

## *THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS.*

THE analogy between the Ephesian and Sardian letters is close, and the two have to be studied together. History had moved on similar lines with the two Churches. Both had begun enthusiastically and cooled down. Degeneration was the fact in both ; but in Ephesus the degeneration had not yet become so serious as in Sardis. Hence in the Ephesian letters the keynote is merely change, instability and uncertainty ; in the Sardian letter the keynote is degradation, false pretension and death.

In those two letters the exordium takes a very similar form. To the Ephesian Church "these things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, he that walketh between the seven golden candlesticks." To the Sardian Church the letter proceeds from him "that hath the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." The sender of both letters stands forth as the centre, the pivot and the director of the Universal Church, and in particular of the entire group of the Asian Churches. Effective power exercised over the whole Church is emphasized in both cases, and especially in the Sardian address. The "Seven Spirits of God" must certainly be taken as a symbolic or allegorical way of indicating the full range of exercise of the Divine power in the Seven Churches, i.e. in the Universal Church as represented here by the Asian Churches. If one may try in inadequate and rough terms to express the meaning, the "Spirit of God" is to be understood as the power of God exerting itself practically in the Church ; and, since the

Church is always regarded in the Revelation as consisting of Seven parts or Churches, the power of God is described in its relation to those Seven parts as the "Seven Spirits of God."

This awkward and indirect way of expression (which is misleading if it be not sympathetically and carefully interpreted) is forced on the writer by the plan of his work, which does not aim at philosophic exposition, but at shadowing forth through sensuous imagery "the deep things of God," according to the crude literary form which he chose to imitate.

Under the phraseology, "the Seven Spirits of God," the writer of the Revelation conceals a statement of the great problem: "how does the Divine power make itself effective in regard to the world and mankind, when it is entirely different in nature and character from the common world of human experience? How can a thing act on another which is wholly different in nature from it, and lies on a different plane of existence?" The Divine power has to go forth, as it were, out of itself in order to reach mankind. The writer had evidently been occupying himself with this problem; and, as we see, the book of the Revelation is a vague and dim expression of the whole range of this and the associated problems regarding the relation of God to man. But the book is not to be taken as a solution of the problems. It is the work of a man who has not reached an answer, i.e. who has not yet succeeded in expressing the question in philosophic form, but who is struggling to body forth the problems before himself and his readers in such imagery as may make them more conceivable.

The most serious error in regard to the book of the Revelation consists in regarding it as a statement of the solution. No solution is reached in the book; but the writer's aim is to convey to his readers his own perfect

confidence that the Divine nature is effective on human nature and on the world of sense, all-powerful, absolutely victorious in this apparent contest with evil or anti-Christ; that in fact there is not really any contest, for the victory is gained in the inception of the contest, and the seeming struggle is merely the means whereby the Divine power offers to man the opportunity of learning to understand its nature.

The Spirit of God, and still more the Seven Spirits of God, are therefore not to be taken as a description of the method by which the Divine activity exerts itself in its relation to the Church; for, if looked at so, they are easily perverted and elaborated into a theory of intermediate powers intervening between God and the world, and thus there must arise the whole system of angels (which in human nature, as ideas and customs then tended, inevitably degenerated into a worship of angels, according to Colossians ii. 18; just as a few centuries later the respect for the saints and martyrs of the Church degenerated into a worship of them as powers intervening between man and the remote ultimate Divine nature). The Seven Spirits form simply an expression suited to reach the comprehension of men at that time, and make them image to themselves the activity of God in relation to the Seven Churches, and to the whole Universal Church. That this is a successful attempt to present the problem to human apprehension cannot be maintained. The book is the first attempt of a writer struggling to express great ideas; but the ideas have not yet been thought out clearly in his mind and he has been led away to imitate a crude and bad model fashionable in Jewish circles at the time. He has reached an infinitely higher level than any other of that class known to us; but there are ineradicable faults in the whole class.

The Church of Sardis, then, is addressed by Him who controls and directs the Divine action in the Churches as

they exist in the world, and who holds in his hand the Seven Churches, with their history and their destiny. This expression of His power is varied from that which occurs in the address of the Ephesian letter, of course in a way suited to the Sardian Church, though it is not easy for us to comprehend wherein lies the precise suitability. As everywhere, throughout this study, we cannot hope to do more than reach a statement of the difficulties and the problems, though often a clear statement of the question involves a suggestion of a reply (and in so far as it does this it involves personal opinion and hypothesis, and is liable to fall into subjectivity and error).

We observed the peculiar suitability of the Ephesian address to the situation of Ephesus as the centre and practical leader of the whole group of Asian Churches. Hence the final detail in that address—"He that walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands"; for (as we already saw) the lampstands symbolize the Churches on earth, as the seven Stars symbolize the seven Churches, or their spiritual counterparts, in heaven. Instead of this the Sardian address introduces "the seven Spirits of God." A more explicit and definite expression of the activity of the Divine nature in the Churches on earth evidently recommended itself as suitable in addressing the Sardian Church.

One naturally asks here, what is the reason? wherein lies the suitability? To answer the question, it is obviously necessary to look at the prominent point of difference between Sardis and Ephesus (which we have already stated). Ephesus had changed and cooled, but the degeneration had not yet become serious; restoration of its old character and enthusiasm was still possible. As a Church Ephesus might possibly be in the future as great as it had been in the past. But the Church of Sardis was already dead, though it seemed to be living. It was done

with the past. A revivification of its former self was impossible. There remained only a few in it for whom there was some hope. They might survive, as they had hitherto shown themselves worthy. And they shall survive, for the power which has hitherto sustained them will be with them and keep them to the end. In this scanty remnant of the formerly great Church of Sardis, the Divine power will show itself all the more conspicuous. Just as in the comparatively humble city of Thyatira the faithful few shall be granted a strength and authority beyond that of the Empire and its armies, so in this small remnant at Sardis the Divine power will be most effective, because they stand most in need of it.

It is not to be imagined that this consideration exhausts the case. There remains much more that is at present beyond our ken. The more we can learn about Sardis, the better we understand the letter.

In none of the Seven Letters is the method of the writer, and the reason that guided him in selecting the topics more clearly displayed than in the letter to the Church in Sardis. The advice which he gives to the Sardians is, in a way, universally suitable to human nature: "Be watchful; be more careful; carry out more completely and thoroughly what you have still to do, for hitherto you have always erred in leaving work half done and incomplete. Try to make that first enthusiasm and eager attention with which you seemed to listen to the Gospel a permanent feature in your conduct. If you are not watchful, you will not be ready at the moment of need: my arrival will find you unprepared, because 'in an hour that ye think not the Son of Man cometh'; any one can make ready for a fixed hour, but you must be always ready for an unexpected hour."

Advice like that is, in a sense, universal. All persons, every individual man and every body of men, constantly

require the advice to be watchful, and to carry through to completion what they once enter upon, for all men tend more or less to slacken in their exertions and to leave half-finished ends of work. In all men there is observable a discrepancy between promise and performance; the first show is almost always superior to the final result.

But why are these precise topics selected for the Sardian letter, and not for any of the others? Why does the reference to the thief in the night suggest itself in this letter and not in any other? It is plain that Ephesus was suffering from the same tendency to growing slackness as Sardis, and that its first enthusiasm had cooled down almost as lamentably as was the case in the Sardian Church. Yet the advice to Ephesus, though like in many respects, is expressed in very different words.

But in almost every letter similar questions suggest themselves. There were faithful Christians in every one of the Churches; but the word "faithful" is used only of Smyrna. Every Church was brought into the same conflict with the Roman State; but only in the Pergamenian letter is the opposition between the Church and the Empire expressly emphasized, and only in the Thyatiran letter is the superiority in strength and might of the Church over the State mentioned.

In the Sardian letter the reason is unusually clear; and to this point our attention must now be especially directed.

No city in the whole Province of Asia had a more splendid history in past ages than Sardis. No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendour and present decay as Sardis. Its history was the exact opposite of the record of Smyrna. Smyrna was dead and (yet) lived. Sardis lived, and was dead.

Sardis was the great city of ancient times and of half-historical legend. At the beginning of the Greek memory of history in Lydia, Sardis stood out conspicuous and alone

as the capital of the great Oriental Empire with which the Greek cities and colonies were brought in contact. Their relations with Lydia formed the one great question of foreign politics for those early Greek settlers; and Lydia was Sardis. Everything else was secondary, or was under their own control, but in regard to Sardis they had always to be thinking of foreign wishes, foreign rights, the caprice of a foreign monarch and the convenience of foreign traders, who were too powerful to be disregarded or treated with disrespect. Thus Sardis before the middle of the sixth century B.C. was to the Greek colonies of the Ægean coasts the great city of the East; to them it represented Asia as distinguished from, and always more or less hostile to, Europe and Greece. That impression the Asiatic Greeks, with their tenacious historical memory, never entirely lost. Sardis was always to them the capital where Croesus, richest of kings, had ruled—the city which Solon, wisest of men, had visited, and where he had rightly augured ruin because he had rightly mistrusted material wealth and luxury as necessarily hollow and treacherous—the fortress of many warlike kings, like Gyges, whose power was so great that legend credited him with the possession of the gold ring of supernatural power, or Alyattes, whose vast tomb rose like a mountain above the Hermus valley beside the sacred lake of the Mother Goddess.

But to those Greeks of the coast colonies, Ephesus and Smyrna and the rest, Sardis was also the city of failure, the city whose history was marked by the ruin of great kings and the downfall of great military strength, apparently in mid-career, when it seemed to be at its highest development. It was the city whose history conspicuously and pre-eminently blazoned forth the uncertainty of human fortunes, the weakness of human strength, and the shortness of the step that separates over-confident might from sudden and irreparable disaster. It was the city whose

name was almost synonymous with pretensions unjustified, promise unfulfilled, appearance without reality, confidence that heralded ruin. Reputed an impregnable fortress, it had repeatedly fallen short of its reputation, and ruined those who trusted in it. Croesus, after losing a battle with his first army against Cyrus far in the east beyond the Halys, retired to Sardis at the beginning of winter, and issued orders for the concentration of all his forces in the ensuing spring to continue the war; he fancied he could sit safe in the great fortress, but his enemy advanced straight upon it and carried it by assault before the strength of the Lydian land was collected.

Carelessness, and failure to keep proper watch, arising from over-confidence in the apparent strength of the fortress, had been the cause of this disaster, which ruined the dynasty and brought to an end the Lydian Empire and the dominance of Sardis. The walls and gates were all as strong as art and nature combined could make them. The hill was steep and lofty on which the upper city stood. The one approach to the upper city was too carefully fortified to offer any chance to an assailant. But there was one weak point: in one place it was possible for an active enemy to make his way up the perpendicular sides of the lofty hill, if the defenders stood idle and permitted him to climb unhindered. According to the legend this weak point existed from the beginning of history in Sardis, because, when the divine consecration and encompassing of the new fortress had been made at its foundation, this point had been omitted; thus the tale would imply that the weak point was known to the defenders and through mere obstinate folly left unguarded by them. But such a legend is usually a growth after the fact. The crumbling character of the rock on which the upper city of Sardis stood shows what the real facts must have been. In the course of time a weakness had developed at one point. Through want of



proper care in surveying and repairing the fortifications this weakness had remained unobserved and unknown to the defenders; but the assailants, scrutinizing every inch of the walls of the great fortress in search of an opportunity, noticed it and availed themselves of it to climb up, one at a time. On such a lofty hill, rising fully 1,500 feet above the plain, whose sides are and must from their nature always have been steep and straight and practically perpendicular, a child could guard against an army; even a small stone dropped on the head of the most skilful mountain-climber, would inevitably hurl him down. An attack made by this path could succeed only if the assailants climbed up entirely unobserved; and they could not escape observation unless they made the attempt by night. Hence, even though this be unrecorded, a night attack must have been the way by which Cyrus entered Sardis. He came upon the great city "like a thief in the night."

The sudden ruin of that great Empire and the wealthiest king of all the world was an event of that character which most impressed the Greek mind, emphasizing a moral lesson by a great national disaster. A little carelessness was shown; a watchman was wanting at the necessary point, or a sentinel slept at his post for an hour; and the greatest power on the earth was hurled to destruction. The great king trusted to Sardis, and Sardis failed him at the critical moment. Promise was unfulfilled; the appearance of strength proved the mask of weakness; the fortification was incomplete; work which had been begun with great energy was not pushed through to its conclusion with the same determination.

More than three centuries later another case of exactly the same kind occurred. Achæus and Antiochus the Great were fighting for the command of Lydia and the whole Seleucid Empire. Antiochus besieged his rival in Sardis, and the city again was captured by a surprise of the

same nature; a Cretan mercenary led the way, climbing up the hill and stealing unobserved within the fortifications. The lesson of old days had not been learned; experience had been forgotten; men were too slack and careless; and when the moment of need came, Sardis was unprepared.

A State cannot survive which is guarded with such carelessness; a people so slack and ineffective cannot continue an imperial power. Sardis, as a great and ruling city, was dead. It had sunk to be a second-rate or third-rate city of a Province. Yet it still retained the name and the historical memory of a capital city. It had great pretensions, which it had vainly tried to establish in A.D. 26 before the tribunal of the Roman Senate in the contention among the Asian cities recorded by Tacitus, *Annals*, iv. 55.

No one can doubt that this Sardian letter took its form in part through the memory of that ancient history. It was impossible for the Sardians to miss the allusion, and therefore the writer must have intended it and calculated on it. Phrase after phrase is chosen for the evident purpose of recalling that ancient memory, which was undoubtedly still strong and living among the Sardians, for the Hellenic cities had a retentive historical recollection, and we know that Sardis in the great pleading in A.D. 26 rested its case on a careful selection of facts from its past history "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead. Be thou watchful, and stablish the things that remain, which were ready to die: for I have found no works of thine fulfilled before my God. . . . If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."

It seems therefore undeniable that the writer has selected topics which rise out of and stand in close relation to the past history of Sardis as a city. In view of this evident plan and guiding purpose, are we to understand that he

preferred the older historical reference, and left aside the actual fortunes of the Church as secondary, when he was sketching out the order of his letter? Such a supposition is impossible. The writer is in those words drawing a picture of the history and degeneration of the Sardian Church; but he draws it in such a way as to set before his readers the continuity of Sardian history. The story of the Church is a repetition of past experience; the character of the people remains unchanged; their faults are still the same, and their fate must be the same.

If this view be correct—and it seems forced on us unavoidably by the facts of the case—then another inference must inevitably follow: the writer, so far from separating the Church of Sardis from the city of Sardis, emphasizes strongly the closeness of the connexion between them. The Church of Sardis is not merely in the city of Sardis, it is in a sense the city; and the Christians are the people of the city. There is not in his mind the slightest idea that Christians are to keep out of the world—as might perhaps be suggested from a too exclusive contemplation of some parts of the Revelation; the Church here is addressed almost as if to suggest that the fortunes of ancient Sardis had been its own fortunes, that it had endured those sieges, committed those faults of carelessness and blind confidence, and sunk into the same decay and death as the city.

That this is intentional and deliberate cannot be questioned for a moment. What this writer said he meant. There is no accident or unintended significance in those carefully chosen and well weighed words. In regard to this letter the same reflections arise as were already suggested in the case of the other letters, and especially the Smyrnaean and Pergamenian. In his conflict with the Nicolaitans the writer was never betrayed into mere blind opposition to them; he never rejected their views from mere hatred of those who held them; he took the wider

view which embraced everything that was right and true in the principles of the Nicolaitans—and there was a good deal that was rightly thought and well said by them—together with a whole world of thought which they had no eyes to see. In the Seven Letters he repeatedly gives marked emphasis to the principle, which the Nicolaitans rightly maintained, that the Christians should be a force in the world, moulding it gradually to a Christian model.

Throughout the Letters the writer seems constantly to be reiterating one thought, “ See how much better the true eternal Church does everything than any of the false pretenders and opponents can do them.” In regard to one detail after another he points out how far superior is the Christian form to that in which it is tendered by the Imperial State, by the cities, or by false teachers. If Laodiceia clothes its citizens with the glossy black woollen garments of its famous industry, he offers white garments to clothe the true Laodiceans. If the State has its mighty military strength and its imperial authority, he points out to the true remnant among the Thyatirans that a more crushing and irresistible might shall be placed in their hands, and offers to the Pergamenian victors a wider authority over worlds seen and unseen. If the Nicolaitans emphasize the intimate relation between the life of the Church and the organization of the State and the society amid which the Church exists, he states with equal emphasis, but with the proper additions, that the Church is so closely connected with the State and the City that it can be regarded as sharing in a way their life, fortunes and powers.

It is not fanciful to trace here, as in other cases, a connexion between the spirit of the advice tendered and the permanent features of nature amid which the city stood and by which it was insensibly moulded. Sardis stood, or rather the upper and the only fortified city stood, on a lofty hill, a spur projecting north from Mount Tmolus and dominating

the Hermus valley. The hill has still, in its dilapidated and diminished extent, an imposing appearance; but it undoubtedly presented a far more splendid show two or three thousand years ago, when the top must have been a broad plateau of considerable extent, the sides of which were almost perpendicular walls of rock, except where a narrow isthmus connected the hill with the mountains behind it on the south. Towards the plain, north, east and west, it presented the most imposing show, a city with walls and towers, temples, houses and palaces, filling the elevated plateau so completely that on all sides it looked as if one could drop a stone 1,500 feet straight into the plain from the outer buildings.

The rock, however, on which Sardis was built was only nominally a rock. In reality, as you go nearer it, you see that it is only mud slightly compacted, and easily dissolved by rain. It is, however, so constituted that it wears away with an almost perpendicular face; but rain and frost continually diminish it, so that now little remains of the upper plateau on which the city stood, and in one place the plateau has been worn almost wholly through, so that the visitor needs a fairly cool head and steady nerve to walk from one part of it to the other. The isthmus connecting the plateau with Tmolus on the south has been worn away in the same fashion.

There can be no doubt that the isthmus, as being the solitary approach, must always have been the most strongly fortified part. At present the plateau is said not to be accessible at any other point except where the isthmus touches it; but there are several chinks and clefts leading up the north and west faces,<sup>1</sup> and I should expect that by one of them a bold and practised climber could make his way up. These clefts vary in character from century to century as the surface disintegrates; and all of them would

<sup>1</sup> I have not seen the east face from a near point.

always be regarded by the ordinary peaceful and unathletic oriental citizen as inaccessible. But from time to time sometimes one, sometimes another, would offer a chance to a daring mountaineer. By such an approach it must have been that Cyrus in 549, and Antiochus in 218, captured the city. It is right to add that the account that we have given of the way in which Sardis was captured differs from the current opinion in one point. The usual view is that Cyrus entered Sardis by the isthmus or neck on the south. That was the natural and necessary path in ordinary use; the only road and gateway were there; and inevitably the defence of the city was based on a careful guard and strong fortification at the solitary approach. The enemy was expected to attack there; but the point of the tale is that the ascent was made on a side where no guard was ever stationed, because that side was believed to be inaccessible. The misapprehension is as old as the time of Herodotus (or rather some of old Greek glossator, who has interposed a false explanation in the otherwise clear narrative of Herodotus I. 84).

The crumbling, poor character of the rock must always have been a feature that impressed the thinking mind, and led it to associate the character of the inhabitants with this feature of the situation. Instability, untrustworthiness, inefficiency, deterioration—such is the impression that the rock gives, and such was the character of Sardian history and of the Sardian Church—as we have just seen.

This series of studies of the Seven Letters may be exposed, perhaps, to the charge of imagining fanciful connexions between the natural surroundings of the Seven Cities and the tone of the Seven Letters. Those who are accustomed to the variety of character that exists in the West will refuse to acknowledge that there exists any such connexion between the character of the natural surroundings and the spirit, the Angel, of the Church.

But Western analogy is misleading. We are accustomed to struggle against Nature, and by understanding Nature's laws to subjugate her to our needs. When a waterway is needed, as at Glasgow, we transform a little stream into a navigable river. Where a harbour is necessary to supply a defect in nature, we construct with vast toil and at great cost an artificial harbour. We regulate the flow of dangerous rivers, utilizing all that they can give us and restraining them from inflicting the harm they are capable of. Thus in numberless ways we refuse to yield to the influences that surround us, and by hard work rise superior in some degree to them.

Such analogy must not be applied without careful consideration in Asia. There man is far more under the influence of nature; and hence results a homogeneity of character in each place which is surprising to the Western traveller, and which he can hardly believe or realize without long experience. Partly it may be because nature and the powers of nature are on a vaster scale in Asia. You can climb the highest Alps, but the Himalayas present untrodden peaks, where the powers of man fail. The Eastern people have had little chance of subduing and binding to their will the mighty rivers of Asia (except the Chinese, who regulated their greatest rivers more than 2,000 years ago). The Hindus have come to recognize the jungle as unconquerable, and its wild beasts as irresistible; and they passively acquiesce in their fate. Vast Asiatic deserts are accepted as due to the will of God; and through this humble resignation other great stretches of land which once were highly cultivated have come to be marked on the maps as desert, because the difficulties of cultivation are no longer surmountable by a passive and uninventive population. In Asia mankind has accepted nature; and the attempts to struggle against it have been almost wholly confined to a remote past or to European settlers.

How it was that Asiatic races could do more to influence nature in a very early time than they have ever attempted in later times is a problem that deserves separate consideration. Here we only observe that they themselves attributed their early activity entirely to religion; the Mother-Goddess herself taught her children how to conquer nature by obeying her and using her powers.

But among the experiences which specially impress the traveller who patiently explores Asia Minor step by step, village by village, and province by province, perhaps the most impressive of all is the extent to which natural circumstances mould the fate of cities and the character of men. The dominance of nature over the minds of those Asiatic peoples is, certainly, more complete now than it was of old; but still even in the early ages of history it was great, and it was a main factor both in moulding the historical mythology, or mythical explanations of historical facts, that were current among the common people, and in guiding the more reasoned and pretentious scientific explanations of history set forth by the educated and the philosophers. Among the latter may be classed, in a certain degree, and on one side only of their contents, the Seven Letters; for they contain among other things an outline of "the philosophy of history" for the Seven Cities, and in almost every case the history of the city is viewed in relation to the eternal features of nature around it.

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