

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA.

THE letter to the Smyrnaeans forms in many ways a marked contrast to the Ephesian letter; it is constructed exactly on the same plan, but the topics are of a very different kind. Of all the seven letters this is expressed in the most continuous and unbroken tone of laudation. It is instinct with life and rejoicing; the joy is of the Christian type, caused not by ease and comfort and pleasures, but by the triumph over hardship and persecution, by superiority to circumstances; and the life is that strong vitality which overcomes death and rises victorious from apparent dissolution.

While the Ephesian letter appeals throughout to the past history of the Church in Ephesus, and attempts to rouse a fresh enthusiasm among the congregation by the memory of their previous glory as Christians, the Smyrnaean letter is to a remarkable degree penetrated with local feeling and urban patriotism.

The Smyrnaean Church is addressed by "the first and the last, which was dead and lived." All Smyrnaeans would appreciate the analogy to their own ancient history in those words. Strabo furnishes again the best commentary. He tells that the Lydians destroyed the ancient city of Smyrna, and for about 400 years there was no city, but

merely a state composed of villages scattered through the plain and over the hill-sides. Smyrna literally "was dead, and lived," like Him who addresses it.

The meaning of this opening address is obscured by the unfortunate mistranslation, which disfigures both the Authorized and the Revised Version, "which was dead¹ and lived *again*." The insertion of this word *again* is unjustified and unjustifiable: there is nothing in the Greek corresponding to it, and the quotations from Matthew ix. 18, John v. 25, Ezekiel xxxvii. 3,² do not constitute any sufficient defence. The analogy of Rev. xiii. 2 ff. corroborates the plain sense of this letter. The idea is, not that life begins a second time after a period of death, but that life persists through death. The Divine Sender of the letter to Smyrna "was dead and lived," and so likewise Smyrna itself "was dead and lived." A practical corroboration of these last words is found in an inscription belonging to the fourth century B.C.,³ which mentions Smyrna as existing during the period when, as Strabo says, it was dead. If anything should be inserted in the translation to make the meaning quite clear, the word needed is *yet*, "which was dead and *yet* lived."

Smyrna during those four centuries ceased to exist as a Greek "city," but it lived as an Oriental village state, until it was refounded as a Greek city. Similarly Christ "became dead and *yet* lived."

After the introductory address, the letter begins with the usual statement. The writer has full knowledge of the past history of the Smyrnaean Church. Its history had been a course of suffering, and not (as the Ephesian history had been) of achievement. The Smyrnaean Church had had a more trying and difficult career than any other of

¹ Literally "became dead," or "became a corpse."

² They are given by Alford.

³ It is published in *Mittheilungen des Instituts Athen*, vii. 179.

the Asian Churches. It had been exposed to constant persecution. It was poor in all that is ordinarily reckoned as wealth; but it was rich in the estimation of those who can judge of the realities of life. There is here the same contrast between appearance and reality as in the opening address: apparent poverty and real wealth, apparent death and real life.

The humble condition and the sufferings of the Smyrnaean Church are in this letter pointedly connected with the action of the Jews, and especially with the calumnies which they had circulated in the city and among the magistrates and the Roman officials. The precise facts cannot be discovered, but the general situation is unmistakable: the Smyrnaean Jews were for some reason more strongly and bitterly hostile to the Christians than the Jews of Asia generally. But the Asian Jews are little more than a name to us. Nothing is recorded about them except in their relations to the Christians. From general considerations we can form some opinion about their position in the cities, as stated in the *EXPOSITOR*, December 1901, January and February 1902; but in respect of details and facts we know nothing. Inscriptions mentioning Jews are rare and give little information.

Accordingly we cannot even speculate as to the reason for the exceptionally strong anti-Christian feeling among the Smyrnaean Jews. We must simply accept the fact; and we may, perhaps, conclude from it that the national feeling among them was unusually strong.

In an inscription of the second century¹ "the quondam Jews" are mentioned as contributing 10,000 (drachmae?) to some public purpose connected with the embellishment of the city. Böckh understood this enigmatic phrase to mean persons who had forsworn their faith and become

¹ CIG 3148, belonging to the latter part of the reign of Hadrian.

ordinary Smyrnaeans; but this is certainly wrong. Mommsen's view must, so far as we can judge, be accepted, that "the quondam Jews" were simply the body of the Jews of Smyrna, called "quondam" because they were no longer recognized as a separate nation by the Roman law (as they had been before A.D. 70). The reference proves that they maintained in practice so late as 130-137 their separate standing in the city as a distinct people, apart from the rest of the citizens, although legally they were no longer anything but one section of the general population, probably enrolled as a distinct tribe. A correction of a statement in the article on Smyrna in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary*, iv. p. 555a, may here be added. It is there assumed as certain that all the Jews in Smyrna belonged to the class of resident strangers; but a more careful study of the position of Jews in the Asian cities¹ has shown that many Jews possessed the rights of citizenship in the Ionian cities, such as Smyrna. The quondam Jews who made that large contribution to embellish Smyrna were probably for the most part citizens.

We may also probably infer from the strong hatred felt by the Jews, that at first many of the Christians of Smyrna had been converted from Judaism. It was the Jewish Christians, and not the pagan converts, whom the national Jews hated so violently. Except in so far as the converts had been proselytes of the synagogue, the Jews were not likely to care very much whether Pagans were converted to Christianity: their violent hatred was roused by the renegade Jews like St. Paul, who tried to place the unclean Pagans on a level with themselves.

The action of the Jews in the martyrdom of Polycarp must be regarded (as a succession of writers have seen) as

¹ In the *EXPOSITOR* as quoted above, especially Jan. 1902, p. 22 f., and Feb. 1902, p. 92 f.

corroborating the evidence of this letter. In that case the eagerness of the Jews to expedite the execution of the Christian leader actually overpowered their objection to profane the Sabbath day, and they came into the gay assemblage in the Stadium, bringing faggots to make the fire in which Polycarp should be consumed. It must, however, be observed that they are not said to have been present at the sports in the Stadium. The games were over, as usual, at about 11 a.m. Thereafter the rather irregular trial of Polycarp was held; and about 2 p.m. the execution took place, and the most bitter opponents of the Christians had ample time to hear the news, assemble to hear the sentence, and to help in carrying it into effect. Undoubtedly, many who would abhor to appear as spectators of the games on a Sabbath would feel justified in putting to death an enemy of their faith on that day.

Severe trials still awaited the Church in Smyrna: "The devil is about to cast some of you into prison." . . . The expression must be understood as symbolical and figurative; and it would not be permissible to take "prison" in a sense too literal, as implying that imprisonment was the severest punishment that had as yet been, or was likely to be, inflicted on Christians, and that death was still unknown as a penalty for the crime of Christianity, and not even thought of as a possibility in the immediate future.

The "prison" into which the devil would cast some of the Smyrnaean Christians must be understood as a brief epitome of all the sufferings that lay before them; the first act, viz., their apprehension and imprisonment, is to be taken as implying all the usual course of trial and punishment through which passed the martyrs who are described in the later parts of the book. Prison was thought of by the writer of the letter as the prelude to execution, and was understood in that sense by his readers.

That this is so is proved by the promise that follows, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life": Endure all that falls to the lot of the true and steadfast Christians, beginning with arrest and imprisonment, ending with execution: that death will not be the end, but only the entrance to the true life, the birthday of martyrdom. The martyr "was dead and lived"; he was not hurt of the second death.

The importance of this idea in the letter is proved by the conclusion, where it recurs in a slightly varied form: "he that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death." It is this triumph over death that constitutes the guiding thought of the whole letter, just as change was the guiding thought of the Ephesian letter. He that persists to the end, he that is steadfast and overcomes, shall triumph over death. Here, again, the final promise is seen to be peculiarly appropriate to the character and needs of the persons addressed.

Another expression which must be taken in a figurative or symbolic sense is, "thou shalt have tribulation ten days." The "ten days" means simply a period which can be measured, i.e. which comes to an end. The persecution will rage for a time, but it will not be permanent. The Church will live through it and survive it; and has therefore no reason to be afraid of it.

The expression "be faithful," again, would inevitably remind Smyrnaean readers of the history of their city, which had been the faithful friend and ally of Rome for centuries. It cannot be a mere accident that the only one of the Seven Churches with which the epithet *πιστός* is associated in the letters is the Church of that city which had established its historic claim to that epithet in three centuries of loyalty, the city which had been faithful to Rome in danger and difficulty, the city whose citizens had stripped off their own garments to send to the Roman soldiers when suffering from

cold and the hardships of a winter campaign. The honour in which Smyrna was always held by the Romans was proclaimed to be a return *pro singulari fide* (Livy xxxviii. 39); and its services were rewarded in A.D. 26 by the permission granted to it, in preference even to Ephesus, to dedicate the second Asian temple¹ to the reigning Emperor Tiberius and his family.

The same reflection occurs as in the case of Ephesus. Some may think that such an explanation of the reason why this special form of words in the exordium of this letter was chosen, and why the epithet "faithful" is applied to the Church, is fanciful and even unworthy. It is evident, however, that the study which is here presented has been made from a different point of view. It is not in accordance with right method to form *à priori* theories of what is right or wrong, dignified or undignified, possible or impossible, in the interpretation of St. John's words. The only true method is to take the words, and ask what they mean, and what must the readers, for whom they were in the first place written, have understood from them. Now considering how exactly those words, "was dead and lived," applied to ancient Smyrna, it seems certain that the reference must inevitably have been appreciated by the Smyrnaeans; and if so, it cannot have been an accidental coincidence. The writer deliberately chose those words to appeal to local sentiment and patriotism. The same remark applies to his choice of "faithful" as the appropriate epithet for the Smyrnaean Church. Not merely had the Church been faithful: the whole city regarded faithfulness as the chief glory of Smyrna; and the topic must have been familiar to all inhabitants and a commonplace in patriotic speeches.

¹ The first had been dedicated to Augustus by Pergamus; the third was erected in Ephesus at a later date.

It is evident that the writer of the Seven Letters did not discourage such feelings of attachment to their native city, but encouraged local patriotism and used it as a basis on which to build up a strenuous Christian life. He held that a Christian could be a patriot and ought to be proud of and interested in the glory and the history of his own city.

This gives a different impression of the writer's character from what might be gathered from later parts of the Apocalypse ; but it is not good method to take parts of a book and determine the author's character from them alone. Rather, the Seven Letters are a truer index to the author's character than any other part of the Apocalypse, because in these letters he is in closer contact with reality than in any other part of the book.

Accordingly, we must accept the plain evidence of this letter, and infer (as in the Ephesian letter already) that to the writer of the letter the life of the Church in Smyrna was not disconnected from the life of the city ; and this must be regarded as a general principle to be applied in other cases. The Church was to him the heart and soul of the city, and its members were the true citizens. Just as the so-called Jews in Smyrna were not the true Jews, but a mere synagogue of Satan, so the Pagans were not the true citizens, but mere servants of the devil. The true Jews and the true citizens were the Christians alone. To them belonged the heritage of the city's past history : its faithfulness, its persistence, its unconquerable and indestructible vitality, all were theirs. To them also belonged the whole ancient heritage of the Jews, the promises and the favour of God.

In the letter to Smyrna then we see an influence of which no trace was visible in the Ephesian letter. The stock topics of patriotic orators, the glories of the city, are plainly observable in the letter ; and the writer had cer-

tainly at some time mixed in the city life, and become familiar with current talk and the commonplaces of Smyrnaean municipal patriotism.¹ In the Ephesian letter, on the other hand, it was the eternal features and the natural surroundings of the city that the writer referred to. The Smyrnaean letter is not without similar reference. The writer did not confine his attention to those ephemeral characteristics which have just been mentioned, or (to speak more accurately) he regarded those characteristics as merely the effect produced by eternal causes. He had thought himself into harmony with the natural influences which had made Smyrna what it was, and which would continue to mould its history; and from this lofty standpoint he could look forward into the future, and foretell what must happen to Smyrna and to the Church (which to him was the one reality in Smyrna). He foresaw permanence, stability, reality surpassing the outward appearance, life maintaining itself strong and unmoved amid trial and apparent death. In Ephesus he saw the one great characteristic, the changing, evanescent, uncertain relations of sea and land and river; and interpreted with prophetic instinct the inevitable future. In Smyrna he saw nothing of that kind. The city must live, and the Church must live in it. Sea and plain and hills were here unchanging in their combined effect, making the seat of a great city. It must endure much, but only for a definite, limited period; as a city it would suffer from invaders, who would surely try to capture it; and the Church not only would suffer along with the city, but would also suffer from the

¹ Patriotism still was almost entirely municipal, though the Roman Empire was gradually implanting in the minds of ordinary men a wider ideal of patriotism, extending to a nation and an empire, and not confined to a mere city. Greece had vainly tried to make the Hellenic idea strong in the common mind; philosophers had freed themselves from the narrowness of municipal patriotism; but it was left to Rome to make the wider idea effective among men.

busy trading city, in which the element hostile to God would always be strong.

And history has justified the prophetic vision of the writer. Smyrna, the recipient of the most laudatory of all the Seven Letters, is the greatest of all the cities. At the head of its gulf, which stretches far up into the land, it is the one important modern seaport of the whole country. It has tempted the cupidity of every invader, and has suffered from the greed and cruelty of many conquerors ; but it has arisen, brilliant and strong, from every disaster. No Asian city gives the same impression of brightness and life, as one looks at it from the water, and sees it spread out on the gently sloping ground between the sea and the hill, and climbing up the sides of the graceful hill, crowned with the walls and towers of the mediaeval castle. That hill seems only a rounded hillock of 460 feet in elevation. But when you ascend it you find that it is not merely an isolated conical hill, as it seems from the sea to be. It is really only a corner of the great plateau that lies behind it. It is far stronger than at first you supposed, for it is supported from behind by the immeasurable strength of the continent, which pushes forward this hill, like a fist, towards the sea. Strength surpassing appearance, brightness, life : those are the characteristics of the letter and of the city.

In this letter no one can fail to recognize the tone of affection and entire approval. Whereas the writer urged the people of Ephesus to be as they once were, he counsels the Smyrnaeans to continue as they are now. Ephesus has to recover what it has lost, but Smyrna has lost nothing. The persecution and poverty which had been the lot of its Church from the beginning, and which would still continue for a period, kept it pure. There was nothing in it to tempt the unworthy or the half-hearted ; whereas the dignity and high standing of the Ephesian Church had attracted some not entirely worthy members. The writer

looks confidently forward to the continuance of the same steadfastness in Smyrna. He does not even hint at the possibility of partial failure; he does not say, "If thou be faithful, I will give thee the crown"; he merely exhorts them to be faithful as they have been.

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