sup> It is to a great extent on this and similar evidence that the present writer has based his confident and unhesitating opinion as to the time of origin of the New Testament books, ever since he began to understand the spirit and language of the period. Before he began to appreciate them, he accepted the then fashionable view that they were second century works.

<sup>3</sup> It died with him, of course, and would cease to influence thought within a few years after his death: he was a god only for his lifetime (though a pretence was made of worshipping all the deceased Emperors who were properly deified by decree of the Senate): even in old age, it is doubtful if he continued to make the same impression on his people, but as soon as he died a new god took his place. New ideas and words then ruled among men, for the new god never was heir to the immense public belief which hailed the divine Augustus. With Tiberius began a new era, new thoughts, and new forms.

There are already some signs that, as people begin to learn these facts, which stand before us on the stones engraved before the birth of Christ, this line of argument is beginning to be developed. It will at least have this great advantage, that it assigns correctly the period when the Christian narrative originated, and that it cuts away the ground beneath the feet of those who have maintained that the Gospels are the culmination of a long subsequent growth of mythology about a more or less historical Jesus. The Gospels, as we have them, though composed in the second half, and for the most part in the last quarter, of the first century, are a faithful presentation in thought and word of a much older and well attested history, and are only in very small degree affected by the thoughts and language of the period when their authors wrote, remaining true to the form as fixed by earlier registration.

Similarly, the Seven Letters are the growth of their time, and must be studied along with it. They belong to the second half of Diocletian's reign, 88-96 A.D.; and it is about that time that we may look for the best evidence as to the meaning that they would bear to their original readers.

#### VII. SYMBOLISM OF THE SEVEN LETTERS: ITS MEANING.

In the first place we notice that there are two pairs of ideas mentioned in i. 20, "the seven stars are the angels of the Seven Churches; and the seven lampstands are Seven Churches." Of these, the second pair stand on the earth, and in the first pair, since the stars belong to heaven, the angels also must belong to heaven. There is the earthly pair, the Churches and the lampstands that symbolize them; and there is the corresponding heavenly pair, the angels and the stars which symbolize them.

A similar correspondence between a higher and a lower

embodiment of Divine character may frequently be observed in the current religious conceptions of that time. We find amid the religious monuments of Asia Minor certain reliefs, which seem to represent the Divine nature on two planes, expressed by the device of two zones in the artistic grouping. There is an upper zone showing the Divine nature on the higher, what may be called the heavenly plane; and there is a lower zone, in which the god is represented as appearing among the worshippers who come to him on earth, to whom he reveals the right way of approaching him and serving him, and whom he benefits in return for their service and offering duly completed. The best example known to me is dated 100 A.D.,<sup>1</sup> and belongs to the circuit of Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> But, without an illustration, I need not try to describe its bearing on the subject.

The lampstand, which represents the Church, is a natural and obvious symbol. The Church is Divine: it is the kingdom of God among men in the world: in it shines the light that illumines the darkness of the world.

The heavenly pair is more difficult to express precisely in its relation to the earthly pair. There seems to be involved here a conception, common in ancient time generally, that there are intermediate grades of existence to bridge over the vast gap between the pure Divine nature and the earthly manifestation of it. Thus the star and the angel, of whom the star is the symbol, are the intermediate stage between Christ and His Church with its lamp shining in the world. This symbolism was taken over by St. John from the traditional forms of expression in theories regarding the Divine nature and its relation to the world.

Again, we observe that, in the religious symbolic language

<sup>1</sup> The text is published by Wagener, *Inscriptions recueillies en Asie Mineure*, I.

<sup>2</sup> See Section II.

of the first century, a star denoted the heavenly existence corresponding to a divine being or divine creation or existence located on earth. Thus, in the language of the Roman poets, the divine figure of the Emperor on earth has a star in heaven that corresponds to it and is its heavenly counterpart. So the imperial family as a whole is also said to have its star, or to be a star. It is a step towards this kind of expression when Horace<sup>1</sup> speaks of the Julian star shining like the moon amid the lesser fires; but still Horace was hardly conscious of having advanced beyond the limits of mere poetic metaphor. But when Domitian built a Temple of the Flavian Family, the poet Statius describes him as placing the stars of his family (the Flavian) in a new heaven.<sup>2</sup> There is implied here a similar conception to that which we are studying in the Revelation: the new Temple on earth corresponds to a new heaven framed to contain the new stars; the divine Emperors of the Flavian family (along with any other member of the family who had been formally deified) are the earthly existences dwelling in the new Temple, as the stars, their heavenly counterparts, move in the new heaven. The parallel is close, however widely separate the theological ideals are; and the date of Statius's poem is about the last year of Domitian's reign, 95-96 A.D.

The star, then, is obviously the heavenly object which corresponds to the lamp shining on the earth, though superior in character and purity to it. Now, as the lamp on earth is to the star in heaven, so is the Church on earth to the angel. Such is the relation clearly indicated. The angel is a corresponding existence on another and higher plane, but more pure in essence, more closely associated with the Divine nature than the individual Church on earth can be.

Now, what is the angel? How shall he be defined or

<sup>1</sup> *Ode* i. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Silvae*, v. 1, 240 f.

described? In answer to this question, then, one must attempt to describe what is meant by the angels of the Churches in these chapters, although as soon as the description is written, one recognizes that it is inadequate and even incorrect. The angel of the Church seems to embody and gather together in a personification the powers, the character, the history and life and unity of the Church. The angel represents the Divine presence, the Divine element, in the Church; he is the Divine guarantee of the vitality and power of the Church.

This seems clear; but the difficulty begins when we ask what is the relation of the angel to the faults and sins of his Church, and, above all, to the punishment which awaits and is denounced against those sins. The Church in Smyrna or in Ephesus suffers from the faults and weaknesses of the men who compose it: it is guilty of their crimes, and it will be punished in their person. Is the angel, too, guilty of the sins? Is he to bear the punishment for them?

Undoubtedly the angel is touched and affected by the sins of his Church. Nothing else is conceivable. He could not be the counterpart or the double of a Church, unless he was affected in some way by its failings. But the angels of the Churches are addressed, not simply as touched by their faults, but as guilty of them. Most of the angels have been guilty of serious, even deadly sins. The angel of Sardis is dead, though he has the name of being alive. The angel of Sardis is lukewarm and spiritless, and shall be rejected. Threats, also, are directed against the angels. "I will come to thee,"<sup>1</sup> "I will come against thee," "I will spit thee out of my mouth."

The angel is regarded as responsible for any neglect of the warning now given, "and thou shalt not know what

<sup>1</sup> "I will come in displeasure at thee," is the more exact meaning, as Professor Moulton points out.



hour I will come upon thee": "thou art the wretched one, and poor, and miserable, and blind, and naked." Other passages might be quoted.

These expressions seem to make it clear that the angel could be guilty and must suffer punishment for his guilt. This is certainly surprising, and, moreover, it is altogether inconsistent with our previous conclusion that the angel is the heavenly counterpart of the Church. He who is guilty and responsible for guilt cannot stand anywhere except on the earth.

The inconsistency, however, is due to the inevitable failure of the writer fully to carry out the symbolism. It is not so difficult to follow out an allegory perfectly, so long as the writer confines himself to the realm of pure fancy; but, if he comes into the sphere of reality and fact, he soon finds that the allegory cannot be wrought out completely; it will not fit the details of life. When John addresses the angels as guilty, he is no longer thinking of them, but of the actual Churches which he knew on earth. The symbolism was complicated and artificial; and, when he began to write the actual letters, he began to feel that he was addressing the actual Churches, and the symbolism dropped from him in great degree. He writes to the Church of Ephesus or of Sardis, and not to its angel; or, rather, all distinction between the Church and its angel vanishes from the writer's mind. He comes into direct contact with real life, and thinks no longer of correctness in the use of symbols and in keeping up the elaborate and rather awkward allegory. He writes naturally, directly, and unfettered by symbolical consistency.

In the Apocalypse, as a whole, we must observe that the author was using an established literary form, adapting this traditional device to his own purposes, but often badly fettered and impeded by its fanciful and unreal character. Much of his imagery and symbolism was prescribed for him

by the traditional principles of apocalyptic composition. But sometimes the traditional form breaks in his hands; and he throws away for the moment the shattered fragments. That is the case with the Seven Letters.

It is therefore vain to attempt to give a rigidly accurate definition of the meaning which is attached to the term "angel" in these chapters. All that concerns the angels is vague, impalpable, elusive, defying analysis and scientific precision. You cannot tell where in the Seven Letters, taken one by one, the idea "angel" drops and the idea "church" takes its place. You cannot feel certain what characteristics in the Seven Letters may be regarded as applying to the angels, and what must be separated from them. But the vague description given in our earlier paragraphs will be sufficient for use; and it may be made clearer by quoting Professor J. H. Moulton's description of angels: "Spiritual counterparts of human individuals or communities, dwelling in heaven, but subject to changes depending on the good or evil behaviour of their complementary beings on earth."<sup>1</sup>

How far did St. John, in employing the symbolism current at the time, accept and approve it as a correct statement of truth? That question naturally arises; but the answer seems inevitable. He regards this symbolism merely as a way of making spiritual ideas intelligible to the ordinary human mind, after the fashion of the parables in the life of Christ. He was under the influence of the common and accepted ways of expressing spiritual, or philosophical, or theological truth, just as he was under the

<sup>1</sup> In this description (*Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. iii. p. 514), the words "subject to changes depending on" is another way (and probably a better way) of expressing what I have put in the form "touched or affected by." I intentionally wrote out all that I have said before looking at Professor Moulton's article, though I resolved to read it before printing my own words, and, if it seemed needful, to correct my words from him. I found we were to a great degree in agreement on the facts, though I am not convinced by his argument as to a Zoroastrian origin.

influence of fashionable forms in literature. He took these up and made the best he could of them. The apocalyptic form of literature was far from being a high one; and the Apocalypse of John suffers from the unfortunate choice of this form: only occasionally is the author able to free himself from the chilling influence of that fanciful and extravagant mode of expression. The marked difference in character and power between the Apocalypse and the Gospel of St. John is in great measure due to the poor models which he followed in the former.

It is an interesting fact that one of the most fashionable methods of expressing highly generalized truths or principles—the genealogical method—is never employed by John (except in the universally accepted phrases, “son of man,” “Son of God”). The contempt expressed by Paul for the “fables and endless genealogies” of current philosophy and science seems to have been shared by most of the Christian writers; and it is true that no form of veiling ignorance by a show of words was ever invented more dangerous and more tempting than the genealogical.<sup>1</sup> A good example of the genealogical method may be found in Addison’s 35th *Spectator*, an imitation of the old form, but humorous instead of pedantic.

#### VIII. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS.

Each of the Seven Letters opens, as letters in ancient time always did, by stating who sends the message. But the formula does not take the form that it ought to have if the sender of the message were the writer of the letter, viz., “the writer to the person addressed.” In the present case the letters are written by John, who imagines

<sup>1</sup> It is unnecessary to repeat what was said about the genealogical method of stating philosophic, or scientific, or historical theories in the *Expositor*, December, 1901, p. 412.

himself to be only the channel through which they come from the real originator of them; and the exordium is altered to suit this peculiar method. The writer does not name himself; but after naming the person addressed, "To the angel of the Church in Ephesus," he gives a brief description of the originator of the message. The seven descriptions all differ from one another; and, taken together, they make up the complete account given in chap. i. of "One like unto a son of man." This Divine sender of the message seems to present himself in a different aspect to each individual Church; and the seven aspects make up his complete personal description, as if indicating that the Seven different congregations or Churches make up, when taken together, the complete and Universal Church. This expresses in another way what we have tried to express in Section I: the Seven Churches make up the complete Church of the Province Asia, because each of them stands in place of a group of Churches, and (as we now may add) the Church of the Province Asia in its turn stands in place of the Universal Church of Christ.

As was implied in the first of these papers,<sup>1</sup> the letter to an individual Church passes easily into an "Epistle General" to the whole Church, for it embodies general principles of nature, order, and government, which are applicable to all. Similarly, to apply the comparison which was forced upon us in that paper, the Imperial Rescript addressed to a Province or to its governor embodied general principles of administration, which were afterwards regarded as applicable universally (except in so far as they were expressly adapted to an exceptional condition of the Province addressed). But in every case, when an individual Church is addressed, as here, it is addressed in

<sup>1</sup> EXPOSITOR, Dec. 1903, p. 401 ff. (an introduction to the series): especially p. 417 f.

and for itself, and its own special individual character and fortunes are clearly present before the writer's mind. He does not think of the Smyrna group when he addresses Smyrna, nor is he thinking of the Universal Church: he addresses Smyrna alone; he has it clear before his mind, with all its special qualities and individuality. Yet the group which had its centre in Smyrna, and the whole Universal Church, alike found that the letter which was written for Smyrna applied equally to them, for it was a statement of eternal truths and universal principles.

It is not to be supposed that the Seven Letters were sent separately to the Seven Churches. The Apocalypse is a book which was never intended to be taken except as a whole; and the Seven Letters are a mere part of this book, and never had any existence except in the book. The Seven Churches had established their representative position before the book was composed; and that is assumed throughout by the author. They stand, in their combination, to him for the entire Province, and the Province stands to him for the entire Church of Christ; but when he is writing to Smyrna or Thyatira, he sees and thinks of Smyrna or Thyatira alone. I hoped that this was made clear in the Section, but it seems that my intention was not understood rightly by some readers.

As to the brief description of the Divine sender, which is prefixed to each of the Seven Letters, it is obvious in several cases that the details selected are peculiarly appropriate to the individual Church addressed. Probably there was a certain suitability in every case, though we cannot always discern it, owing to our ignorance of much of the character and history of the cities.

The message to the Church in Ephesus comes from him "that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." If we review the openings of the other six letters, none could

so appropriately be used to the Church in Ephesus as this description. The only one which could for a moment be compared in suitability with it is the opening of the Sardian letter, "he that hath the Seven Spirits of God and the seven stars"; the second part in that case is appropriate to Ephesus, and is almost identical with part of the Ephesian exordium, but the first part is not so strikingly appropriate as the rest of the Ephesian exordium.

Ephesus, as in practical importance the leading city of the Province Asia, might be said in a sense to be in the midst of the Seven Churches; and the Divine figure that addresses her appropriately holds in his hand the seven stars of those Churches. The leading city can stand for the whole Province, as the Province can stand for the whole Church; and that was so customary and usual as to need no explanation or justification. To the Christians, Ephesus and Asia were almost convertible terms; Ephesus stood for Asia, Asia was Ephesus. Hence in the list of equivalent names printed by Parthey as Appendix I. to his edition of *Hierocles et Notitiae Episcopatum*, the explanation is formally given, No. 40, Ἀσία ἡ Ἐφεσος.

As to the holding of the seven stars, Mr. Anderson Scott, in his admirable little edition, published in the Century Bible, remarks that, "in the image before the eye of the Seer the seven stars probably appear as a chain of glittering jewels hanging from the hand of Christ." This image suits excellently the description which we have given already of the Seven Churches as situated on the circling road that goes forth from Ephesus, traverses them all in succession and returns to its point of origin in the representative city of the Province.

W. M. RAMSAY.