

## THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.

### IX. THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS (*continued*).<sup>1</sup>

AFTER the formal heading, which is prefixed to the letter proper, each of the Seven Letters begins by a statement intimating that the writer possesses full knowledge of the character and position of the Church which he is addressing. In five out of the seven letters this intimation begins, "I know thy works." But in the cases of Smyrna and Pergamum, the opening is different: "I know thy tribulation" and "I know where thou dwellest." The difference is evidently due to their peculiar circumstances. He who wishes to prove his full knowledge of the Church in Smyrna, says that he knows its sufferings; because these were the striking feature in its history. And in Pergamum the most prominent and distinguishing characteristic lay in its situation, "where the throne of Satan is:" by that situation its history had been strongly influenced.

But in most cases what is essential to know about a Church is what it has done; and so begins the Ephesian letter. The past history of the Ephesian Church had been one of labour and achievement, enduring and energetic. Above all it had been distinguished by its insight into the true character of those who came to it with the appearance of Apostles. It lay on the great highway of the world, visited by many Christian travellers, some coming to it for its own sake, others merely on their way to a more distant

<sup>1</sup> In page 164, line 20, the name of Diocletian has slipped in where Domitian is meant.

destination. Especially, those who were travelling to and from Rome for the most part passed through Ephesus: hence it was already, or shortly afterwards became, the highway of the martyrs, "the passage-way of those who are slain unto God," as Ignatius called it a few years later, i.e., the place through which must pass all those who were on their way to Rome to amuse the urban population by their death in the amphitheatre.

Among these there came to Ephesus, or passed through it, many who claimed to be teachers; but the Ephesian Church tested them all; and, when they were false, unerringly detected them and unhesitatingly rejected them.

The recital of the past history and the services of the Church occupies a much greater proportion of the Ephesian letter than of any other of the Seven. The writer dwells upon it with emphatic appreciation. After describing the special kind of work in which the Ephesians had been most active and useful, he returns again to praise their career of patience and steadfastness, and describes their motive—"for my name's sake"—which enhances their merit. The best counsel, the full and sufficient standard of excellence for the Ephesians, is to do as they did of old. Others may have to improve; but Ephesians are urged not to fall short of their ancient standard of action.

The best commentary on this is found in the letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians, with its profound and frank admiration, which might seem almost to be exaggerated were it not justified by the language of St. John. The Syrian bishop wrote as one who felt that he was honoured in associating with the envoys from the Ephesian Church and in being "permitted by letter to bear it company, and to rejoice with it." Ignatius<sup>1</sup> shows clearly in his letter the reasons for his admiration. The characteristics which he praises in the Ephesian Church are the same as those which

<sup>1</sup> Ignat. *Eph.* § 9: see EXPOSITOR, Feb. 1904, p. 84.

St. John mentions. And yet they are so expressed as to exclude the idea that he remembered the words of this letter and either consciously or unconsciously used them : " I ought to be trained for the contest by you in faith, in admonition, in endurance, in long suffering,"<sup>1</sup> § 3 : " for ye all live according to truth and no heresy hath a home among you ; nay, ye do not so much as listen to any one if he speak of ought else save concerning Jesus Christ in truth," § 6 : " as indeed ye are not deceived," § 8 : " I have learned that certain persons passed through you from Syria,<sup>2</sup> bringing evil doctrine ; whom ye suffered not to sow seed in you, for ye stopped your ears," § 9 : " you were ever of one mind with the Apostles in the power of Jesus Christ," § 11.

The ideas are the same ; but they are scattered about through Ignatius's letter, and not concentrated in one place. Moreover the words are almost entirely different. The idea of testing, which is prominent in St. John, is never explicitly mentioned by Ignatius, and yet it is implied and presupposed in the passages quoted from §§ 6, 8, 9. But he was interested only in the result, the successful championing of truth, whereas St. John was necessarily interested quite as much in the way by which the Ephesians attained the result.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Ignatius was not

<sup>1</sup> Of the three words used by St. John *ὑπομονή*, *κόπος*, *βαστάζειν*, Ignatius uses only the first, which almost forced itself on any writer. In the following passages the only word of importance that occurs in the corresponding passages in St. John is " Apostles " ; and Ignatius uses it of the true Apostles, St. John of the false.

<sup>2</sup> *ἐκεῖθεν*, from yonder, referring to some place unmentioned which was much in his own mind, and which would naturally spring to the mind of the Ephesian readers. There was only one place, which the Ephesians would naturally connect with Ignatius, when he mentioned no name ; and that was Syrian Antioch : cp. *τῶν ἐκεῖ πιστῶν* at the end of the letter (Syria is there named in the context). Lightfoot suggests that Ignatius meant " yonder " as Philadelphia ; but there was no reason why such a reference should have been intelligible to the readers in Ephesus.

familiar with the letter of St. John. He could hardly have kept so remote from the expression of this letter, if it had been clear and fresh in his memory. There is no proof that the Revelation had become familiar in Syria so soon after it was written.

Hence the testimony of Ignatius may be taken as entirely independent of the Revelation, and as showing what was the general estimate and reputation of Ephesus in the Christian world about the beginning of the second century. It had not grown weaker or less brilliant in the interval since St. John wrote.

But, while nothing is required of the Ephesians except that they should continue to show their old character, yet a return to their earlier spirit was urgently necessary. The fault of the Ephesian Church was that it no longer showed the same spirit: the intense enthusiasm which characterized the young Church had grown cooler with advancing age. That is the serious danger that lies before them; and it is the common experience in every reform movement, in every religion that spreads itself by proselytizing. The history of Mohammedanism shows it on a large scale. No religion has ever exercised a more rapid and almost magical influence over barbarous races than Islam has often done, elevating them at once to a distinctly higher level of spiritual and intellectual life than they had been capable of even understanding before. But in the case of almost every Mohammedanized race, after the first burst of enthusiastic religion, under the immediate stimulus of the great moral ideas that Mohammed taught, has been exhausted, its subsequent history presents a spectacle of stagnation and retrogression.<sup>1</sup>

The problem in this and in every other such case is how

<sup>1</sup> On this fact, and the reason for it, lying in the position of women and the consequent want of any true home education, see *Histor. Comm. on Epistle to Galatians*, p. 388.

to find any means of exercising a continuous stimulus, which shall maintain the first enthusiasm. Something is needed, and the writer of this letter perhaps was thinking of some such stimulus in the words that follow, containing a threat as to what shall be done to Ephesus, if it continues to degenerate, and fails to reinvigorate its former earnest enthusiasm. But a less serious penalty is threatened in this case than in some of the other letters—not destruction, nor rejection, not even the extirpation of the weak or erring portion of the Church, but only “I come in displeasure at thee, and will move thy lampstand, the Church, out of its place.”

Some commentators regard the threat as equivalent to a decree of destruction, and point to the fact that the site is a desert and the Church extinct, as a proof that the threat has been fulfilled. But it seems impossible to accept this view. It is wrong method to disregard the plain meaning, which is not destruction but change; and equally so to appeal to present facts as proving that destruction must have been meant by this figurative expression.

Surely in this milder denunciation we may see a proof that the evil in Ephesus was curable. The loss of enthusiasm which affected that Church was different in kind from the lukewarmness that affected Laodicea, and should be treated in a different way. The half-heartedness of the Laodiceans was deadly, and those who were so affected were hopeless, and should be irrevocably and inexorably rejected. But the cooling of the first Ephesian enthusiasm was a failing that lies in human nature. The failing can be corrected, the enthusiasm may be revived, and if the Ephesians cannot revive it among themselves by their own strength, their Church shall be moved out of its place.

Equally unsatisfactory is another interpretation, that Ephesus shall be degraded from its place of honour, which implies an unconscious assumption that Ephesus already

occupied its later position of metropolitan authority in the Asian Church. As yet Ephesus had no principate in the Church, except what it derived from its own character and conduct; while its character continued, its influence must continue; if its character degenerated, its influence must disappear.

The threat is so expressed that it must be understood of a change in local position: "I will move thy Church out of its place."<sup>1</sup>

The interpretation of Grotius is nearer the truth: "I will cause thy population to flee away to another place."<sup>2</sup> I do not know whether the form in which he expresses his interpretation is due to the belief current in the country that the Christian people of Ephesus fled to the mountains and settled in a village four hours distant, called Kirkindji, which their descendants still consider to be the representative of the ancient Ephesus. But if Grotius had that fact in view, his interpretation does not quite hit the mark. The writer of the seven letters was not thinking of an arbitrary fact of that kind, which might befall any city, and was in no way characteristic of the real deep-seated nature of one more than of another. He had his eye fixed on the broad permanent character of Ephesian scenery and surroundings, and his thought moved in accord with the nature of the locality, and expressed itself in a form that applied to Ephesus and to no other of the seven Churches.

There is one characteristic that belongs to Ephesus, distinctive and unique among the cities of the Seven Churches: it is change. In most ancient sites one is struck by the immutability of nature and the mutability of all human additions to nature. In Ephesus it is the shifting character of the natural conditions on which the city depends for

<sup>1</sup> κινήσω ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς.

<sup>2</sup> Efficiam ut plebs tua alio diffugiat

prosperity that strike every careful observer, every student either of history or of nature. The scenery and the site have varied from century to century. Where there was water there is now land : what was a populated city in one period ceased to be so in another, and has again become the centre of life for the valley : where at one time there was only bare hillside or the gardens of a city some miles distant, at another time there was a vast city crowded with inhabitants, and this has again relapsed into its earlier condition : the harbour in which St. John and St. Paul landed has become a mere marsh, and the theatre where the excited crowd met and shouted to Diana, desolate and ruinous as it is, has been more permanent than the harbour. The relation of sea and land has changed in quite unusual fashion : the broad level valley was once a great inlet of the sea, at the head of which was the oldest Ephesus, beside the Temple of the Goddess, where the modern village stands. But the sea receded and the land emerged from it. The city followed the sea, and changed from place to place to maintain its importance as the only harbour of the valley. A thousand years before Christ Greek colonists had built their new city, a commercial town, in rivalry and opposition to the old town of the Goddess, on the slope of the southern mountains ; and after some centuries had passed the Greek city and the older native city had been merged in one ; and that united city again had migrated to the Ephesus which was known to St. John.

All those facts were familiar to the Ephesians ; they are recorded for us by Strabo, Pliny, and Herodotus, but Ephesian belief and record are the foundation for the statements of those writers. A threat of removing the Church from its place would be inevitably understood by the Ephesians as a denunciation of another change in the site of the city, and must have been so intended by the writer. It should be taken up, and moved away to a new spot,

where it might begin afresh on a new career with a better spirit. But it would be still Ephesus, as it had always hitherto been amid all changes.

Such was the meaning that the Ephesians must have taken from the letter; but no other of the Seven Cities would have found the words so clear and significant. Others would have wondered what they might mean, as the commentators are still wondering and debating. To the Ephesians the words would seem natural and plain.

But after this threat the letter returns to the dominant note. The Ephesian Church was still, as it had been from the beginning, guarding the way, testing all new teachers, and rejecting with sure judgment the unworthy. In the question which beyond all others seemed to the writer the critical problem of the day the Ephesians agreed with him, and hated the works of the Nicolaitans. In the other letters that party in the early Church is more fully described. In the Ephesian letter they are only named.

#### X. PERORATION OF THE EPHESIAN LETTER.

The peroration of each of the Seven Letters is modelled in the same way: all contain a claim for attention and a promise. The former is identical in all Seven Letters: "he that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches"; and needs no further comment. The latter is different in every case, being adapted to the special character of each.

There is a difference among the letters in regard to the arrangement of the peroration: in the first three the claim for attention comes before the promise, in the last four it comes after. It is doubtful whether there is any special intention in this, beyond a certain tendency in the writer towards employing variety as a literary device. Almost every little variation and turn in these letters, however, is carefully studied; and probably it is through deliberate



intention that they are divided by this variation into two classes; but what is the reason for the division and the principle involved in it, is hard to say. The first three ranked also as the three greatest cities of the Province, vying with one another for the title "First of Asia," which all three claimed. In the general estimation of the world, they certainly formed a group by themselves, while the others were second-rate. It may be that this difference almost unconsciously affected the writer's expression and produced a variation in the form, though the variation apparently conveys no difference in force or meaning, but is purely literary and formal.

An attempt has been made to explain the variation on the ground that the first three Churches are regarded as having on the whole been faithful, though with faults and imperfections; whereas the last four have been faithless for the most part, and only a "remnant" is acknowledged in them as faithful. But, while that is true of three out of the four, yet Philadelphia is praised very highly, with almost more thoroughness than any even of the first three, except Smyrna; and it is the only church to which the Divine author says "I have loved thee."

The promise contained in the peroration is different in every case, and is evidently adapted in each instance to suit the general tone of the letter and the character and needs of the city. To the Ephesian who overcometh, the promise is that he shall eat of the tree of life, which is in the Garden of God. Life is promised both to Smyrna and to Ephesus; yet how differently is it expressed in the two cases. Smyrna must suffer, and would be faithful unto death, but it shall not be hurt of the second death. Ephesus had been falling from its original high level of enthusiasm; it needed to be quickened and reinvigorated, and none of the promises made to the other Churches would suit its need; but the fruit of the tree of life is the

infallible cure, the tree whose very leaves were for the healing of the nations, the tree in which every true Christian acquires a right of participation (xxii. 2, 14).

Thus ends the letter. It is a distinctly laudatory one, when it is examined phrase by phrase : it shows admiration and full appreciation of a great career and a noble history. Yet it does not leave a pleasant impression of the Ephesian Church ; and there is a lack of cordial and sympathetic spirit in it. The writer seems not to have loved the Ephesians as he did the Smyrnaeans and Philadelphians. He respected and esteemed them. He felt that they possessed every great quality except a loving enthusiasm. But when, in order to finish with a word of praise, the writer seeks for some definite laudable fact in their conduct at the present moment, the one thing which he finds to say is that they hated those whom he hated. Their disapproval and their hatred were correctly apportioned : in sympathy and love they were defective.

They stand before us in the pathway of the world, at the door by which the West visited the East, and from which the East looked out upon the West, as a dignified people worthy of their great position, who have lived through a noble history in the past, and are on the whole not unworthy of it in the present, who maintain their high tradition—and yet one thing is lacking, the power of loving and of making themselves loved.

#### XI.—CHARACTER OF THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS.

Every image or idea in this letter finds a parallel or an illustration in Jewish thought and literature. Yet it cannot be said with truth that the letter is exclusively Jewish in tone. There is nothing in it which would seem strange or foreign to the Hellenic or Hellenized people for whom the book was in the first instance written. Even the tree

of life carried no un-Hellenic connotation to Ephesian readers. The tree was as significant a symbol of life-giving Divine power to the Asian Greeks as to the Jews, though in a different way. Trees had been worshipped as the home of the Divine nature and power from time immemorial, and were still so worshipped, in Asia Minor as in the ancient world generally. On some sacred tree the prosperity and safety of a family or tribe or city was often believed to depend. When the sacred olive-tree on the Acropolis of Athens put forth a new shoot after the city had been burned by the Persians, the people knew that the safety of the State was assured. The belief was widely entertained that the life of a man was connected with some tree, and returned into that tree when he died. The tree which grew on a grave was often thought to be penetrated with the spirit and life of the buried man; and an old Athenian law punished with death any one that had cut a holm-oak growing in a sepulchral ground, i.e. heroön.<sup>1</sup>

It will probably seem to many persons an unworthy and even irrational procedure to trace any connexion between the superstitious veneration of sacred trees and the symbolism of St. John. But it was shown in Section V.<sup>2</sup> that although Ignatius abhorred paganism, and though the memory of his pagan days caused a lasting sense of shame in his mind, yet he could compare the life of a Christian congregation to the procession at a pagan festival, and could use symbolism derived from the pagan mysteries to shadow forth the deepest thoughts of Christianity. In all those cases the same process takes place: the religious ideas of the pagans are renovated in a Christian form, ennobled, and spiritualized. The tree of life in the Revelation was in the mind of the Ephesians a Christianization of the sacred tree in the pagan religion and folk-lore: it was a

<sup>1</sup> On the subject see Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. v. p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> EXPOSITOR, Feb. 1904, p. 91 ff.

symbolic expression which was full of meaning to the Asian Christians, because to them the tree had always been the seat of Divine life and the intermediary between Divine and human nature. But to us the "tree of life" carries little meaning. It seems to us little more than a metaphor in this passage, and in chap. xxii. a mere detail in a rather fanciful and highly poetical allegory. A considerable effort is needed before we can even begin dimly to appreciate the power which this idea had in the minds of Ephesian readers: we have to recreate the thoughts and mind of that time, before we can understand their conception of the "tree of life."

Accordingly, although the "tree of life" is different from any expression that occurs, so far as known, in Greek literature, it contains nothing that would seem strange or exotic to Greeks or Asians. And every other idea in the letter would seem equally natural, and would appeal to equally familiar beliefs and habits of life. While we need not doubt that the writer took the "tree of life" from his own Jewish sphere of thought, yet he certainly avoids in all these letters anything that is distinctly anti-Hellenic in expression. He is in advance of, not in hostility to, the best side of Hellenic thought and education, so far as the letters are concerned.

This is all the more remarkable in view of the strenuous opposition, the almost bigoted hatred, that is shown in these letters to the views of the Nicolaitans. Their theory on life and religion, on the deep thought and philosophic character of which they prided themselves,<sup>1</sup> undoubtedly emphasized the Greek side of Christianity, and attempted, in the practical working out of Christian teaching, to maintain as a rule of life the closest possible relation with

<sup>1</sup> In ii. 24 it is clear that they contemptuously contrasted their advanced teaching with the simplicity and unphilosophic character of the teaching which St. John champions.

the best customs of ordinary society in the Asian cities. This attempt was in itself quite justifiable and right; but in the judgment of St. John (and we may add of St. Paul<sup>1</sup> also) they went too far, and tried to retain in the Christian life practices that were in diametrical opposition to the essential principles of Christianity, and thus they had strayed into a syncretism of Christian and anti-Christian elements which was fatal to the growth and permanence of Christian thought.

The opposition to the Nicolaitans determines the whole character and form of the Seven Letters. But the writer does not make the mistake of going to the opposite extreme, minimizing the share that Greek thought and custom might have in the Christian life, and exaggerating the opposition between Greek education and true religion. He holds the balance with a steady hand; he expresses himself in a form that should be clear and sympathetic to the Greek Churches whom he was addressing; he gives quiet emphasis to the best side of Greek education in letters which are admirable efforts of literary art and power; but at a certain point his sympathy stops dead; beyond that point it was fatal to go.

In studying St. Paul we found ourselves forced to recognize the essential agreement of his views on this question with St. John's: *EXPOSITOR*, Feb. 1901. Now in studying St. John we find ourselves forced to the same judgment. With superficial differences they both take the same calm, sane view of the situation as a whole, and legislate for the young Church on the same lines. Up to a certain point the converted pagan should develop the imperfect, but not false, religious ideas and gropings after truth of his earlier years into a Christian character; but there was much that was absolutely false and fundamentally perverted in those ideas, and all that part of them must be inexorably eradicated

<sup>1</sup> See the fuller statement in the *EXPOSITOR*, February 1901, p. 103 ff.

and destroyed. The determining criterion lay in the idolatrous element: where that was a necessary part of pagan custom or opinion, there was no justification for clinging to it: unsparing condemnation and rejection was the only course open to a true Christian. Hence arose the one striking contrast in outward appearance between the views of the two Apostles. St. Paul clung to the hope and belief that the Church might develop within the Empire, and find protection from the Imperial government. St. John regarded the Imperial government as Antichrist, the essential and inevitable enemy of Christianity. Between the two lay the precise formulation of the Imperial policy, which imposed on the Christians as a test of loyalty the performance of religious ritual in the worship of the Emperors. The Empire armed itself with the harness of idolatry; and the principle that St. Paul laid down in the sharpest and clearest terms at once put an end to any hope that he had entertained of reconciliation and amity between the Church and the existing State.

The letter is framed on a plan common to all the Seven Letters. It is therefore not a true letter, but a literary composition, which is cast in the form of a letter because that form had already established itself in usage. Now the writer certainly did not select this form merely because it was recognized in the pagan literature. He selected it because it had already become recognized as the characteristic and the best form of expression for a certain class of Christian parænetic literature. A philosophic exposition of truth was apt to become abstract and unreal; the dialogue form, which the Greeks loved and some of the Christian writers adopted, was apt to degenerate into looseness and mere literary display; but the letter, as already elaborated by great thinkers and artists who were his predecessors, was determined for him as the best medium of expression. In this form literature, states-

manship, ethics, and religion met, and placed the simple letter on the highest level of practical power.<sup>1</sup> Due regard to the practical needs of the individual congregation addressed prevented the writer of a letter from losing hold on the hard facts and serious realities of life. The spirit of the lawgiver raised him above all danger of sinking into the commonplace and the trivial. Great principles must be expressed in the Christian letter. And finally it must have literary form as a permanent monument of teaching and legislation.

It was a correct literary instinct that led John to express the message to the Seven Churches in letters, even though he had to work these letters into an apocalypse of the Hebraic style, a much less fortunate choice. In each letter, though it was only a literary Epistle addressed to a representative Church, the writer was obliged to call up before his mind the actual Church as he knew it; and thus he has given us seven varied and individualized pictures of different congregations, all distinctly recognizable.

Probably the opposition and criticism which he was sure to experience from the Nicolaitans stimulated the writer to reach the high standard of literary quality which characterizes the Seven Letters in spite of the neglect of traditional form and rule. He uses the language of common life, not the stereotyped forms of the historian or the philosopher. As Dante had the choice before him between the accepted language of education, Latin, and the vulgar tongue, the popular Italian, so St. John had to choose between a more artificial kind of Greek, as perpetuated from past teaching, and the common vulgar speech, often emancipated from strict grammatical rules, but nervous and vigorous, a true living speech. He chose the latter.

Yet, in spite of the obvious reasons for using a different and more colloquial class of Greek in this work than in the

<sup>1</sup> EXPOSITOR, Dec. 1903, p. 420 ff.

historical work which we know as the fourth Gospel, the difference between the two works as regards grammatical construction and language has been made an argument against their common authorship. Such an argument assumes that there was no element of volition and choice in determining the admitted difference of style. But just as the style of Luke varies to a remarkable degree in different parts of his work according to the subject and scene, in a way which is certainly deliberate and intentional, so it is at least conceivable that the variation in St. John's work is intentional. That however is a large question on which it is impossible to enter here; but it may be added that the fact that the three formal Epistles approximate more to the style of the history than of the Apocalypse is not inconsistent with the suggestion just made.

I take the opportunity of quoting from Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, Leipzig, 1903, p. 42 (where he describes the importance of Silence in the mystic ritual), some confirmation of the opinion stated in Section V. that Ignatius attached such Divine value to Silence under the influence of his pagan experience in the Mysteries. The instructions were given to the *mystes* "lay thy right finger on thy mouth and say, Silence! Silence! Silence! symbol of the living imperishable God." Silence is even addressed in prayer, "Guard me, Silence"; where Dieterich remarks that the capital S is needed. I did not see Dieterich's fascinating book until March 1904.

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