

Word. Further, it is impossible to say whether, according to the notions of the Jewish doctors, there was any connection between what they called the Word of the Lord and the person of the Messiah.

We possess now all the elements required for the explanation of the notion and of the term Logos in the Prologue of John, without going away from the sphere of the theocratic revelations and forsaking that sacred soil in which the roots of the Apostle's religious thought and life were imbedded.¹

THE EPISTLES TO
THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.

INTRODUCTORY (*concluded*).

THE words in which the writer of the Apocalypse describes himself, and the process by which the messages he is about to write came to him, are every way significant. "Tribulation" had come upon those Churches, and he was a "fellow-sharer" with them in the sufferings which it brought; but through the tribulation he and they were alike gaining their place "in the kingdom." He repeats, *i.e.*, the lesson which the Churches in that region had heard at the outset from St. Paul, that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts xiv. 22). But he is their partner also in the patience or "endurance," not *of* (I follow the better reading), but "*in* Jesus." The thought expressed is not, as it is perhaps in 2 Thess. iii. 5 (if we accept our English rendering), that of "the patient waiting for

¹ A Dissertation from GODET'S "Commentary on the Gospel of St. John," translated from the French by the Rev. E. W. SHALDERS, B.A.

Christ," nor yet of a patience like that of which Christ had been the great example, but of an endurance which had its life and energy in union with Him. He goes on to tell how it was that he found himself in Patmos. He had proclaimed the Word of God; he had borne his witness, and this was the result. It would help us but little in the work on which we have entered to picture to ourselves the rocks and shores of that island. With its scenery we have but small concern. The imagery of the visions that follow is all but entirely unaffected by the external surroundings of the seer. At the furthest, we can but think of the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean, now purple as wine, now green as emerald, flushing and flashing in the light like the hues on the plumage of a dove, opalescent and phosphorescent, according to the changes of sun and moonlight, as accustoming the Apostle's eye, and, through the eye, his thoughts, to impressions of splendours and glories—the rainbow round about the throne, and the sea of crystal mingled with fire—which we find it all but impossible to represent to the imagination, and which even he found it hard to express adequately in words.

And he was "in the Spirit, on the Lord's day." I cannot hesitate for a moment to accept the current explanation of the latter phrase, as meaning the first day of the week, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, the day also, let us remember, of the Lord's Supper. The adjective which in each case expresses the sacred character of the supper or the day was, so far as we can trace it, either coined by St. Paul, or for the first time taken out of colloquial into written use, as

applied to the former. It is found in no earlier writer. It seems probable that, fashioned as it was, to express a new thought and meet a new want, it spread rapidly among the Greek-speaking Churches, and its first extension would naturally be to the day on which the disciples in each Church met together to partake of the sacred meal to which it had been originally applied.¹ Let us think, then, what that day would be to the beloved disciple in his Patmos exile; how, absent from his flock in the body, he, at that hour of closest communion with them and with his Lord, would yet be with them in the spirit; how the very separation would throw him back more entirely upon the earlier memories of the day as that on which he had first beheld his Master as the conqueror of Hades and of Death. It was natural, if we may apply that term to the orderly sequence of spiritual phenomena, that such emotions should pass into ecstatic adoration, that the life of sense should be suspended, that he should be in the state of half-consciousness which St. Paul so well portrays, "Whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth" (2 Cor. xii.). In that trance-state so described, in which the man sees what others cannot see and hears voices which others cannot hear, and which, in this case at least, did not deprive the seer of the power of distinctly recording afterwards what had been thus made known, the messages to the Seven Churches were revealed to him.

The first impression made on the new conscious-

¹ The same word *κυριακός* is, according to a current, but not quite certain, etymology, the origin of Kirche, Kirk, Church, as being the Lord's house. "Cyriac," as a proper name, is another instance of its extension.

ness is that which is described as like the sound of "a great voice, as of a trumpet." It woke him out of the sleep that was the transition-stage between the lower and the higher life. Its sounds thrilled through brain and nerve, as will thrill one day the trump of the archangel. He heard the words, "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last," of which he had already reproduced the echoes. He heard too, as if in answer to unuttered and unrecorded prayers, the words which told him that there were messages from that Eternal One to each of those Churches or communities of believers whose wants and perils had been as a burden on his soul. If his waking thoughts had travelled, as thoughts do travel at such times and under such conditions, to those portions of the flock of the Great Shepherd which he had so often visited, with which he had so often on the Lord's Day broken the bread and drunk of the cup of blessing, it must have been welcome tidings to him that he could preach to them a diviner word of counsel and reproof from his place of exile than he had done when he had been living and working in the midst of them. And then he turned and looked—and the vision that met his gaze was one of glory and majesty unspeakable. The "seven golden candlesticks" which he there beheld would at least remind him of the seven-branched candlestick which stood in the inner sanctuary (not the Holy of Holies) of the Tabernacle and the Temple. They had borne their witness there for centuries that God was Light, and that that Light revealed itself in manifold variety growing out of a central unity. In the vision of Zechariah—whose prophecy had, as we

have seen already, been much in the mind of St. John, suggesting imagery and phraseology—it had been seen, probably after the pattern of the lamp constructed at the time of the return from the Babylonian exile under Zerubbabel for the restored temple, as “a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof” (Zech. iv. 2). To make the symbol yet more complete, and adapted to what were then the pressing necessities of the time, he saw in his vision two olive-trees feeding from their branches, through two golden pipes, the bowl through which the lamps were kept burning. He learnt in the interpretation of the symbol that the two olive-trees were the two “sons of oil,” the two “anointed ones,” the representatives of priestly and of civil authority, Joshua and Zerubbabel, upon whom at that period the welfare of the nation’s life depended. The candlestick, or lamp, that was thus seen in the prophet’s vision, was probably identical in form with that which has become familiar to us as represented on the Arch of Titus, among the spoils of Jerusalem. Here, however, we have what seems at first a modification of the symbolism, almost a new symbol. The seer beholds not a lamp with seven branches, but seven distinct lamps. The ethical reason of the change is, perhaps, not far to seek. For him the lamp was the symbol not merely of the uncreated Light, but (so he had been taught by his Lord Himself) of a Christian society, as the channel through which that light was to be diffused through the world, a lamp set upon the lamp-shaft or pedestal (Matt. v. 15). What he

needed therefore was to bring out clearly the individuality of each such society, and this was done by the manner in which they were thus presented to his vision. If one were to endeavour to realize the vision as it were pictorially, it may have been that the Form which he beheld in the midst of the seven lamps stood in front of the central shaft, hiding it from view, and so leaving them to appear each in its own separate distinctness.

That Form he describes as like unto "the Son of man." Taken by themselves, and standing as they do without the article, the words might be translated simply, as in the great prophecy of Daniel (vii. 13), from which the title had been derived, "One like unto the Son of man," a form which, though arrayed in glory, was yet human. But the constant appropriation of the title by the Lord Jesus, its use by Him in the words which had stamped the expectation of his second Advent upon the minds of his disciples, forbid us to assign that lower meaning to it here. What the seer meant his readers to understand was, that he had seen the Master whom he had known and loved.

The description that follows lies obviously beyond the region of art. It is an attempt to portray thoughts and impressions which are almost, if not altogether, beyond the reach of words. The seer strives to represent a glory which has dazzled and confounded him. A human form, pervaded and clothed with light in all its purity, glorified and transfigured, so that what he had once beheld on the Mount of Transfiguration seemed to pale in memory before this greater brightness, this was

what he looked upon. It is important that we should remember that there had been that anticipation of the glory of the Son of man while He was yet on earth, that the seer who now beheld the vision had then been one of the eye-witnesses of his Majesty. It is not less important to remember how far it was now surpassed. The head and hair in their dazzling whiteness spoke at once of stainless purity and of the crown of glory of the Ancient of Days; the eyes seemed to burn into the soul with their fiery and searching gaze; the voice was like the sounds of many waters; even the feet, just shewn below the long robe that reached to the ankles, glowed with the same pervading brightness.¹ The other details of the manifestation are, however, more significant. The form of the Son of man is seen arrayed, not, as in the days of his ministry, in the short seamless tunic and the flowing cloak (the *χίτων* and *ιμάτιον*, which were the common dress of the Jewish peasant), but in the long robe reaching to the feet, that had been the special garment of the High Priest. St. John uses, *i. e.*, the very word *ποδήρης*, which stood in the LXX. version of Exod. xxviii. 31, for the *Ephod* of Aaron. And he is girded with a golden girdle, not, as of one who toils

¹ It is not, I think, important for our purpose to discuss the mysterious *χαλκολιβανος*—the “fine brass” of the English Version. As this is the one passage in which it is found, its meaning must be more or less conjectural. I incline with Bleek to the view that it is a hybrid compound of the Greek *χαλκός* and the Hebrew “*labân*”—white. Such technical words were likely enough to be current in a population like that of Ephesus, consisting largely of workers in metal, some of whom, if we may judge from the case of Alexander the coppersmith (Acts xix. 34; 2 Tim. iv. 14), were without doubt Jews. I believe the word in question to have belonged to this technical vocabulary. It is, at any rate, used by St. John as familiar and intelligible to those for whom he wrote.

and runs, around the loins (comp. Luke xii. 35), but, as of one who had passed into the repose of sovereignty, around the breast. That the girdle should be of gold, as the symbol of that sovereignty, was almost a necessary consequence. In this combination of the received emblems of the two forms of rule there was set forth, in its simplest symbolism, that union of the kingly and the priestly offices, that revival of the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, which the argument of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews had by this time made more or less familiar. And in his hand He holds seven stars (verse 16). In what way they were seen as held by Him we are not told; but the symbolism is, I venture to think, far more suggestive if we think of them as shining as precious gems would shine if used as signet-rings, than if we picture to ourselves the seven stars as held in the palm of the hand, or suspended from it as a wreath.¹ Here, at least, there is the guiding precedent of the old prophetic language. Of one king of the house of David it had been said that though he were as the "signet upon the right hand" of Jehovah, he should be plucked from it and cast away (Jer. xxii. 24). Of another heir to the kingly succession of that house, the promise had been written, "I will take thee, O Zerubabel, my servant, . . . saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet." To the Eastern mind no symbol

¹ If one may venture on representing to the eye the manner in which they were thus held, I would suggest that they were seen on the inner side of the open hand, arranged in an order like that of the seven stars in the constellation of Ursa Major. It may be noticed that Philo refers both to that constellation and the Pleiades as examples of the prominence of the mystic number even in the visible and material universe.

could more adequately express the preciousness of the angels of the Churches to Him who thus held them, the honour to which He had exalted them, the care with which He watched over them.

The character of the next symbol is less ambiguous—"Out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword." The thought expressed is obviously that of the power of the Divine Judge to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart, and to punish those which were evil and deserved punishment. The sword was thus identical with "the word of the Lord" of the older prophets (Isa. xlix. 2), and of Heb. iv. 12, "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow." Here, adopting the new nomenclature of the writer, we may call it "the word of *the* WORD"—the spoken utterance of Him who Himself utters the mind and will of the Eternal Father. What the seer beheld in vision was the expression of the truth that the message he was about to record would be conveyed in keen and piercing words, cutting through the ulcers of the soul, cutting off the diseased members, laying bare the inmost organs of the inner life, slaying those who deserved slaughter; but also wounding to heal, even slaying that He might raise as from the dead. And therefore it was that the countenance which he beheld was "as the sun shining in his strength," bright and terrible to look upon, and yet the source of all life and joy. In the light of that countenance he and all men, if they walked in it, should see the light of life.

So it was in the immediate personal experience of the disciple. As though that sword had pierced his

soul, as though that light were too dazzling for mortal eye, he "fell at his feet as dead." And then from that death-like trance he was roused by a touch and by a word. "He laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not." We can hardly doubt that that touch must have recalled many an hour of loving and tender companionship in what seemed now as a remote past, when he had leant his head upon the Master's breast, and had felt the hand that told of sympathy and of love laid, in hours of sorrow and perplexity, upon his shoulder, or clasping his hand in the confidence of friendship. "Fear not;" that, too, had been often heard by the disciples on the Lake of Galilee (Matt. xiv. 27; John vi. 19), in the dark hours of night. It had been the cheering watchword of his call to be one of the fishers of men (Luke v. 10), one of the little flock which the Good Shepherd had deigned to take under his especial guardianship (Luke xii. 32). Then, for the most part, it was the thought of their Lord's presence that removed their fear, the presence of One who was then "despised and rejected of men;" like themselves in the outward accidents of life. That which removed the greater fear now was the assurance which the word and the touch gave him that the glorified form on which he looked was one with the Son of man whom he had known and loved, one also with the Eternal Lord, One who had triumphed over death, the living One who had died, but was henceforth "alive for evermore." The word "Amen" which followed, so often used by our Lord during his earthly ministry, placed this assurance of his everlasting life, the source of all life to others,

on the level of the highest truths which He had been wont to seal with this emphatic affirmation.

And to this there was added the new proclamation, "I have the keys of death and of Hades" (I take the words in what appears to be their true order). What thoughts would those words raise in the mind of the hearer? What abiding truths do they set forth for us? He, we know, had heard his Master speak of "the gates of Hades" (Matt. xvi. 18). He had accepted the interpretation of the old Messianic psalm, which spoke of the soul of the Christ as not having been left in Hades. He must have known the faith of St. Peter, that in his descent into Hades his Lord had, in that unseen world, preached to the spirits in prison, who had once been disobedient (1 Pet. iii. 19), proclaiming his gospel to those that were dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit (1 Pet. iv. 6). He may have been familiar with the half-proverbial saying which appeared afterwards in the Targums and the Talmud, that the key of the grave was one of the four keys which the Eternal King committed to no ministering angel, but reserved exclusively in his own power and for his own use. In any case he knew, both from the language of the older prophets (Isa. xxii. 22), and from his Lord's promise to Peter (Matt. xvi. 18), that the key was the recognized symbol of supreme, though, it might be, delegated authority, of the power to open and shut, to admit and to exclude. In these words, therefore, he would hear the assurance that the shadowy realms on which men looked with terror, and which they peopled with all dark

imaginings, were in very deed subject to the rule of Him who, though He had tasted death for every man, was now alive for evermore. "Death and Hades"—these were familiar sounds, as the names of the two great enemies of mankind, the forces that opposed the fulfilment of God's purposes and the completion of his kingdom. Now he heard that they had been despoiled of their power to harm, as afterwards he was to hear that they would deliver up the dead that were in them, and that they themselves should be cast, together with those who were not found written in the Book of Life, into "the lake of fire" (Rev. xx. 13-15). That thought was the one adequate remedy for the fear of death through which, with hardly an exception, men had been all their life-time subject to bondage; for the secret of that fear was their want of faith that there also, in that unseen world, behind the veil, were to be traced the workings of an absolute Righteousness and an Everlasting Love.

The command that followed, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things that shall be hereafter," was simple and clear enough. But as yet the inner meaning of the vision that he had looked on had not been made known to him, and it was the fitting sequel to the education through which his Lord had led him while on earth, explaining to him and to his brother disciples the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, which to others were veiled in parables, that here also, before he entered on the special task assigned him, he should be taught the meaning of the symbols of the seven stars that were in or on the right

hand of the Son of man, and of the seven golden candlesticks in the midst of which He stood. The seven stars were, he heard, "the angels of the seven churches."

The question—Who were meant by these "angels"? has received very different answers. On the one hand it has been urged that everywhere else throughout the Book "angels" are angels in the ordinary acceptation of the word, superhuman messengers and ministers of God; that the term is nowhere else applied in the New Testament, nor in early Patristic writings, to any officer or teacher in the Church; that the symbolism of the visions of Daniel, in which Persia and Grecia are represented by angels (Dan. x. 20, 21; xii. i.), who are as their princes and guardians, finds a natural parallel here. On the other hand it is urged that, even admitting, what it is hard to admit, that the language of Daniel is more than symbolic, and that there are round the Eternal Throne the guardian angels of nations, with the divided counsels and conflicting interests of the peoples committed to their care, the words that are addressed to the angels of the Churches are altogether inapplicable except to men of like passions with ourselves. They have laboured and not fainted, or they have to suffer even unto death, or they have left their first love, or they are neither cold nor hot, and are in peril of utter rejection. I follow accordingly the majority of commentators in identifying these angels with those whom we should call the bishops of the Churches, the chief presbyters, vested with authority over other presbyters, exercising control over all the Churches of what in

modern phrase would be their diocese, the city and its suburbs committed to their care.

But the question comes why these chief presbyters were described here, and here only, by this new title ; and the answer is to be found, I believe, in the special phenomena of that transition period of the apostolic age to which we have referred the book before us. In the earlier organization, the names of bishop and elder were, as is well known, interchangeable,¹ and the Apostles occupied a position more or less analogous to that of the bishops of later date. But at the time when St. John wrote, the personal care of St. Paul had been withdrawn from the Asiatic Churches, and had been delegated to one specially sent by him, like Timotheus, to act on his behalf in appointing, reproving, or deposing elders. What title was to be given to this new officer, this Vicar-Apostolic of the primitive Church? The term "bishop" had not yet risen to the higher level in which it implied a superiority to presbyter. The name of Apostle, as applied to those who had been called and chosen by Christ Himself, was too high. In its other sense, as used of those who were simply the "messengers" of the Churches (2 Cor. viii. 2, 3), it was too low. The word "angels" might well commend itself at such a time as fitted to indicate the office for which the received terminology of the Church offered no adequate expression. Over and above its ordinary use, it had been applied by the prophet whose writings had been brought into a new promi-

¹ It is hardly necessary to prove an admitted fact, but a reference to the following passages will shew the equivalence of the two terms : Acts 17, 28 ; Phil. i. 1 ; 1 Tim. iii. 1, 8 ; Tit. i. 5, 7 ; 1 Pet. v. 1, 2.

nence by the ministry of the Baptist, to himself as a prophet (Mal. i. 1), to the priests of Israel (Mal. ii. 7), to the forerunner of the Lord (Mal. iii. 1). It had been used of those whom, in a lower sense, the Lord had sent to prepare his way before Him (Luke ix. 52), and whose work stood on the same level as that of the Seventy. Here then seemed to be that which met the want. So far as it reminded men of its higher sense, it testified that the servants of God who had been called to this special office were to "lead on earth an angel's life;" that they, both in the liturgical and the ministerial aspects of their work, were to be as those who in both senses were ministering spirits in heaven. It helped also—and this may well have commended it—to bring the language of the Revelation into harmony with that of the great apocalyptic work of the Old Testament, the prophecy of Daniel. On the other hand, we need not wonder that it did not take a prominent place in the vocabulary of the Church. The old associations of the word were too dominant, the difficulty of distinguishing the new from the old too great, to allow of its being generally accepted. It was enough that it answered, as now, a special purpose.

That these bishop-angels of the Churches should be represented by the symbol of the stars, must have seemed, as soon as the key was once given, to be simple and natural enough. They too were set in the firmament of heaven, of the kingdom of heaven, to give light upon the earth. "Their sound had gone into all the earth" (so St. Paul had interpreted the words of the noblest of the Psalms of nature, which referred in their original meaning to the

voiceless witness of the stars), "and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. x. 18). And for those to whom these messages were sent, the fact that they were as stars in the right hand of Christ was at once solemnizing and strengthening. They were not what they were, or where they were, by chance. In the hand of Christ, subject to his power, but sustained also by his strength, safe so long as they continued there, shining in their unclouded brightness; in danger, if they strayed from his protection, to be as the "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever"—this was and is a thought of comfort and of awe for all those who were successors to their office and sharers in their responsibilities.

Of the symbolism of the candlesticks, or lamps, I have already spoken. All that need be added here is that which grows out of the connection of the two symbols. The stars shine, each in its brightness and its beauty, and if true to the light given them, will shine for ever as gems upon the right hand of the Lord of the Churches. But to give light to those that are in the house, to diffuse the knowledge of the truth by word and yet more by act, to derive their power thus to let their light shine before men from Him who gives the oil, without which the light would be extinguished, these attributes of the life of the Church were better represented by the lamps that shed their rays through the surrounding darkness. That the Lord was seen in the midst of them was a witness that they too were subject to his rule, and were not exempted from his care.