

Theology on *the Web.org.uk*

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes.
Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit
or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the
copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the
ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the
links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbadshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*THE EPISTLES TO
THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.*

IV.—**THYATIRA.** (*Revelation ii. 18-29.*)

LITTLE as we know of the general history of this Church in the apostolic age, it has at least one point of contact with the record of the life and labours of St. Paul. The purple-seller of the city of Thyatira, who went with other women to the place where prayer was wont to be made, to the oratory by the river-side at Philippi, and “whose heart the Lord opened that she attended unto the things that were spoken of Paul” (Acts xvi. 14), is among the most familiar figures in St. Luke’s history of the mission-work of the Church. The facts that connect themselves with that mention of her name are also so generally known, that it will not be necessary to do more than briefly refer to them.

(1) Thyatira, situated geographically, as it stands in the order of the Messages, between Pergamos and Sardis, owed, if not its origin, yet its importance, to the fact of its being one of the Macedonian colonies founded by Alexander the Great after his conquest of the Persian Empire. As such, it was natural that it should, even after the lapse of three centuries, have many links that connected it with the mother country, and of this the presence of Lydia at Philippi may fairly be taken as an instance. (2) Inscriptions, the date of which is referred to the period between Vespasian and Caracalla, shew that the city contained many corporate guilds, which were united together by common

pursuits and religious rites, and that of these the guild of dyers was one of the most prominent. That art was indeed common to many of the Asiatic cities, and the commercial fame of Miletus in particular mainly rested on it; but of all these, Thyatira was the only one that had any connection with Macedonia. When we meet with Lydia at Philippi, she is already "one that worshipped God," a half-proselyte, *i.e.*, to Judaism; and we may reasonably infer from this the presence of a Jewish element, more or less influential, among the population of the city from which she came. The inhabitants seem indeed to have presented, from the names that appear on their monuments, a greater mingling of races than was commonly to be found, and included Macedonians, Italians, Asiatics, and Chaldæans. The chief object of their cultus was Apollo, worshipped as the Sun-God, under the Macedonian name of Tyrinnas.

It has been suggested by Dean Blakesley here, as before in the case of Smyrna, that the special words by which the Lord of the Churches describes Himself were determined by the character of the worship just referred to. He assumes that there was a statue of Apollo, of gold and ivory, or of wood or marble richly gilt; that this shone with a dazzling brightness, and that the "eyes like a flame of fire and the feet like fine brass" were meant to present the image of the Lord of the Churches as yet more glorious and terrible. Ingenious as the conjecture is, it has, I believe, nothing but its ingenuity to commend it. The imagery had been already used without reference to any local

colouring, and a reason for this special application of it may be found in the aspects of stern sovereignty which marks the whole Message. The feet of *chalcolibanus* shall crush the enemies of God as though they were the vessels of a potter.

The special notes of praise assigned to the Church of Thyatira correspond in a very marked degree with those which we find prominent also in that of the Philippians. Loving ministrations, patient endurance, warm-hearted faith, the more feminine graces of the perfect Christian character are dominant in both. It has been held by not a few writers (notably by Canon Lightfoot) that this characteristic of the Philippian converts was, in part, owing to the continued influence of the first European proselyte in that Church. If we remember that she came from Thyatira, and not improbably returned to it after a season, it is at least interesting to trace there also the same type of character as having been developed possibly under the same influence. And there were no signs of any falling off in this respect. The "last works" were "more than the first." What was wanted was that these graces should be balanced by others of a more masculine type, by righteous zeal against evil, by the exercise, when necessary, of the power to judge and to condemn. Here also the prayer of one who knew what the Church needed would have been that their "love might abound more and more in knowledge and in all judgment" (Phil. i. 9).

We cannot enter on the words which follow without noticing the strange reading, not "that woman," but "thy wife, Jezebel" (*τὴν γυναικα σον*), which would

force upon us the conclusion that the work of the Angel, or Bishop, of the Church of Thyatira was thwarted by one who ought to have been his helpmate in it; that she had become tainted with the teaching of the followers of Balaam, and claimed as a prophetess an authority that over-ruled her husband's. I cannot set aside that reading on account of the strangeness of the picture thus presented to us, for truth is often stranger than fiction.¹ And on the principle, which has become almost an axiom in textual criticism, that the more difficult reading is probably the true one, this, commended as it is by some of the highest MSS., may well claim admission into the text. We can understand the deliberate suppression of a fact so startling. It is hard to understand the deliberate insertion of a word that would create so great a difficulty. On the other hand, it must be remembered that there is hardly any limit to be set to the blunders, pure and simple, of transcribers, and that the pronoun which creates

¹ If we receive this rendering we find (as Dr. Wordsworth has pointed out) a singular parallel in the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippian Church (c. xi.). There also the influence of women, at first, as we have seen, an element for good, had become the source of evil; and the wife of a presbyter named Valens is mentioned as having encouraged him in his transgressions. Strangely enough, too, the transgression is like in kind to that with which the Message to Thyatira deals. We have indeed only the Latin text of this part of the Epistle, and there we read: "Moneo itaque vos, ut abstineatis ab avaritiâ et sitis casti, et veraces. . . . Si quis non abstinuerit ab avaritia, ab idololatria coinquinabitur." The "avaritia" of the Latin corresponds, however, in all probability, to the Greek *πλεονεξία*, and that word, as in 1 Thess. iv. 5, and probably in 1 Cor. v. 10, was used in a secondary sense, as implying the lawless lust which was regardless of the rights of others. The union of the "avaritia" with "idololatria" almost forces this meaning upon us, and so presents the two as being in as close an alliance at Philippi as at Thyatira.

the perplexity is wanting in at least one (the Sinaitic MS.) of the first-class authorities.

On the whole, then, it seems best to deal with the passage, in any case sufficiently startling, without the additional element of strangeness which this reading gives it. On the other hand, I cannot accept the view taken by Alford and others, that "the woman Jezebel" represents, not a person, but a sect. Everything in the description has, if I mistake not, a distinctly individualizing character, and as such it throws light on some interesting social questions connected with the history of the Apostolic Church.

It lay in the nature of the Pentecostal gift that the powers which it conferred were not confined to one sex any more than to one class or race. Daughters as well as sons were to prophesy; the Spirit was to be poured on the "handmaids" as well as the "servants" of the Lord. (Acts ii. 17-18.) In Palestine, doubtless, the exercise of these gifts would be restricted by what had become, in spite of the older recollections of Deborah and Huldah, the traditional position of women in the religious life. It was not likely that a woman would be bold enough to speak in a synagogue where all of her own sex were screened off from seeing or being seen. In Greek-speaking countries, on the other hand, familiar with the thought of Sibyls and Pythian priestesses and damsels like that at Philippi with a spirit of divination, the true gift would more readily find a sphere of action, and would be more exposed, on the one hand, to the excitement and ecstasy which were among the incidents of its working; and, on the

other, to the rivalry of a counterfeit inspiration, morbid in its nature, presenting phenomena of startling extravagance and easily enlisted in support of the wild imaginations which were the germs of heresy. Traces of that extravagance we meet with in the Church of Corinth. Women had appeared in the public gatherings of the Church, and had "prophesied" with their faces unveiled, casting aside that which, both in the Jewish and Greek code of social ethics, was the symbol of womanly reserve. (1 Cor. xi. 5-10.) At first, it would seem, St. Paul had been content to reprove any manifestation of the prophetic power that was accompanied by so flagrant a disregard of the principles which, then as always, were the foundation of the rules of conventional decorum. But second thoughts (I do not think it irreverent to attribute second thoughts even to an Apostle) led him to the conclusion that the risks of abuse were so great that it was better to restrain the practice which was so liable to them; and accordingly, both in a later Chapter of the same Epistle (1 Cor. xiv. 34, 35) and in the injunctions which he left as his last bequest to the Asiatic Churches (1 Tim. ii. 11, 12), he laid down the rule that women were to be "silent" in all assemblies of the Church at which men were present, and to confine the exercise of their gifts to the work of teaching their own sex. We know too little of the conditions under which the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist prophesied at Cæsarea (Acts xxi. 8) to be able to say whether this was an exception to St. Paul's rule. It is probable enough that it was only in the privacy of their own home, or surrounded

by female disciples, that they gave utterance to the words which came from their lips, instinct with a divine power; it is possible that their character as "virgins" (*i.e.*, not merely unmarried women, but consecrated to a ministerial life) gained for them exceptional privileges; it is possible, lastly, that the Apostolic Churches were not bound by any uniform code of rules and rubrics, and that that of Cæsarea had not as yet adopted the regulation which was binding on the Churches founded by St. Paul.

What we have to deal with, in any case, in the Church of Thyatira is the assumption, on the part of some conspicuous woman, of the character of a prophetess, supported by the phenomena that simulated inspiration, and that her utterances were used to support the twofold errors of the Nicolaitanes and the followers of Balaam, "to teach and to seduce" the servants of Christ "to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols." The name Jezebel, the representative of the Zidonian worship which had tainted the life of Israel with its impurities, was used, as that of Balaam had been, to point the sharpness of the rebuke, possibly with a special reference to the memorable scene when she, with unveiled face, and the brightness of her eyes heightened with the *kohl* of Eastern cosmetics, looked out of her palace window to try for the last time her powers of fascination, or, if those failed, of defiance, on the advancing conqueror and avenger (2 Kings ix. 30). It would hardly be at variance with what we know of the workings of the unrestrained orgiastic impulse at other times and in other countries (as, *e.g.*, in the Bacchanalia, of which Livy (xxxix 8-19) gives so

terrible a description) to assume that the words of verse 22 were literally true; and that here too the Agapæ, or love-feasts of the Christian Church, were stained, as the hints in 2 Peter ii. 13, 14, and Jude, verse 12, not obscurely intimate, with the perpetration of fathomless impurities in which this so-called prophetess was herself a sharer.

The words of threatening that follow on the statement of the guilt were not less distinctly personal in their character. As the incestuous adulterer at Corinth was delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor. v. 5); as those who polluted the supper of the Lord with riotous excess received not only the just reward, but the natural fruit of their sin, in sickness and in death (1 Cor. xi. 30), so it was here. The penal discipline of sickness was needed to wake up the self-blinded prophetess to perceive the real character of the evil into which she had plunged; and she was to be "cast into the bed" of pain and weariness; and those that were sharers in her guilt into "great tribulation," while "her children" were to be "slain with death." The received explanation of the last clause is that the "children" of the false prophetess were her followers and supporters; and for those who maintain the impersonal character of the woman Jezebel, as representing a wild heretical sect, such an interpretation is, of course, at once natural and inevitable. It is hard, however, to distinguish, on this hypothesis, between the "children" and "those that commit fornication with her," in their different degrees of complicity; and, on the whole, I see no reason for abandoning

the literal meaning even here. The writers of the New Testament recognized, as we have seen, in the events of life a Divine order, sometimes a Divine interposition; and as the death of the child of sin had been the appropriate penalty of David's great transgression (2 Sam. xii. 14), so it might be here. The loss of "the desire of her eyes," the death of the children who were the issue of her shameless life, was to be the sharpest pang in the penal discipline that was to come on her; and, stript and bare of all that once made the joy of life, weary and sick, without the smiles of children round her, the false prophetess was to await her end. So should all the Churches know that the Lord was "he which searcheth the hearts and reins," discerning all the baseness and impurity which were clothed with the high-sounding swelling words of knowledge, wisdom, freedom; that, though the long-suffering of God may in many cases reserve the execution of his sentence till the term of probation is over, there are yet others in which the sins of men bring on themselves a swift destruction, and that they which sow to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.

Another characteristic feature of the false teaching of these early Gnostics appears in the words that follow. They boasted that they alone had the courage and the power to know the "depths" of Satan. The peculiar addition, "as they say," indicates that the phrase was one in frequent use among them, and it throws light on the relation in which they stood to the great teachers of the Apostolic Church. Here, as in the matter of eating things sacrificed to idols, they were caricaturing and pervert-

ing the language of St. Paul. From him, after he had tracked the mysterious working of the Divine love in permitting evil for the sake of a greater good, had burst the rapturous cry, "Oh, the *depth* of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Rom. xi. 33). He, in contemplating the glory which eye had not seen, nor ear heard, but which God had revealed by his Spirit, had spoken of that Spirit thus working in man as one that "searcheth all things, even the *deep* things of God" (1 Cor. ii. 10). It was, in the nature of things, probable that those who claimed a prophetic inspiration shewing itself in a higher form of knowledge than that which was given to others, should take up a phrase so congenial to their boastful claims, and talk much of their acquaintance with the "depths of God." If their boasts were limited to that knowledge, we must see in the startling phrase the "depths of Satan," the stern irony of condemnation. Their fancied knowledge of the mysteries of the Divine Nature, obtained by a deliberate transgression of every Divine commandment, did but bring them nearer to that Satanic nature, in which knowledge without holiness was seen in its highest power. As those who called themselves Jews were of the Synagogue of Satan, as those who boasted of their freedom were themselves the servants of corruption, so was it here. Every step they took that led them further into the depths of a mystic impurity did but identify them with that power of evil which Christ had come to conquer and destroy. It is possible, however, and the position of the words, "as they say," renders it even probable, that their dark imaginations

carried them even to the literal utterance of the words which are put, as it were, into their lips. We cannot conquer Satan, they may have said, so long as we are ignorant of any of his devices ; we must enlarge the range of our experience till we have fathomed the depths of evil and emerged from them uninjured; we must shew that though the body may be a sharer in all that men count impure, it may yet leave the Spirit with a clear and unclouded vision of the things of God. That form of Antinomianism has too many parallels in the history of human error for us to think it incredible that it should have appeared in a soil so fruitful in all strange dreams of morbid fancy as that of the Asiatic Churches ; and we need not wonder if a delusion to which the language, though not the life, even of a Luther at times drew perilously near, exercised its horrible fascination when it came from the lips of the false prophetess of Thyatira.

As the word "*depth*" gave us the key to the meaning of this part of the Message, so does the word "*burden*" to that of the part which follows : "*I will put upon you none other burden but that which ye have already ; hold fast till I come.*" The Apostle hears from his Lord the echo of that decree to which he had once been a consenting party. "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us to lay upon you no greater *burden* than these necessary things" (Acts xv. 28). They might ask, as they heard this reproof of the freedom and the license which they claimed as boasting to be the true representatives of St. Paul's teaching, more Pauline than St. Paul himself, "Are we then to be brought

once again under the yoke of bondage? Is the Law, with all its restraints and prohibitions, to be once more the code of the Church of Christ?" To such questions the words which the Seer wrote supplied the answer: "No; that which you once welcomed as the great charter of your freedom has not been cancelled. You may have all the liberty which it permits. No other burden is to be imposed upon you—neither circumcision, nor that which circumcision implies. But that charter contained, in precise terms, the command to abstain from eating things sacrificed to idols, and from fornication; and these rules of life are still binding, as in accordance with the mind of Christ; the first as resting on the duty of witnessing for Christ, and the second as founded on the eternal law of purity. Keep that fast through all trials and temptations till I come, and then he that overcometh shall receive his due reward."

The nature of that reward in this instance is described in terms of singular grandeur: "I will give him authority [*ἐξουσία*, the might of right, not *δύναμις*, the right of might] over the Gentiles, and he shall guide them¹ [*ποιμανεῖ*, shall do a shepherd's work] with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken in pieces, even as I have received of my Father." The promise is nothing less than that the faithful victor shall be a sharer in the sovereignty of

¹ The use of the word in the LXX. Version of Psa. ii. seems, in the first instance, to have been merely a mistranslation resting on a false etymology of the words which in the Authorized Version is rendered "shalt break them." Here, however, and in Rev. xii. 5, as in so many other passages, the writer adopts the LXX. Version without any hesitation.

the Anointed King, as described in the great Messianic prophecy of Psa. ii. There is, we cannot but believe, the same special adaptation in this case, as in the others, of the promised reward to the peculiar circumstances of the conflict. That to which the Disciples were tempted was an undue compliance with the customs of the Heathen as such. Their fear of offending them, their reluctance to confess before them that they were worshippers of the Crucified, was bringing them into bondage. And therefore they were told that he who resisted that temptation should take his true position, as being over those Heathen ; should, in the great manifestation of the kingdom, share in his Lord's rule of righteous, and therefore inflexible, severity ; that then all the power and might of the Heathen that continued hostile to the Divine Kingdom should, like vessels of the potter not made to honour, be crushed to pieces.¹

And, lastly, there was the yet more mysterious promise, "I will give unto him the morning star." As with the manna, and with the fruit of the tree of life, so also here, that which the Lord holds forth as the supreme and crowning blessing is the gift of Himself, the fruition of his glorious presence. That title of the "bright and morning star" is claimed by Him at the close of the Apocalypse as belonging to Himself as "the root and the offspring

¹ The argument used by Polycarp in dealing with the case already referred to presents a singular agreement with this passage : "Si quis non abstinuerit se ab avaritia (*i.e.*, πλεονεξία, in its secondary sense of impurity) ab idolatria coinquinabitur et tanquam inter gentes judicabitur. Quis autem ignoret judicium Domini ? An nescimus quia sancti inundum judicabunt, sicut Paulus docet." ("Epist. ad Phil." c. xi.)

of David" (xxii. 16). And when He gives that star He gives Himself. Each symbol represents obviously a special aspect of that Divine presence. And the star had of old been the received emblem of sovereignty. Balaam had seen "a star coming out of Jacob, and a sceptre rising out of Judah" (Num. xxiv. 17); and the Magi of the East, seeing the star, set forth to worship Him who was born King of the Jews (Matt. ii. 2). It was the symbol of sovereignty on its brighter and benignant side, and was therefore the fitting and necessary complement of the dread attributes that had gone before. The King came not only to judge, and punish, and destroy, but also to illumine and to cheer. He was to be as the day-spring from on high, giving light to those that were in darkness and the shadow of death (Luke i. 78). All lower gifts of prophecy or knowledge were but as one of the lights of earth, as lamp, or torch, or candle, shining in a dark and squalid place where they did but make the darkness visible, but when the day star (*φωσφόρος*, Lucifer, the light-bringer) should arise in their hearts, men would rejoice in the fulness of its radiance. The gift of the morning star is therefore the gift of *that* attribute of sovereignty no less than of its judicial and penal majesty. The conqueror in the great strife should receive light in its fulness and transmit that light to others—and so should take his place among those that turn many to righteousness, and "shall shine as the stars" for ever (Dan. xii. 3).