

*DR. JOHANNES LEPSIUS ON THE SYMBOLIC
LANGUAGE OF THE REVELATION.¹*

A. INTRODUCTION.

THE request has been made to me that I should explain more clearly what is meant by the words used in the first part of this Introduction (EXPOSITOR, February, 1911, p. 163): "In those lands [i.e. the east Mediterranean countries] there was current an opinion that there is in heaven a world corresponding to and typical of the world of earth. Everything that is done rightly on earth has its prototype and justification in the heavenly world. Every congregation on earth has its heavenly counterpart: the churches have their stars and their candlesticks in heaven." This view underlies my study of parts of the Revelation, published as *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, and is there illustrated from various standpoints, but not on the astronomical or astrological side. I therefore add some comment on that aspect of the question.

This request leads straight into the difficult subject of the difference between the simpler old Oriental thought and the modern highly complex Western thought. The old Oriental thought stands far closer to the primitive and natural ways of contemplating the world and its phenomena; and it is not easy to put away from us the acquired habits to which we have become so inured that they seem to us natural and necessary and universal. Yet the entire New Testament is composed on a different plane of thought

¹ The translator of Dr. Lepsius's articles regrets that, owing to difficulty in deciphering her handwriting and the fact that residence abroad made it impossible for her to see a proof, the name Confucius was printed instead of Copernicus on p. 187. Further, in the title and concluding signature, Johann appeared instead of Johannes in the first two parts, a mistake for which she was not responsible.

and outlook from that on which we stand ; and the more one succeeds in habituating oneself to the old Oriental way of contemplating the world, the more deeply does one feel that a good deal of modern critical study moves on a different plane, and is too hard and definite (both the conservative and the " advanced " schools in varying degrees fall under this description), whereas ancient thought was more fluid and undefined.

Take the very simplest and humblest of cases, one which is so trite that an apology must be made for using it, because those who have not fully realised what it implies almost seem to be slightly annoyed when it is mentioned, as if the allusion to it implied something of an insult to their intelligence. The ancients carried no watches and had no clocks—I mean in our sense of the term—and only a few scientific observers ever thought of an hour as a fixed and invariable measure of time. To the ancients an hour was one-twelfth of the period between sunrise and sunset, and this hour is always different in absolute length to-day, both from what it was yesterday and from what it will be to-morrow. Hence it would have been valueless in ancient times to measure duration by counting and stating the number of hours during which any phenomenon or event lasted ; in midwinter four *horae* made about three hours of our time, while at midsummer they made five. This is so elementary that some grow impatient when it is stated ; but it has to be stated because very few modern scholars seem to realise that our modern habits of accuracy in regard to time affect strongly our expression and thought, and that ancient custom was markedly different. How many of our scholars have ever read a Greek or Roman author for the purpose of noting how far this elementary fact influenced his language and his way of thinking ? Very few, I think. Yet I often find, in explaining a Latin author to a class in college, that I have

to show how the expression arises from the writer's looseness in regard to time, and would be differently put by a modern writer. His outlook is not ours, and is readily criticised by us from a wrong point of view, and not easily understood rightly by the modern critic.

This looseness in respect of the lapse of time shows itself in many ways among the ancient writers. Not merely were the hours an impossible way of estimating time, for they were useful only as points, but not as measures of duration. Even the months and years were also of comparatively small value, until they were fixed by the Julian system in 46 B.C. Hence chronology was awkward and difficult, and methods of chronological indication and counting were rudimentary and liable to much miscalculation. It was a really hard thing for an historian to express a period or a date in such a way as to convey the same meaning to his readers ; and it is no wonder that the dates of ancient history are so uncertain and cause so much discussion and such diversity of opinion, for they were as obscure in ancient times as they are now. That cumbrous reckoning by the names of annual magistrates, which conveys so little information to those who do not possess a list of magistrates, has its value, when other methods are so uncertain. The reckoning by counting the years of a king or emperor is exposed to numerous uncertainties, and is often quite vague, unless the reader is informed which out of many possible ways of counting was followed by the writer. The cure for all these evils lay in more careful study of the book of the sky, and better understanding of its signs. Scientific method of study grew up gradually, but astrological and unscientific methods grew much more rapidly at an early date.

As Dr. Lepsius says in the opening of his Section H, below :
 " The chronological systems of the ancient world rest on an astrological foundation." Even the ordinary measures of

time and of the lapse of time, every attempt made by the common man to estimate the movement of time during day or night or in the recurrence of the seasons, were founded on personal observation of the sky according to a system of interpretation ; and this whole system is summed up in the term astrology.

Astrology in this wide sense was developed out of the early attempts to attain some method of giving precision in respect of time. As all the simpler and more obvious methods of reckoning time proved useless or misleading, it was necessary to study the heavens more minutely. Thus there was gradually discovered a trustworthy method of reckoning.

The progress of time was estimated during the night by the aspect of the stars, and during the day of course by the position of the sun. The latter custom is so obvious and universal that it needs no illustration, and we have only to add that it would not increase appreciably the knowledge of astronomy among the people who practised it except indirectly in a fashion that will be alluded to. It was founded on a rough eye-estimate of the distance of the sun from mid-heaven or from the horizon, and in practice it produced little more than a division of the day into two main parts, or halves, viz. the part before the moment when the sun was in mid-heaven, i.e. before noon, and the part after that moment. There came into existence also a rudimentary subdivision of each into two parts, the earlier part of the forenoon and the later part of the afternoon, these being marked out by the nearness of the sun to the eastern and western horizon respectively. With the use of the sun-dial came the numbering of the hours from one to twelve ; but these points of time changed every day, except the sixth hour, which was always noon. So far, this all results naturally from the circumstances, and is a commonplace in discussions.

Much more difficult was the estimation of the hour of night. The moon is more varied in its apparent motion, and is often not visible for a season ; and the stars had to be observed and studied for this purpose. An example may be taken from Roman literature.

In the opening of the "Iphigenia" of Ennius, when Agamemnon asks his old servant what aspect of the night is seen in the sky, i.e. what o'clock it is,

*quid noctis videtur in altisono
caeli clipeo ?*

the latter answers in the simple style of the peasant, familiar with the look of the sky, and accustomed to deduce therefrom a rough estimate of the lapse of time,

*superat temo
stellas cogens iterum atque iterum
noctis sublime iter.¹*

From the position of the Wain at its height, as it forces the stars in their nightly course through the heavens, he inferred that it was about the dead of night. So unfamiliar are we in modern times with this method of reckoning, that most students have to ponder over the passage for some time and perhaps to consult some astronomical authority, before they gather the meaning of those words, which to the ancients were the natural expression of the ordinary man. The purpose of the tragedian was not (as it might be in a modern poet) to adorn his page with a pretty but rather recondite picture of the nightly sky and motion of the stars ; he wished simply to present a homely picture of a rough uneducated peasant, guessing the hour of night in his usual way.

¹ I follow the simple (but perhaps not correct) reconstruction of the text given by Dr. Merry. For our present purpose it makes no difference which of several proposed forms of texts is right : in all the one important fact appears that the time of night is estimated from the motion of the Great Bear.

The latter part of the night and the approach of daylight was estimated from the Morning Star, during its periodic appearance. Examples of this custom are quoted from common modern Oriental usage by Col. Mackinlay in his book *The Magi : how they recognised Christ's Star* (p. 22 f.); and he has gone on to show that many things in the Bible, which we have been accustomed to read as if they were artificial and ornamental, were the expression of direct observation of nature in the sky or on the earth.¹

Even more important and characteristic than this custom of estimating the time of night by the movement of the stars, was the habit of recognising the progress of the seasons and the period of the year by the rising and setting of the stars. So long as lunar months were used by the people as the measure of time, the process of the months gave no useful indication of the process of the seasons. Either the months moved about the solar year (as still in the Moham-medan year at the present day, so that the month of Rama-zan is sometimes in midwinter and sometimes in summer or autumn or spring), or, when an extra lunar month was intercalated at intervals, in order to preserve the corre-spondence between solar and lunar years, the correspondence was so rough and imperfect that the months give only a poor and vague indication of the seasons of the year. Even in the early stages of reckoning by solar years, when inter-calation was performed in a rude fashion, the monthly indication was of small value. When Caesar introduced the Julian system in 46 B.C., the months had got about eighty days out of place in the solar year, so that Janu-ary was in December.

The rules of agriculture in early times could, therefore, not possibly be expressed according to the months. It was

¹ Some other illustrations are given in the present writer's *Education of Christ* (p. 73 ff.), and in *Luke the Physician and other Studies* (p. 220 ff.).

useless to prescribe that the farmer should be on the outlook for the right moment to begin reaping about the beginning or the middle of such and such a month, when that month in a well regulated calendar might vary by fifteen to thirty days in its relation to a true solar year, and in a badly regulated calendar might shift round the whole year. But the heliacal risings of the stars furnished a sure means of estimating the seasons in the early stages of the world's history; and the old rules of agriculture are measured by the heavenly calendar. As Hesiod says, "When the Pleiades, daughters of Atlas, are at their rising, begin the reaping, and the ploughing when they are about to set." So with the other rules.

Accordingly, since the natural month, viz. that indicated by the phases of the moon, the time that elapses from one new moon to the next, is valueless as a measure to show the recurrence of the seasons, more careful observation of the sky and the motions of the stars was necessary. The attention of men was directed strongly to this study, which took a hold on their minds and occupied a large share of their thoughts. It was so important a study that its importance was exaggerated; and the belief readily grew up that not merely the conduct of agriculture, etc., but also the whole life of man, could be read in the heavens, if the stellar motions were fully understood.

Now agriculture was, in primitive times, closely associated with religion. The goddess had taught her people the ways of agriculture and its seasons, just as she also had taught them the methods and times of managing domestic animals, and of horticulture, and of apiculture,¹ etc. The signs for each operation were set in the heavens for all to read who had been properly instructed. The divine power

¹ On the connexion of apiculture with religion, see the article on Greek and Anatolian Religion in *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible*, v. p. 116 ff. 1

was always calculating; and registering for man the laws and seasons of nature in the motions of the celestial bodies. All things that were most important in life, and even many unimportant actions, had their due season ; and the heavens measured and indicated the proper time for each. There was a celestial life, which formed the counterpart and the guarantee of the terrestrial life. Man should look to the heavens for guidance ; and the guidance comes through astrological interpretation of the signs.

Such is the basis of astrology ; and it is evidently a sound and true basis for all men and for every religion. On this basis, however, a vast superstructure was erected, largely through false and fanciful analogies, and even by perversions. But there is a real, natural and trustworthy foundation.

The Etruscan and Roman and Greek sciences of augury were among the perversions of this fundamentally true idea that the heavens give to men the signs of the times and seasons. The augural science elaborated the doctrine that because (what is perfectly right and true) the Divine power is always striving to guide men, to reveal itself to men and to warn them against wrongdoing, therefore everything that a man sees occurring in the sky, such as the flight of birds, or the atmospheric phenomena, are signs of the will of God and warnings of his coming fate or fortune. If, for example, he is starting on a journey, and a bird flies across his path in one direction, he will be successful in his enterprise ; but if the bird flies in the opposite direction, he will be unlucky and ought to abandon his voyage.¹ This augural discipline was elaborated to an extraordinary degree of artificiality, until it became almost farcical ; and so was the astrological discipline.

There was nothing repellent to the ancient mind in the

¹ The signs which a magistrate sees in his official capacity show the destiny of the State, the signs which are granted to a general in supreme command affect the fortunes of his army, and so on.

astrological teaching. On the contrary, a moderate astrological teaching was necessary for right life ; and there was therefore a presumption and prejudice in favour of certain developments of it, which we now regard as foolish and meaningless ; and it required an effort of the thinking mind to reject or even to doubt the more elaborate and artificial developments, which trenched more and more on the realm of the forbidden arts of reading the future. Some part of astrology was wise and right, some part was artificial and over-elaborate without being wrong ; and it was possible to expatiate widely in this realm of celestial symbolism, without ever touching on anything that could shock the most sensitive religious mind in ancient time.

There is another aspect of this subject which should not be wholly omitted, although it touches a topic so wide and far-reaching as to far transcend the limits of this Introduction and the competence of the present writer. It was in their attitude towards the starry firmament, " the thousand thousand myriads of myriads of angels, the starry army of the celestial hosts,"¹ that the ancients approached most closely to thinking about the Infinite. Not only is that the natural path of approach to this conception in the early stages of human thought, but also the Greeks in particular hated and shrank from the very idea of Infinity. To them the Finite seemed to be the right subject for man to think about. The Finite was subject to measure and bounds, and was characterised by that order and symmetry which the Greek mind craved for, whereas it regarded all that transcended the conditions and limitations of human thought as repellent and rebellious. The Infinite, τὸ ἀπειρον, was evil and bad, the Finite, τὸ πεπερασμένον, was good and true and wise.

¹ Quoted from Dr. Lepsius' expression of the meaning that lies in Revelation v. 11 (see *EXPOSITOR*, March, p. 225).

We, on the contrary, now attempt to lead on the mind to the Infinite as the goal and the proper subject of contemplation. The Infinite is the true and the really existent, because God is infinite. The human mind is imperfect and therefore incomplete and evil, just because it is bounded and hedged in and conditioned by limitations. There is no direction in which the contrast between the Greek and the modern thought is more absolute than in this.

The contrast is brought before the eye with special impressiveness in the ancient temple as contrasted with the Gothic cathedral. The former, especially the Greek, is the perfection of order and ornate beauty, a blaze of colour¹ and artistic work; but it lies low, near the level of the eye in comparison with its lateral extent, close to the standard of human life. There is little or nothing in it or its adornment to carry the mind away from the plane of earth. The Gothic cathedral appeals to a totally different kind of emotion, the mind cannot but be directed away from the things of ordinary life as one stands in a cathedral and looks around and finds that the gaze is drawn upwards, whether one will or no. The religious effect of the cathedral is immeasurably stronger than that of the temple.

In comparing the two, however, one would make a vast error, if one forgot that the ancient temple did not, and was not intended to, fulfil all the purposes which are aimed at in the modern cathedral. The temple was supplemented by the vault of heaven. A very large part of ancient life and of ancient religion was calculated for the open air. The temple was not much more than a storehouse for the Divine things. Many of the greatest religious ceremonies took place under the dome of the sky. Men were watched by

¹ In looking at the ruins of a Greek temple in their monotone, with all the colour gone, one might forget that originally the building was a blaze of colour, both in the sculptural and in the architectural parts.

the great eye of heaven, the Sun, through the whole day, and they were always on the outlook for the signs of the Divine will in the sky, whether by day or by night. The motions of the stars declared the intentions and revealed the nature of God. The temple and the firmament conspired to fulfil the purposes of the modern cathedral ; and who will maintain that the conjunction may not prove more effective in a religious point of view than the greatest of cathedrals ? Has not religion lost something of its power over the mind, since it regarded the building alone as the house of God ?—for that is practically very much the opinion of the modern ordinary religious man, even though he may in theory and word on some occasions express a different opinion.

The sky and the stars thus played a far greater part in ancient than in modern religious life ; and the part that it played may be summed up in the term astrology with its good side and its bad, its basis of truth and usefulness and its accretion of artificiality and of evil.

When the prophet in the Old Testament spoke of God coming to Egypt riding on a cloud, his expression was partly, but not wholly metaphorical. He did, after all, recognise that the cloud was the messenger and vehicle of Divine power, an angel of the Lord (Isaiah xix. 1). All the heavenly bodies and all the phenomena of the sky were the servants and messengers of God.

When Homer in the *Odyssey*, Book VII., makes his hero walk invisible through the city of the Phaeacians and into the palace of the king, his expression approaches more closely to figurative language. He did not think of a cloud moving through the city as Ulysses walked towards the palace, for that would only have attracted popular attention. His words are an attempt to compensate for the poverty of existing language and the indefiniteness of thought : he wished to

say that Ulysses was made invisible by the power of the goddess ; and he naturally used an analogy drawn from the obscuration of the sky and the stars by a cloud. The cloud that prevents the shepherd from seeing the stars which act ordinarily as his guides, is interposed by Divine power ; and the goddess by the same device prevents the crowd from seeing Ulysses.

It is a long step, indeed, from this simple stage of astrological thought to the complex imagery of the Revelation ; but the distance is not untraversable. The calculation of years was, as a fact, elaborated by the ancients into a complex system so as to make the days and months fit the recurring motions of the celestial bodies. Any ancient system of intercalation seems complex to us only because it is unfamiliar ; but it is not more complex than the Gregorian system, and distinctly less complex than the calculation of the incidence of Easter. In the latter case we see religious feeling clinging to an antiquated and ineffective system of fixing an old festival to a certain season of the year, a system which was not practised by the earliest Christians and might not have been accepted by them.

Given the religious feeling that the sky was peopled by myriads of myriads of angels the astrological complexity of ancient thought naturally and inevitably grew up ; and, being familiar to the ancients, it seemed to them no more complex than the familiar Gregorian system and other devices seem to us.

The question, however, must obtrude itself on every mind, how far this elaborately planned and highly complicated structure of the Revelation, as it is set before us by Dr. Lepsius,¹ is in harmony with the situation of the seer as a prisoner in the island of Patmos, a prisoner suffering chains and hard labour and cut off almost wholly from human

¹ See the Sections *H* and *I* following.

intercourse. The situation as a prisoner is vouched for in the book itself : the terrible conditions of the imprisonment are proved by the conditions of the case.¹ The difficulties, however, to a large extent disappear when we take into consideration two facts.

In the first place, the mind of the seer was saturated with the Jewish literature of the Apocalyptic type. It is well known that there were many Apocalypses already in existence. It was the most favourite and common form of Jewish literary composition in the later period before Christ. If such a form was frequently adopted by writers, it must have found many readers. The literature of a nation comes into existence to satisfy national needs and desires ; it is in a sense the creation of the readers as truly as it is the work of the writers.

That the Revelation took its shape in the mind of a writer whose mind was powerfully and deeply influenced by the Jewish literature of this class is, of course, evident and admitted. So patent is this fact, that several modern critics have maintained that the Seer of the Revelation took one or more older Jewish Apocalypses and put them bodily into his "vision," merely adding Christian parts or inserting here and there brief Christian touches : such a work then would cease to be a real vision, and would become a purely artificial composition, constructed largely with scissors and paste.² So strong indeed is the Jewish element in the Revelation that we must admit one of two alternatives. The first alternative is that some theory of that kind is true. The second alternative is that John was familiar with Jewish literature of the Apocalyptic class,

¹ As stated in *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 83.

² Vischer took the first bold and well-thought out steps in this direction, and he has been followed by others with various theoretical reconstructions of a similar general type.

his mind was saturated with it and the visions of his mind naturally moulded themselves into similar forms to those Apocalypses; therefore, what he saw as the truth of the universe—the message which was given him to convey to his Asian congregations—took its outward form and arrangement from his cast of thought and mind; and his thought was the product of his education (which was partly Jewish and partly Christian).

That the second of these alternatives is true, and that the theories which move in the line of the first alternative have been taking a false direction has long appeared to me the necessary conclusion. Those theories rest on evident facts, but they view the facts (as I think) in a wrong light and in distorted perspective. Already in 1892 in the Mansfield College Lectures (which were published in 1893 as *The Church in the Roman Empire before A.D. 180*) I said on p. 298: "John was greatly influenced by older Jewish works of this character" (i.e. Apocalypses): there is only a question "in regard to the manner in which John used those previously existing Apocalypses. The Revelation, as we have it, is not a revised edition of a Jewish document. It is the work of a Christian writer who was familiar with Jewish Apocalypses, and adapted to his own purposes much that was contained in some one or more of them; but this writer treated the material with a mastery and freedom that made his work in its entirety a Christian document, however strong are the traces of the older form in parts of it." Heaven-high superiority is consistent with likeness.

No reason to alter this opinion has presented itself to me in the intervening eighteen years; but I should like to acknowledge how much I had learned from the theories of that type which I could not on the whole accept. Especially Vischer's short treatise, the first of the kind which I had seen on this subject, was the first book that turned me to-

wards serious thought about the Revelation, and serious attempt to understand its plan ; and though success seems as far off as ever in regard to considerable parts of the book, yet parts are clear, and the general character as a statement of principles, not as a foretelling of facts, is certain.

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(To be continued.)

LEXICAL NOTES FROM THE POPYRI.*

XXII.

προτίθημι.—*Syll.* 325¹⁵ (i/B.C.), an inser. whose contacts with New Testament language have been noticed before, has *τισιν δὲ τῶν πολειτῶν ε[ίς] λύτρα προτιθείς* (sc. *χρήματα*), *ἔδειξεν ἑαυτὸν πρὸς πᾶσαν ἀπάντησιν τῶν σωζομένων εὐομείλητον*, “ offering money for the ransom of other citizens, he showed himself gracious at every welcoming of those who from time to time safely returned.” BU 372 ii¹⁸ (154 A.D. —cf. FP 24⁸ and note), *ἔστω π[ρο]θεσμία † [αὐτοῖς], ἐξ οὗ ἂν τοῦτό μου τὸ διάταγμα ἐν ἐκάστῳ νομῶ προτεθῆῃ, μῆνες ‡—* “ let their limit of time be three months from the date of *publication* of my edict in each several nome.” What help will either of these passages give us for Romans iii. 25 ? Deissmann’s brilliant pages (*BS* 124–135) have finally settled the meaning of *πλαστήριον* there. He does not discuss *προέθετο*, but translates it “ publicly set forth,” without illustrating it. It will be risky perhaps, but the temptations of the inscription are rather strongly seducing us to another rendering. The hero in this passage is really an apt parable : he spent his wealth freely on the “ ran-

* For abbreviations see the February and March (1908) *EXPOSITOR*, pp. 170, 202.

† The word of Galatians iv. 2, an old law term, very common in papyri.

‡ Why does Krebs put “(sic)” here ?