

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS.

(Continued.)

BUT Sardis was not entirely degenerate and unworthy. Even in it there were a few persons who maintained their Christian character and "did not defile their garments." This strong expression shows wherein lay the guilt of Sardis. It was different essentially from the fault of Thyatira, the city which comes next to Sardis in the severity of its condemnation. Thyatira was in many ways distinguished by excellence of conduct, and the corporate life of its Church was vigorous and improving, so that its "last works were more than the first"; but a false theory of life and a false conception of what was right action were leading it astray. Sardis was not Christian enough to entertain a heresy or be led astray by a false system; it had lost all vigour and life, and had sunk back to the ordinary pagan level of conduct, which from the Christian point of view was essentially vicious and immoral in principle.

The Sardian Church fell under the condemnation pronounced by St. Paul (1 Cor. v. 10) against those who, having become Christians and learned the principles of morality, relapsed into the vices which were commonly practised in pagan society. These were to be treated far more severely than the pagans, though the pagans lived after the same fashion; but the pagans lived so on principle, knowingly and intentionally, because they held it to be right, whereas the Christians had learned that it was wrong, and yet from weakness of will and character slipped back into the evil. With them the true Christians were

not to keep company, but were to put them out of their society and their meetings. With pagans who lived after the same fashion, however, it was allowable to associate (though it lies in the nature of the case, and needs no formal statement, that the association between Christians and pagans could never be so intimate as that of Christians with one another).

A peculiarly kind and loving tone is perceptible in this part of the letter. There is a certain reaction after the abhorrence and disgust with which the weak degeneracy of Sardis has been described; and in this reaction the deserts of the faithful few are painted with a loving touch. They have kept themselves pure and true, and "they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy." Their reward shall be to continue to the end white and pure, as they have kept themselves in Sardis.

This warm and affectionate tone is marked by the form of the final promise, which begins by simply repeating what has been already said in the letter. In most of the other letters the final promise comes as an addition; but here the love that speaks in the letter has already uttered the promise, and there is nothing left except to say it again, and to add explicitly what is already implied in it, life. "He that overcometh shall thus be arrayed in white garments; and I will in no wise blot his name out of the Book of Life, and I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." The reward of all victors shall be the reward just promised to the few faithful in Sardis, purity and life—to have their name standing always in the Book, openly acknowledged and emblazoned before God.

In the Smyrnaean letter also the concluding promise is to a certain extent anticipated in the body of the letter, as here; and the tone of that letter is throughout warm and appreciative, beyond the rest of the Seven Letters. Where

this letter rises to the tone of love and admiration, it approximates to the character of the Smyrnaean letter, and like it ends with the promise of life.

The "Book of Life" is here evidently understood as an official list (so to say) of the citizens of the heavenly city, the true Jerusalem, the Elect City, peopled by the true Christians of all cities and provinces and nations. As in all Greek and Roman cities of that time, there was kept a list of citizens, according to their class or tribe or deme, in which new citizens were entered and from which degraded citizens were expunged, so the writer of this letter figuratively mentions the Book of Life. There is a remnant in Sardis whose names shall never be deleted from the Book, from which most Sardians have been expunged already.

That undoubtedly is the meaning which would be taken from the words here by Asian readers. Mr. Anderson Scott points out that in the Jewish Apocalyptic literature a wider sense is given to the term, and the "Book of Life" is regarded as a record of exploits, a history of the life and works of God's people. That this second sense was in the writer's mind elsewhere is certain; but it is clear from xx. 12 (compare xiii. 8, xvii. 8, xx. 15) that the books of record are distinct from the "Book of Life." The wider sense would not be gathered by the Asian readers from this reference, and was clearly not intended by the writer of the letter.

This is one of many points of difference which strongly mark off the Apocalypse of John from the common Apocalyptic literature of that age and earlier times; and this immense difference ought never to be forgotten (though it is perhaps not always remembered clearly enough) by those scholars who, in studying the great influence exerted by the older literature of this class on our Apocalypse, have seen in it an enlarged Christian edition of an originally Jewish Apocalypse.

White was widely considered among the ancient nations as the colour of innocence and purity. On this account it was appropriate for those who were engaged in the worship of the gods, for purity was prescribed as a condition of engaging in divine service, though usually the purity was understood in a merely ceremonial sense. All Roman citizens wore the pure white toga on holidays and at religious ceremonies, whether or not they wore it on ordinary days; in fact, the great majority of them did not ordinarily wear that heavy and cumbrous garment; and hence the city on festivals and holidays is called "*candida urbs*," the city in white. Especially on the day of a Triumph, white was the universal colour—though the soldiers, of course, wore not the toga, the garb of peace, but their full-dress military attire with all their decorations—and there can hardly be any doubt that the idea of walking in a Triumph similar to that celebrated by a victorious Roman general is here present in the mind of the writer when he uses the words, "they shall walk with me in white." A dirty and dark-coloured toga, on the other hand, was the appropriate dress of sorrow and of guilt. Hence it was worn by mourners and by persons accused of crimes.

The Asian readers could know of a Roman Triumph only from literature and report, for in the strictest sense Triumphs could be celebrated only in Rome, and only by an Emperor in person; but, in proportion as the Triumph in the strict old Roman sense became rare, the splendour and pomp which had been appropriated originally to it alone were more widely employed; as, for example, in the procession escorting the presiding magistrate, the Praetor, to the games in the Roman Circus; and there is no doubt that the great provincial festivals and shows which were celebrated in the chief Asian cities according to Imperial policy as a means of diffusing Roman ideas and ways, were inaugurated with a procession modelled after the stately

Roman procession in which the Praetor was escorted in triumph to the circus, as Juvenal describes it—

What! had he seen, in his triumphant car
Amid the dusty Cirque, conspicuous far,
The Praetor perched aloft, superbly drest
In Jove's proud tunic with a trailing vest
Of Tyrian tapestry, and o'er him spread
A crown too bulky for a human head:

Add now the Imperial Eagle, raised on high,
With golden beak, the mark of majesty,
Trumpets before, and on the left and right
A cavalcade of nobles, all in white.

Thus though the Triumph itself could never have been seen by the readers of this letter, they knew it, partly from report and literature as the most typical celebration of complete and final victory, partly from frequently seeing ceremonies in the great Imperial festivals which were modelled after the Triumph. Hence, St. Paul in writing to the Colossians, ii. 15, uses a similar metaphor: "he made a show of the principalities and the powers, openly triumphing over them in it," which (as Lightfoot and scholars generally recognize) means that the powers of the world were treated as a general treats his conquered foes, stripped¹ of their honours, and paraded in the Triumph as a show to please the citizens and to glorify the conqueror.

The Triumph was in origin a religious ceremonial. The victorious general who celebrated it played for the moment the part of the Roman god Jupiter; he wore the god's dress and insignia, and resigned them again when he reached the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Mount. But it need not be thought strange that St. John and St. Paul should use this pagan ceremonial to express metaphorically the decisive triumph of Christ over all opposing powers in the world, when we have seen that Ignatius describes the life of the true Christian as

¹ The A. V. must at this point be considered truer to the spirit of the passage than the Revised Version.

a long religious procession similar to those which were celebrated in the pagan ritual.

The warm and loving tone in the latter part of the Sardian letter need cause no wonder. There is always something peculiarly admirable and affecting in the contemplation of a pure and high life which maintains unspotted rectitude amid surrounding degradation and vileness. No characters stand out in clearer relief and more striking beauty than the small band of high-minded Romans who preserved their nobility of spirit and life amid the degeneracy and servility of the early Empire. The same distinction marks this remnant of purity amid the decaying and already dead Church of Sardis. Even the thought of it rouses a warm interest in the modern reader's mind, and we understand how it inspires this part of the letter with an unusual warmth of emotion, which contrasts with the coldness that we observed in the Ephesian letter.

Hence also we see how the analogy between these two letters, the Sardian and the Ephesian, ceases towards the end of the letter. The standard of conduct throughout the Ephesian Church had been uniform : the whole Church had acted correctly and admirably in the past ; the whole Church was cooling down and beginning to degenerate. No exception is made ; no remnant is described that had not lost heart and enthusiasm. The changeable nature of Ephesus had affected all alike. And therefore the penalty is pronounced, that the Church shall be moved out of its place. It is a conditional penalty ; but there is no suggestion that any portion of the Church has escaped or may escape it. The Church as a whole must revivify itself, or suffer the penalty ; and Ephesus cannot alter its nature ; changeableness is the law of its being. There is no real hope held out that the penalty may be avoided ; and the promise at the conclusion is couched in the most general terms ; this Church is cooling and degenerating, but to him that overcometh vigour and life shall be given.

On the other hand, the Sardian Church has not been uniform in its conduct, and it shall not all suffer the same fate. The Church as a whole is dead; but a few, who form bright and inspiring exceptions, shall live as citizens of the heavenly city. There is no hint that Sardis shall be spared, or the Church survive it. Its doom is sealed irrevocably; and yet a remnant shall live.

Sardis to-day is a wilderness of ruins and thorns, pastures and wildflowers, where the only habitations are a few huts of Yuruk nomads beside the Temple of Cybele in the low ground by the Pactolus, and at the distance of a mile two modern houses by the railway station. And yet in a sense a remnant has escaped and still survives, which does not indeed excite the same loving tenderness as makes itself felt in the latter part of this letter, yet assuredly merits our sympathy and interest. In the plain of the Hermus, which Sardis once dominated, there are a few scattered villages whose inhabitants, though nominally Mohammedans, are clearly marked off by certain customs from the Turkish population around. Their women (according to the account given us at Sardis) usually bear Christian names, though the men's names are of the ordinary Mohammedan class; they have a kind of priests, who wear black head-dress, not the white turban of the Mohammedan hodjas and imams; the villages hold private assemblies when these "black-heads" (Kara-Bash) pay them visits; they drink wine and violate other Mohammedan rules and prohibitions; and it is believed by some persons who have mixed with them that they would become Christians forthwith, if it did not mean death to do so. At the same time they are not at all like the Takhtaji (described in *Impressions of Turkey*, p. 268, and elsewhere); the latter are apparently a survival of ancient paganism, pre-Christian in origin.

W. M. RAMSAY.