

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA.

PROFESSOR RAMSAY'S interesting paper in the January number of the *EXPOSITOR* throws much light on the inter-communication of the Churches of Asia Minor, but I do not see that it completely solves the problem: "Why did St. John speak of 'the seven Churches' when there must have been so many others?" Nevertheless it certainly assists the solution.

The seven cities were neither the largest, nor the most important, nor the most representative of different portions of the province, nor have we any right to assume that they were the most Christian among Asiatic towns. Professor Ramsay has therefore pointed to the probability that in the year 94 some ecclesiastical postal system had already grown up in Asia. The Churches had become grouped and crystallized into postal districts, according to their geographical distribution, and the seven cities are, so to speak, the post-towns for seven groups. A main line of communication would start from Ephesus, and make a circle through these post-towns; and from each of them a subordinate circle would pass through a number of outlying cities. "These seven cities were the most suitable points for distributing the letters to the groups of Churches in the easiest way and the shortest time by seven other messengers, who . . . made secondary circuits from the seven representatives" (p. 27). It is thus explained why the great cities of Magnesia and Tralles are omitted—they had a postal service direct from Ephesus. The unimportant cities of Thyatira and Philadelphia were junctions respectively for "an inland district on the north-east and east" (this is somewhat vague—where there really any Christian cities between Thyatira and Mount Temnus?), and for upper

Lydia, and for this reason they are included among "the Seven Churches."

Now the last portion of Professor Ramsay's paper appears to destroy the thesis upheld in the earlier parts. It is headed "III. *The Letters address single Churches.*" That is to say, they are *not* addressed to postal districts, groups of Churches.

"The seven letters were written by one who was familiar with the situation, the character, the past history, the possibilities of future development, of those seven cities. The Church of Sardis, for example, is addressed as the Church of that actual, single city; the facts and characteristics mentioned are proper to it alone, and not common to the other churches of the Hermus valley. Those others were not much in the writer's mind: he was absorbed with the thought of that one city: he saw only death before it: it was a city of appearance without reality, promise without performance, outward show betrayed by careless confidence. But the other cities which were connected with it may be warned by its fate, and he that overcometh shall be spared and honoured" (pp. 33-4).

It is evident that such a warning would be just as useful to the rest of the Churches of Asia, or of the world, as to those whose post-town was Sardis. But the letter was intended for Sardis alone. The Apostle had no idea of addressing the whole of Asia, but seven particular Churches, which he styles "*The Seven Churches of Asia,*" αἱ ἐπὶ τὰ ἐκκλησίαι αἱ ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ.

The article is all-important, and Professor Ramsay has made no attempt to account for it. "*The Seven Churches*" implies that there were no others; and yet we can hardly think that there were no longer any Christians at Colosse, at Miletus, at Troas, and so forth, or that there were not yet any at Tralles or Magnesia, which had each its bishop in the days of St. Ignatius.

Now, if we assume the generally accepted date of 93-6 for the Apocalypse, we find that it is divided by as much as 30-40 years from the Epistles of St. Paul, the first Evangelist of Asia. St. Paul addressed his letters indifferently to "the

Church" or to "the saints" of such and such a city. Any community of "saints," together with its *episcopi* or presbyters, is a Church in his eyes. None of the Pauline Churches appear ever to have had a bishop in the lifetime of their founder, and ecclesiastical organization was still in a somewhat incoherent condition.

But the letters of St. Ignatius are only 10-23 years later than the Apocalypse. Asia was now full of Christians. In Bithynia and Pontus the sacrifices were no longer frequented. Organization had become a necessity, and tradition points to St. John as the author of the system we find existing under Trajan. Between the Apocalypse and the Ignatian letters there is not time for a revolution. St. Ignatius implies that, when he wrote, every more important city, at least, had a bishop. We can hardly venture to assume that every one of these sees had been erected since the return of St. John from exile.

St. Ignatius constantly assumes that a Church is an organism, containing a bishop, priests, deacons and faithful. Without bishop and priests, he once asserts, there is no church: *χωρίς τούτων ἐκκλησία οὐ καλεῖται*, "No Christian community which has not yet been organized so as to possess a bishop as well as priests, has a right to the name of *ἐκκλησία*" (*Trall.* 3. 1) This statement is the more remarkable because St. Ignatius calls his own Church "The Church in Syria," probably implying that there was no other Church in Syria but that of Antioch.¹

We conclude that the growth of ecclesiastical organization has necessarily narrowed the meaning of the word *ἐκκλησία*, just as it narrowed the meaning of the word *ἐπίσκοπος*. Henceforward *ἐκκλησία* is not used of any lesser ecclesiastical unit than the episcopal see, and we hear

¹ When the other communities of the province *Oriens* received bishops, the Church of Antioch became a patriarchate instead of a diocese. The same is true of the evolution of the Alexandrian patriarchate.

no more of a "Church" governed by presbyters, still less of the "Church" in the house of such an one.¹ If we attribute the new discipline itself to the author of the Apocalypse, we shall be inclined to attribute to the same author the narrowing of the terms *ἐπίσκοπος* and *ἐκκλησία*.

It would seem to follow that "the seven Churches of Asia" are those seven of the Christian communities of the province which St. John had had time to organize under episcopal government, and which are consequently of especial interest to him. Others he may have organized after his return (as Clement Al. says, *Quis dives*, 42, and ap. Eus. *H.E.* iii. 23) if he still had strength, but the mystic number seven sums up his accomplishment before his exile.

The mention of the "angels" of the Churches is an indication that these seven Churches actually possessed bishops. Many ancient fathers and modern commentators identify the angels with the bishops. According to Dr. Moulton, the angels in Apoc. i. 20 are rather the "heavenly doubles" of the Churches.² This seems to be more exact. "The seven candlesticks are the seven Churches," and they stand upon the ground. "The seven stars are the angels of the seven Churches," and they are the reduplications of the candle-flames, held in the hand of the Son of God, as it were in heaven. St. John will have combined the idea of guardian angels with that of celestial counterparts, just as in Daniel the angels of the kingdoms are "princes" as well as representatives.³

¹ The letter of Clement, about this time, still calls the large community of Corinth a "Church," as St. Paul had done, though it had apparently no bishop as yet.

² In a very interesting article, "It is his angel," in *Journal of Theol. Studies*, July 1902, p. 514.

³ "Even in Daniel," says Dr. Moulton, "the representative angels are not free from guardian functions" (p. 517).

But the seven letters cannot possibly be intended to be delivered by the Apostle to the heavenly doubles who are in the hand of Christ. They are, on the contrary, sent down from heaven to earth, to be communicated to the real Churches by the seer of the vision. In a mystical book like the Apocalypse, and in mystical letters like these seven, we can hardly venture to take the "angels" invariably in a literal sense. If we admit that in i. 20 the actual angels are meant, we shall not be wrong in interpreting them mystically in the addresses of the letters.

The bishop, according to early doctrine, is precisely the earthly guardian and representative of his Church. His title, *ἐπίσκοπος*, declares that he is its guardian. But he is also its representative, almost its "double," before God and men. He is answerable for it before God, he is its mouthpiece, he is its head, *unde scire debes episcopum in ecclesia esse et ecclesiam in episcopo* (Cyprian, *Ep.* lxvi. 8). St. Ignatius would evidently endorse this view. The seven Churches would readily understand the mystic signification, for they would be aware why it was they were entitled "*the seven Churches*," and they would be familiar, as we are not, with St. John's teaching both as to angels and as to bishops.

Two questions remain. Why had these Churches rather than others been organized? Why are they mentioned in this particular order?

Until I had the pleasure of reading Professor Ramsay's article, it had not struck me that these questions could be solved, but now I think he has supplied the answer.

St. John, according to tradition, made Ephesus his headquarters, and he will have established a bishop there in the first place. It was natural that he should next provide a chief pastor for the rival cities of Smyrna and Pergamus. Having reached Pergamus by "the oldest Roman road in the province Asia," he found before him "the great imperial

post-road" which would lead him to the important towns of Sardis and Laodicea. As he had to pass Thyatira and Philadelphia on the way, it was natural that he should not fail to establish bishops in these also. On arriving at Laodicea, he may have thought that Colosse and Hierapolis were too small to need bishops at once, or there may have been local reasons for delay, such as jealousies, or want of a suitable subject to appoint. But it is more likely that he was summoned suddenly to Ephesus, perhaps by a messenger of Domitian, for we find that he was unable to stop in the great towns of Tralles and Magnesia (through which he must have passed), so as to give them bishops. They were not far from Ephesus, and it would be easy to visit them on another occasion. Probably he actually appointed Polybius and the predecessor of the youthful Damas¹ as bishops of these sees immediately after his return from Patmos. The order in which the letters are given is the order in which St. John had visited the cities. It is consequently also the order in which a messenger would deliver them, if a messenger ever did deliver them. It seems to me infinitely more probable that St. John never wrote out the seven letters separately at all, for they would be unintelligible without the first chapter, which supplies a common introduction to all. I suppose that he wrote down the whole Apocalypse while he was in Patmos (without an amanuensis, as the freedom and incorrectness of the style suggests), and that on his return to Ephesus² he had it copied and sent round to the Churches as a complete work.

¹ Ignat. *ad Magn.* 3.

² So Victorinus Petav., *in Apoc.* cap. x. 11 (P.L. v. 333): "Ibi ergo vidit Apocalypsin. Et Joannes de metallo dimissus, sic postea tradidit hanc eandem quam acceperat a Deo Apocalypsin." The reading is the same in the shorter text, *Bibl. Max.* PP. iii. p. 419. The best MS. (Ottobon. lat. 3288A) has: "Ibi ergo videtur Johannes Apocalypsin conscripsisse. Et cum iam seniozem se putasset post passionem recipi posse, interfecto

[The above was in type before Prof. Ramsay's article appeared in the EXPOSITOR for March, or I should have dealt with it more explicitly. It is interesting to note that Dr. Zahn has pointed out that the Apocryphal Acts of John appear to have made the Apostle perform a journey through the seven cities in the order given by the Apocalypse, just as I have suggested (*Neue kirchl. Zeitschr.* vol. x. p. 191 ff. I take this reference from Bardenheuer, *Gesch. der altkirchl. Lit.* ii. p. 440). Was this a conjecture, or founded on tradition?]

JOHN CHAPMAN.

NOTE.—Through the courtesy of the Editor I am allowed to append a note to the proof-sheets of Dom Chapman's Paper, which I have read with much interest.

1. Dom Chapman thinks that I in Section I. expressed the view that the Seven Letters were addressed to seven districts, and in Section III. contradicted my first view, and declared they were addressed to seven single Churches. My meaning must have been badly expressed, or Dom Chapman has read my poor article with little care. The Seven Churches had come in the course of years to possess a certain outstanding and, therefore, representative character in the Province (as shown in Section I.): thus they stood forth as "the Seven." For reasons of his own St. John preferred to write to the Seven Churches, instead of to the collective Church of Asia. The "postal system" was a necessity of their life, and had been for thirty years in existence and growth.

2. He says that the form of expression, "*the* Seven Churches," implies that there were no others. That seems to me incorrect. The form does not necessarily imply more than that there were Seven Churches, outstanding and

Domitiano omnia iudicia eius soluta sunt, et Johannes a metallo dimissus est, et sic postea tradidit hanc eandem apocalipsin quam a domino acceperat." Victorinus is apparently citing (as usual) a very early authority.

conspicuous in universal estimation. The meaning which Dom Chapman takes would also, of course, be a possible one, but not the only possible one.

3. He says that when Ignatius calls his own Church "The Church in Syria," he implies that there was no other Church in Syria but that of Antioch. This statement also seems to me erroneous. Antioch stands for Syria: it *is* Syria, just as Ephesus *is* Asia in the phraseology quoted in Section VIII. (to which I may refer). This whole idea of representative, outstanding Churches is a most characteristic feature in the thought of that period; and, if I may venture to say so, Dom Chapman in his Paper has failed to grasp it sufficiently or to apprehend it clearly. In this Paper his way of thinking moves only in the forms of the nineteenth century: it needs some effort to think as people thought about A.D. 90, and he is here hardly giving himself the trouble to make that effort (a quality common to many other great and deservedly respected scholars). The adoption of the Seven to represent the Province (and again to represent the entire Church in the whole world) suits the symbolic tone of the whole book. Further, one can hardly avoid the inference that the popular recognition of "the Seven" constituted an appreciable step in the development towards an organized hierarchy of higher and lower bishoprics.

3. Dom Chapman also seems to think that I hold the Seven Letters to have been delivered separately to each Church. This also fails to catch my purpose; and I fear I must have been obscure. The Apocalypse is obviously a single work, and the Seven Letters are part of the symbolic machinery of the complicated allegory; but they were written only for their place in the book and had no separate existence. And yet they are written each to the individual Church, which for the moment stands bare and alone before the mind of the writer. I see no inconsistency

between these statements; but Dom Chapman seems to think that if the letters had been written to individual, definite, single, separate Churches, they would necessarily have a separate existence as single letters. I can only hope that he will think it worth while to read my Paper a second time, trying to sympathise with my way of thinking (which is perhaps too archaic and remote from twentieth century forms); and in Section VIII. I have already printed a re-statement in (I hope) less mistakable form of what I have been trying to express—the first-century mode of thought which so readily ran into symbolism.

4. I cannot think that the appointment of bishops took place either so late or in such a capricious, uncertain way as Dom Chapman makes out. In accordance with my general point of view on this subject, I can feel no doubt that there were more than a score of bishops in the Province Asia, one in every city where a congregation existed, at the time when the Apocalypse was written. Law and principle seem to me to have been much more efficacious, and individual effort and action much less determining, than they seem to him to have been in the growth of the early Church in Asia.

But I may be wrong, and Mr. Chapman may be right. While I maintain what seems convincing to my own humble judgment, and while I must either write clearly and sharply what I think or else be silent altogether, I quite acknowledge that there is room for other views, which I cannot hold (perhaps from blindness or incapacity), and it is well that they should be stated in the precise way in which he sets them forth.

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