

*THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF
ASIA.*

BEFORE proceeding from the general views on the early Christian correspondence, which were stated in the first chapter of this study,¹ to the remarkable group of letters addressed to the Churches of Asia, I may be permitted to recur to two points.

In the first place, the argument in support of the view that writing on perishable materials was practised from an extremely remote time, though necessarily all remains of such writing have perished long ago, has since been reinforced by the independent and far more weighty opinion which Mr. Arthur J. Evans, fresh from his great excavations in Crete, stated to the British Academy in the end of November. Mr. Evans argues, not from general considerations of probability and analogy, as I did, but by inference from a definite fact: "Ink-written inscriptions on vases also existed, pointing to the former existence of writings on papyrus or other perishable materials."² This custom of writing in ink on pottery, especially on broken fragments (called *ostraka*) as being inexpensive, persisted throughout the period of ancient civilization; but the ink, of course, was devised for the purpose of writing on paper and similar materials, and not for use on pottery. The more one thinks over the subject, the more strongly one feels that, as in human nature thought and speech go together in such a way, that word (to use the expression of Plato in the *Theaetetus*) is spoken thought, and thought is unspoken word, so also human beings originally seek by the law of their nature to express their thought in writing as well as in speech; hence

¹ In the *Expositor*, Dec. 1903, p. 401 ff.

² I quote this from a newspaper report, which is so good, accurate and logical, that it must surely have been revised by the lecturer, and may therefore be regarded as a trustworthy expression of his opinion.

the want of writing argues, at least in some cases, not a primitive, but a degraded and barbarous state.

Secondly, a reference should have been added on p. 419 to a paper by Professor W. Lock, read at the Church Congress, September 29, 1898, in which he rightly criticized the narrowness of Professor Deissmann's classification of the Christian letters. While fully agreeing with what he said in that paper, I feel only that he too readily admitted the German scholar's division into the two classes of letters and epistles, as if it were complete.

I. THE SEVEN CHURCHES REPRESENT GROUPS.

In approaching the study of the Seven Letters, we have to observe first of all the fact that only seven are mentioned out of a larger number of Churches which must already have existed in Asia. Those Seven Churches must therefore have been selected for some reason, which we must try to understand, as being representative Churches.

For the reasons stated in the *Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 295 f., we hold firmly to the date about A.D. 94, assigned by Irenaeus for the composition of the book. A date under Nero, which some scholars prefer, seems wholly irreconcilable with the character of the book. Even a date under Vespasian, for which Mr. Anderson Scott ably argues, though not so opposed to the spirit of the book, must be dismissed as causing more difficulties than it solves. But even at the earliest date which has been suggested for the composition of the Revelation, there were several other Churches in Asia which are not mentioned in the list. Some allusion to these will illustrate the main topic.

(1) Troas was the seat of a Church in A.D. 56, and was then the door through which access was open to other cities (2 Corinthians ii. 12, compare Acts xxi. 5 ff.). Its situation in respect of roads and communications made it a

pecially suitable and tempting point of departure for evangelization: it was literally the door to the north-western part of Asia Minor, as is shown at length in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. v. pp. 384 f., 389.

(2) Already during the residence of St. Paul in Ephesus, A.D. 54 to 56, "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word" (Acts xix. 10). That would never have been recorded, except as an explanation of the spread of the new religion and the growth of numerous Churches.

(3) Already in A.D. 61 the Church of Colossae was the recipient of a letter from him, and a body of Christians, who must have constituted a Church, is mentioned at Hierapolis (Col. iv. 13). In this case it is evident that the three Churches of the Lycus valley were considered to stand in close relation to one another. They are very near, Hierapolis being less than six miles north, and Colossae eleven miles east, from Laodicea, and they are grouped together as standing equal in the affection and zeal of the Colossian Epaphras. Any letter addressed to one of them was regarded apparently as common to the other two. This did not require to be formally stated about Laodicea and Hierapolis, which are in full view of one another on opposite sides of the glen; but St. Paul asks the Colossians to cause that his letter be read in the Church of the Laodiceans, and that ye likewise read the letter from Laodicea (Col. iv. 16).

(4) It may therefore be regarded as practically certain that the great cities which lay on the important roads connecting those seven leading cities with one another had all "heard the word," and that most of them were the seats of Churches, when these Seven Letters were written. We remember that, not long after, Magnesia and Tralleis, the two important, wealthy and populous cities on the road between Ephesus and Laodicea, possessed Churches of their own and bishops, that they both sent deputations to

salute, console and congratulate the Syrian martyr Ignatius, when he was conducted like a condemned criminal to face death in Rome, and that they both received letters from him. With these facts in our mind we need feel no doubt that those two Churches and many others like them took their origin from the preaching of St. Paul's coadjutors and subordinates during his residence in Ephesus, A.D. 54-56.

Magnesia inscribed on its coins the title "Seventh (city) of Asia," referring doubtless to the order of precedence among the cities as observed in the Common Council of the Province (*Koivὸν Ἀσίας, Commune Asiae*).¹ This seems to prove that there was some special importance attached in general estimation to a group of seven representative cities in Asia, which would be an interesting coincidence with the Seven Churches. Of those seven cities five may be enumerated with practical certainty, viz. the three rivals, "First of Asia," Smyrna, Ephesus, and Pergamus, along with Sardis and Cyzicus. The remaining two seats were doubtless keenly contested between Magnesia, Tralleis (one of the richest and greatest in Asia), Alabanda (chief perhaps in Caria), Laodicea and Apamea (ranked by Strabo, p. 577, next to Ephesus as a commercial centre of the Province); but apparently at some time under the Empire a decision by the Emperor, or by a governor of the Province, or by the Council of Asia, settled the precedence to some extent and placed Magnesia seventh. Neither Thyatira nor Philadelphia, however, can have had any reasonable claim to a place among that "Seven."¹

Further, it admits of no doubt that the letter to Laodicea was common to a group of at least three Churches. On the same analogy, doubtless, the other six Churches were addressed as representatives of six groups. Now, are we

¹ *Cities and Bish. of Phrygia*, ii. p. 429, where the mention of Philadelphia in a footnote should be deleted, as I have long recognized. At a later time, towards A.D. 200, both Thyatira and Philadelphia grew much wealthier, and were recognized by imperial favour as of higher importance,

to consider that the seven groups are a mere chance classification for this occasion only,—possibly dictated, as has been suggested, by the straining after the symbolism implied in the sacred number, seven—or that the grouping in seven bodies or associations of Churches had already some permanent and recognized existence in the organization of the Churches of the Province ?

In this question, again, no long hesitation seems possible. Taking into consideration the creative and constructive capacity which the Christian Church showed from the beginning, and remembering that as early as A.D. 61 the two chief Churches of the Lycus valley (probably all three) were already regarded as common recipients of the letters addressed to one, we must infer that the consolidation of the three into a district had been completed before the Seven Letters were written. In a vigorous and rapidly growing body like the Church of the Province Asia, a fact was not likely to lie for a long time inactive, and then at last begin actively to affect the growth of the whole organism. Rather we must conceive the stages in the Christian history of the Lycus valley as being three : first, the natural union and frequent intercommunication of three separately founded, independent and equal Churches, as appears in A.D. 61 : secondly, the equally natural growing pre-eminence before the eyes of the world of the leading city, Laodicea, so that letters which were addressed to one city were still intended equally for all, but Laodicea was the one that was almost inevitably selected as the representative and outstanding Church : thirdly, the predominance and presidency of Laodicea as the administrative head and centre amid a group of subordinate Churches.

How far this development had proceeded when the Seven Letters were written it is hardly possible to say with certainty. We can, however, feel very confident that the third stage had not yet been completely attained. The Seven

Letters afford no evidence on this point, except that, by their silence about any other Churches, they suggest that Laodicea was already felt to stand for and therefore to be in a way pre-eminent in its group; while, on the other hand, the spirit of the early Church seems to be inconsistent with the view that Laodicea had as yet acquired anything like headship or superiority. But the whole question as to the growth of a defined fixed hierarchy and order of dignity and authority among the Churches is obscure, and needs systematic investigation.¹

What is true about Laodicea and its group must be applied to the rest of the Seven Churches. Each of them stands as representative of a group. Each of them is to be understood as in a certain degree pre-eminent, but probably hardly predominant, in its group. Each stood before the world as implying, without further mention, the whole group of which it was the centre.

II. ORIGIN OF THE SEVEN GROUPS OF CHURCHES.

In this attempted specification of the relation between the Seven Churches and the groups for which they stand, it is implied that there was nothing like government or authority in the relationship. But, if that was so, how did these groups come into existence? Why did not all those Churches of Asia, equal as they probably were in standing and complete in authority and autonomy,² remain simply side by side without any representative Churches? There must have been some cause which produced that classification into groups with central representatives for each. We must now ask what was the principle that determined the selection

¹ Since the remarks in the text were printed I have seen Prof. Harnack's article in the *Berlin Akad. Sitzungsberichte*, 1901, p. 1186 ff, which goes far to supply the want. It necessitates no alteration in what I have said.

² I mean complete in relation to one another. There can be no doubt that St. Paul as the founder (either immediate or through his subordinate ministers) continued always to hold authority over all alike; how far his authority was transmitted to a successor is uncertain.

of the Seven representative Churches, and what light, if any, that principle throws on the origin of the groups.

The first three, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamus, are the three greatest and outstanding cities of the Province, which vied with one another for the title (claimed and used and boasted about by all)¹ of "First of Asia." This might suggest that the greatest and most important cities of the Province were selected as centres of the groups of Churches; and it is true that two among the remaining four, *viz.*, Sardis and Laodicea, were the heads of *conventus* (i.e. governmental districts for legal purposes), as were also the first three. But this principle breaks down completely in the case of Thyatira and Philadelphia, which were entirely secondary and second-rate cities, the latter in the *conventus* of Sardis, the former in that of Pergamus. The Seven Churches, therefore, were not selected because they were in the most important and influential cities; nor is the order of enumeration, with Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamus coming first, due to the fact that those were the three most important cities.

The late Dr. Hort has pointed the way to the true principle of selection in an excursus to his fragmentary, posthumously published edition of First Peter. In that excursus, which is a model of scientific method in investigation, he points out that the reason for the peculiar order in which the provinces are enumerated at the beginning of the Epistle lies in the route along which the messenger was

¹ In face of this and other similar, frequently quoted facts, it is quite extraordinary how modern scholars continue to repeat that Philippi could not be styled "first city" of its district (Acts xvi. 12), because that rank and title belonged to Amphipolis. Such an argument is a mere modernism, and possesses no meaning or validity when applied to the first century. Philippi as a Roman Colonia could not but be in a sense, and claim to be in every sense, "first in the district." Yet this striking piece of local truth is obscured by writer after writer, repeating that tralaticious error, which appears even in the otherwise excellent article on Philippi in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*.

to travel, conveying the letter (perhaps in so many distinct copies) to the central cities of each province. Similarly, the Seven Churches are enumerated in the order in which a messenger from Patmos would reach them. He would land, of course, at Ephesus, then go north by the direct road (the oldest Roman road in the Province Asia, built about 130 B.C.) to Smyrna and Pergamus. Thence he would go along the great Imperial Post road¹ to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea; and from Laodicea he would return along the Central Route of the Empire down the Maeander valley to the coast. These seven cities were the most suitable points for distributing the letters to the groups of Churches in the easiest way and the shortest time by seven other messengers, who (as we shall see) made secondary circuits from the seven representatives.

Now, it may be argued by some that this order simply suggested itself to the writer of the Seven Letters as convenient for this special case; and that argument cannot be absolutely and conclusively disproved, if any person should urge it. But those who properly weigh the indisputable facts above stated about the growth of the Laodicean district, as an example of the steady, rapid development of early Christian organization, must come to the conclusion that the writer of the Letters was not the first to make Laodicea the representative of a group of Churches, but found it already so regarded by general consent. Now what is true of Laodicea must be applied to the rest of the Seven Churches. In fact, if there were not such a general agreement as to the representative character of the Seven Churches, it is difficult to see how the writer could so entirely ignore the other Churches, and write to the Seven without a word of explanation that the letters were to be

¹ The names, Post Road and Central Route, are explained in an article *Routes and Travel in New Testament Times*, to be published in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. v. pp. 375-402.

considered as referring also to the others. St. Paul, who wrote before that general agreement had been effected, carefully explained that his letter to Colossae was intended to be read also at Laodicea, and *vice versa*; but St. John assumes that no such explanation is needed.

Moreover, it seems clear that such a message as that in i. 11, "What thou seest write in a book and send unto the Seven Churches which are in Asia," is unintelligible unless those Seven were already marked out as representative of the Church of the Province. This seems to the present writer so conclusive a proof that he would rely on it alone without the foregoing long discussion; but opinions vary so widely as to the meaning of even the plainest passages in the New Testament that a more detailed argument has been drawn out.

Thus there stands out before us, about the last decade of the first century, a highly developed organization among the many Churches of the Province Asia—for they must have been many when so many groups existed, and other considerations, also, point decisively to that conclusion. In the preceding chapter of this study, the incalculable importance of the correspondence between the scattered Churches, as being the channel through which coursed the life-blood of the whole body, has been indicated; and the conclusion was reached that, since no postal service was maintained by the State for the use of private individuals or trading companies, "we find ourselves obliged to admit the existence of a large organization" for the transmission of the letters by safe Christian hands. Just as all the great trading companies maintained each its own corps of letter-carriers (*tabellarii*), so the Christians must necessarily provide for the carrying of their own letters, if they wanted to write; and this necessity must inevitably result, owing to the constructive spirit of that rapidly growing body, in the formation of a letter-carrying system. The routes of the

letter-carriers were fixed according to the most convenient circuits, and the provincial messengers did not visit all the cities, but only certain centres, from whence a subordinate service distributed the letters or news over the several connected circuits or groups.

Such is the barest outline of a kind of private postal service which must have had some analogy in the service constructed for itself by every wide-spread corporation in the Empire. The trading companies employed their own slaves; but it is clear that the Christians must have employed members of their own communities. The messengers went direct in each congregation to the *episkopos*, who was charged with the duty of hospitality as well as of correspondence (*Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 368).

Another important point to observe is that the Seven Cities were not selected simply because they were situated on the circular route above described, nor yet because they were the most important cities on that route. The messenger must necessarily pass through Hierapolis on his way from Philadelphia to Laodicea, and through both Tralleis and Magnesia on his way from Laodicea to the coast; all those three cities were indubitably the seats of Churches at that time; Tralleis and Magnesia were much more important and wealthy than Philadelphia or Thyatira; yet none of the three found a place among the representative cities. What then was the principle of selection?

As before, the answer lies in the convenience of epistolary communication. Those Seven Cities were the best points of communication with seven districts: Pergamus for the north (Troas, doubtless Adramyttium, and probably Cyzicus and other cities on the coast contained Churches): Thyatira for an inland district on the north-east and east: Sardis for the wide middle valley of the Hermus: Philadelphia for Upper Lydia, to which it was the door (iii. 8): Laodicea for the Lycus and the upper Maeander valleys, of

which it was the Christian metropolis in later time : Ephesus for the Cayster and Maeander valleys and coasts : Smyrna for the lower Hermus valley and the North Ionian coasts, with Mitylene and Chios (if those islands had as yet been affected).

In this list there is one marked omission. What about the great country of Caria, the hilly country south from the Maeander valley ? The inevitable point of communication for that district would have been Tralleis, but Tralleis was not one of the representative Churches. The reason is clear. Caria lay apart from any of the great lines of communication : it was on the road to nowhere : any one who went south from the Maeander into the hilly country did so for the sake of visiting it, and not because it was on his best way to a more distant aim. Now the new religion spread with marvellous rapidity along the great routes ; it floated free on the great currents of communication that swept back and forward across the Empire, but it was slower to make its way into the backwaters, the nooks and corners of the land : it penetrated where life was busy, thought was active, and people were full of curiosity and enterprise : it found only a tardy welcome among the quieter and less educated rustic districts. Hence Caria (except the lower Maeander valley with Miletus and other towns, for which Ephesus was the representative) was little disturbed in the old ways, when most of the rest of Asia was strongly permeated with Christianity. Hence, also, we have omitted from our list the part of Phrygia that lay south from Laodicea, even though through it a road of some importance led down to Perga and Attalia : any Church on that road would look to Laodicea as its representative, since Laodicea was its legal centre and the road-knot on the line of communication.

The only way to understand clearly this system of communication, and to realize how admirably adapted it is to

the situation, is to work it out on the map in view of the roads. A careful study of the circuits will throw some light on the diffusion of Christianity ; but that lies apart from our proper subject. It will, however, help to make the system clear if we discuss some other difficulties which are likely to suggest themselves.

The first is about Troas. Considering its importance as the doorway of North-Western Asia,¹ one might expect to find that it was one of the seven representative Churches. But a glance at the map will show that it could not be worked into the primary circuit of the provincial messenger, except by sacrificing the ease and immensely widening the area of his journey. On the other hand Troas comes in naturally on that secondary circuit which has Pergamus as its origin. The Pergamenian messenger followed the Imperial Post road through Adramyttium, Assos and Troas, along the Hellespont to Lampsacus. There the Post road crossed into Europe,² while the messenger traversed the coast road to Cyzicus, and thence turned south through Poimanenon and Hadrianotherai to the middle Caicus valley and down to Pergamus. This circuit is perhaps the most obvious and convincing of the whole series, as the account of the roads and towns on it in the *Historical Geography of Asia Minor* will bring out clearly.³

The second difficulty relates to Tralleis and Magnesia. As the primary messenger had to pass through them, why are they relegated to the secondary circuit of Ephesus? In the first place the messenger would reach them last of all, and long before he came to them the messenger on

¹ See above, p. 21.

² This was the Post road used when a purely land route was wanted ; otherwise the Post road crossed the sea between Troas and Neapolis (Acts xvi. 11 ; xx. 5).

³ Unfortunately, the system of circuits is not described in the article on Roads and Travel in *New Testament Times*, mentioned above : the whole subject became clear as a result of the studies undertaken for that article, but not in time to be incorporated in it.

the Ephesian circuit would have reached them. But, secondly, a more important reason is that the primary circuit was not devised simply with a view to the Province of Asia. It was intended to be often conjoined with a further journey to Galatia and the East, so that the messenger would not return from Laodicea to the coast, but would keep on up the Lycus by Colossae eastwards.

Thirdly, either two incredibly large circuits must have started from Philadelphia and Laodicea, or else central and northern Phrygia must have been entirely left out of the system. Some would argue that, as Bithynia was so strongly permeated with the new religion, before 111 A.D., Phrygia which lies further south and nearer the original seats of Christianity, must have been Christianized earlier. This argument, however, ignores the way in which Christianity spread, *viz.*, along the main roads and lines of communication. The same cause, which made Caria later in receiving the new faith (as shown above), also acted in central and northern Phrygia. A study of the interesting monuments of early Christianity in that part of the country has shown that it was Christianized from Bithynia (probably not earlier than the second century)¹; and it was therefore left out of the early Asian system, as being still practically a pagan country. Southern Phrygia lay near the main Central Route of the Empire, and its early Christian monuments show a markedly different character from the North Phrygian monuments, and prove that it was Christianized (as was obviously necessary) from the line of the great Central Highway. This part of Phrygia lay entirely in the upper Maeander valley, and fell naturally within the Laodicean circuit.

Eastern Phrygia, on the other hand, was Christianized

¹ See the EXPOSITOR 1888, October, pp. 263 ff.; the same views are put more clearly and precisely in *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, ii. pp. 510 f., 715.

from Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, and was therefore not included in the early Asian system which we have described. But during the second century, a complete provincial organization came into existence, and all Christian Asia was then united. But, as great part of Phrygia had for a long time been outside of the Asian system of the Seven Churches, it was at first sometimes thought necessary for the sake of clearness to mention Phrygia along with Asia in defining the Church of the whole Province. Hence we have the phrase "the Churches (or Brethren) of Asia and Phrygia" in Tertullian *adv. Prax.* 1, and in the letter of the Gallic Christians.

Thus we find that the Seven Letters are directed to a very well marked district embracing more than half of the province Asia; and natural features, along with indubitable epigraphic and monumental evidence, prove that the district of the Seven Letters contained the entire Asian Church as it was about the end of the first century. The importance of the Seven Letters becomes evident even in such a small though interesting matter as this.

III. THE LETTERS ADDRESS SINGLE CHURCHES.

In the fullest sense the Seven Churches are in these letters regarded as representative: they stand instead of the cities associated with them. The letters are addressed to them as individual Churches, and not to the groups for which they stand. The Seven Letters were written by one who was familiar with the situation, the character, the past history, the possibilities of future development, of those Seven Cities. The Church of Sardis, for example, is addressed as the Church of that actual, single city: the facts and characteristics mentioned are proper to it alone, and not common to the other Churches of the Hermus valley. Those others were not much in the writer's mind: he was absorbed with the thought of that one city: he saw

only death before it: it was a city of appearance without reality, promise without performance, outward show betrayed by careless confidence. But the other cities which were connected with it may be warned by its fate; and he that overcometh shall be spared and honoured. Similarly, Paul's letter to Colossæ was written specially for it alone, and not with reference to Laodicea; yet it was ordered to be communicated to Laodicea, and read publicly there also.

This singleness of vision is not equally marked in every case. In the message to Laodicea, the thought of the other cities of the group is more apparent; and perhaps the obscurity of the Thyatiran Letter, and the generality of the Ephesian, may be due in some degree to the outlook upon the other cities of their groups. Still even the Letter to Ephesus is, in at least one point, clearly marked with the character of the city. The Letter to Thyatira owes its obscurity in some degree to our almost complete ignorance of the special character of that city.

It is, undoubtedly, to this singleness of vision, the clearness with which the writer sees each single city, and the directness with which he addresses himself to each, that the remarkable variety of character in the whole series is due. The Letters were evidently all written together, in the inspiration of one occasion and one purpose; and yet how different each is from all the rest, in spite of the similarity of purpose and plan and arrangement in them all. The letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, which is probably a letter intended equally for a whole group of Churches, and not directed to Ephesus as an individual Church, may be compared and contrasted with the Seven Letters.

To attain full consciousness of the individuality of the Seven Letters one should compare them with the letters of Ignatius to the five Asian Churches, Ephesus, Smyrna, Magnesia, Tralleis, Philadelphia, or with the letter of Clement to the Corinthian Church. Ignatius, it is true,

had probably seen only two of the five, and those only slightly: so that the vagueness, the generality, and the lack of individual traits in all his letters were inevitable. He insists on topics which were almost equally suitable to all Christians, or on those which not unnaturally filled his own mind in view of his coming fate.

But it is a remarkable fact that the more definite and personal and individual those old Christian letters are, the more vital and full of guidance are they to all other readers. The individual letters touch life most nearly; and the life of any one man or Church appeals most intimately to all men and all Churches.

The more closely we study the New Testament books and compare them with the natural conditions, the localities and the too scanty evidence from other sources about the life and society of the first century, the more full of meaning do we find them, the more strongly impressed are we with their unique character, and the more wonderful becomes the picture that is unveiled to us in them of the growth of the Christian Church. It is because they were written with the utmost fulness of vigour and life by persons who were entirely absorbed in the great practical tasks which their rapidly growing organization imposed on them, because they stand in the closest relation to the facts of the age, that so much can be gathered from them. They rise to the loftiest heights to which man in the fulness of inspiration and perfect sympathy with the Divine will and purpose can attain, but they stand firmly planted on the facts of earth. The Asian Church was so successful in moulding and modifying the institutions around it, because with unerring insight its leaders saw the deep-seated character of those Seven Cities, their strength and their weakness, as determined by their natural surroundings, their past history, and their national character.