

**DR. JOHANN LEPSIUS ON THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF THE REVELATION.**

A. INTRODUCTION (*continued*).

As Dr. Lepsius remarks (see p. 169), the numbers seven and twelve appear to rule the whole world of symbolism in the Apocalypse. It is not to be supposed that John made the number seven so important in his book merely because there were seven planets. He did not arbitrarily choose out seven from among all the churches of Asia as representatives of the whole body of congregations in order to suit an astronomical law, any more than he made the number twelve rule in his visions simply because there were twelve hours in the day (from sunrise to sunset) and twelve months in the year. The cause of the dominance of these two numbers in the Apocalypse lay in the fact that these numbers were dominant in history, as John saw it. Twelve rules the Revelation because there were twelve tribes in the historic Israel, and hence the true Israel, the Church of God, dispersed among the nations, likewise was imagined by him as containing twelve tribes.<sup>1</sup> Similarly there must have been seven central or representative congregations and cities in the entire Asian Church; and John wrote to those seven, because they were already recognised in the arrangements and the economy of the Province as a Christian unity.<sup>2</sup> How these seven came to be in this prominent position as centres of seven groups, is not recorded in history; but a theory to explain the origin and character of this sevenfold division has been proposed in the present writer's book on *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*; and that theory appears to

<sup>1</sup> Compare the opening verse of the Epistle of James.

<sup>2</sup> The Church followed the political division of the Empire into Provinces from the beginning onwards, as the "South-Galatian" view maintains.

him to be simply a statement and classification of the probable or certain facts of the situation.

What, then, is the relation between this historico-geographical fact of Asian Church organisation and the astronomical importance of the number seven, on which Dr. Lepsius lays so much stress? According to the present writer's view, the fact as observed in the Asian Church seemed to John in his Apocalyptic vision and scheme to be an example of the correspondence between things in heaven and things on earth, between the Divine model or prototype and the earthly fact.<sup>1</sup> This correspondence was carried out by him in detail. The number seven rules largely in Heaven, as it opened itself to the eye of John. He saw there seven planets and seven candlesticks and the seven Spirits before the throne of God: even the Spirit exerts its power in a sevenfold activity corresponding to the sevenfold nature of the Church on earth and the sevenfold planetary movement.

John saw no inconsistency between this sevenfold nature of the Church and the twelvefold division of the same Church as the Diaspora, scattered among the nations, the true Israel in its twelve tribes. His mind passes freely from one to the other. Sometimes the one division rules in the Apocalypse, sometimes the other. Both are true, because both are envisagements of heavenly truth in human history. It is only the pragmatism and narrowly logical Western mind that sees any discrepancy or inconsistency between two different correspondences of earthly facts to celestial prototypes. The Oriental vision of John was conscious of no discrepancy. Both correspondences were equally true.

Nor did John set any store by the fact that the seven

<sup>1</sup> On this correspondence see above, p. 163.

Churches belong only to a system of dividing and organising the Province Asia, while the Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion constitute the entire Church over the whole world (or the whole Roman world). The Oriental mind passes easily and lightly from the one to the other point of view, and finds both equally true and illuminating.

Now since the seven Churches of Asia correspond to the celestial fact of the seven planets, this correspondence has to be carried out in each case. A Church corresponds to each planet; and the history and nature of each Church, the innate power which rules its past and its future, must be expressed in terms suitable to the corresponding celestial fact, viz., the character of the planet which is the celestial counterpart of that individual Church (according to the accepted astrological or astronomical view of the nature and character of the various planets). Yet under this astrological language there lie in each case real facts concerning the earthly cities and Churches.

Since reading Dr. Lepsius's discussion of this subject, the present writer has become far more clearly conscious of the astrological colouring which often lies on the surface of ancient expression. People had in their mind this idea of a correspondence between celestial and terrestrial facts, and it gave tone to their expression of their thoughts and perceptions of truth. Every man had his star and his angel, his better and true self: just as to Statius (writing also, like John, under Domitian) every Emperor had his own special star, and the Flavian heaven was a sort of celestial expression for the Flavian dynasty. It would be, however, a great error if the reader saw only the astrological colouring, and did not perceive under it the real facts of life and history which are expressed in celestial analogies and astronomical or astrological terms.

Especially where an ancient writer is treating the more

mysterious and unknowable relations of human life, such as death, birth, the relation of man to God, the rewards and punishments that await him in another world or another life, the astrological colouring generally becomes stronger, and often gives a sort of mythological and fanciful tone to the attempt to explain those deeper aspects of nature. Plato is the most typical example of a philosopher, who generally moves out of the realm of strict philosophy into that of astrology and mythology, whenever he attempts to envisage to his readers those deeper truths and relations of human life. The tale of Er, son of Armenius, in the last book of the *Republic*, is a typical example in both ways: it is mythological; it is astronomical; and it is confessedly and professedly a device to suggest through an apologue of fanciful character thoughts which touched the deepest things of human and divine nature.

It was Plato's literary instinct that was largely influential in causing this result. To treat those subjects philosophically required a great increase in the number of abstract nouns and technical philosophical terms, and Plato refused to adulterate the Greek language by a wholesale creation of new words. He aimed at expressing the thoughts of philosophy in the existing Greek speech, which was concrete in its outlook and utterance. Philosophy, however, had to create for itself an abstract terminology; and Greek philosophy was engaged in this task during the centuries that followed after the time of Plato.

It was, further, not merely the want of abstract philosophical words that drove Plato to express his thought in a mythological and astronomical form. His point of view was still very concrete; and he had not yet disengaged the elements of thought from their union in the actual facts of the world, or, rather, in the dominant and customary way of regarding the facts of the world. His whole doctrine of

“ Ideas ” is influenced by the customary point of view : there must be some definite thing, existing apart by itself and for itself, corresponding to every noun, even an abstract noun ; and, if you have the abstract noun “ goodness,” you must have an “ Idea of goodness ” somewhere existent in the universe to give a real counterpart and real basis for “ goodness.” Now obviously this “ Idea of goodness ” does not exist by itself and for itself in the material world as seen and felt by human beings. It can, therefore, exist only in the celestial and astronomical world, somewhere in the higher sphere of being which may be called by the name “ heavenly ” ; and this divine and imperishable and absolutely real “ Idea of goodness ” gives basis and a certain reality to the “ goodness ” which is found in the life of the lower world only mixed up as a quality of the things belonging to this lower and less true world.

Thus Plato’s way of expressing his philosophy is to a certain degree moulded by the traditional custom, to which he was heir, of expressing thoughts about the things of earth on the model of the things of heaven, which are assumed to be their prototypes. That was the point of view involved in early religion ; and from this point of view astrology degenerated into an art of money-getting and imposture.

Greek philosophy released itself to a great extent from the influence of that traditional custom in the interval between Plato and Paul. The Hebrews, however, remained under its influence during that period, and Apocalypse was a favourite Hebrew form of composition. Paul has once composed an Apocalypse, viz., in parts of Thess., showing that he was acquainted with the Hebrew Apocalyptic literature ; but his whole writing and point of view show how little he was permanently influenced by it, and how much he stood above it and apart from it. The concluding Part VII. of

the present writer's *Cities of Saint Paul* was intended to express this principle at greater length and more clearly, viz., that Paul has written Apocalyptically, but that his regular manner is philosophic, not Apocalyptic.

Dr. Lepsius has prefixed to his articles (which have not yet been completed) a translation of the parts of the Revelation treated by him. He regards the passage x. 1–xi. 13 as an intrusion, separating the seventh from the first six trumpets, and even actually breaking up the sixth trumpet, to which xi. 14 belongs. The seventh trumpet he considers to begin with xi. 15.

He also regards chapter vii. as an intrusion; and he will in the sequel essay to prove that it belongs to the trumpets, and has been misplaced in the transmission of the text.

He also considers that the texts of the sixth and the seventh seals have been interchanged.

To the allusion made by Dr. Lepsius below to the cosmological character of the Sufitic Dervish ritual, I should like to add that even among the Mevlevi Dervishes, who are of the Sunni Moslems (though they are not strictly orthodox Sunni), their ritual dance seemed to us to represent the movements of the planets in the heavens, "still choiring to the young-eyed cherubims." It was at Afion-Kara-Hissar in 1884 that we had the opportunity of seeing this dance in its full splendour and with the full musical accompaniment. Even at Konia, the chief seat of this sect, the presentations of the dance-ceremony that we have seen fell far short in ceremonial dignity. The dance was performed at Kara-Hissar in its most complete form as a special compliment to my wife by order of the Sheikhs (the ruling family of the Order); and the thought occurred to us after the conclusion that the ritual, which represented an ordered motion round a central point, was planetary. See the full description given of this dance (the only description I have ever seen

that gives the really important facts about this rite) in Lady Ramsay's *Everyday Life in Turkey*, pp. 271-6. As we saw it, four dancers revolved in the middle and ten circled around the four; each of the fourteen had a double motion, revolving round his own axis and round the central point of the entire dance. All the performers wore richly coloured garments, each in one hue, green, blue, saffron, crimson, olive, violet.

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#### E. THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES.

##### IV. *Thyatira*.

THE Star of the Church of Thyatira is, as is clearly shown in ii. 28 ("I will give him the morning star"), the planet Venus, in Aramaic Noga, the shining one. According to the order of the planets we might expect to find here the planet of the fourth heaven, the Sun. When we come to the angels of the seven trumpets and the seven plagues we find the Sun correctly in the fourth place (viii. 12 and xvi. 8). But here, as we already remarked, the Sun (as the angel of the congregation of Laodicea) is placed last in order, because the geographical situation of the congregations partly determined the course of the circular letter. Venus or the morning star, whose angel, Anael, is also the angel of the sixth day (Friday, Vendredi), is the planet of the third heaven.

The planet Venus was regarded by all the ancient peoples as the star of love, and was usually represented as a goddess (Istar, Atergatis, Astarte, Aphrodite). Dante indeed finds fault with the dangerous opinion of the ancient world,

"That the fair Cypris radiated amorous madness  
beneath her, as she revolved in the third epicycle"  
(*Paradiso*, canto, 8, 2 f.);