

1. Seven churches are addressed as such by the Holy Spirit. *Seven* is the number of spiritual perfection, the same number as the Lord Himself addresses later to the assemblies (Rev. 2 and 3) from the glory.

In these Epistles we have the perfect embodiment of the Spirit's teaching for the churches. They contain "all the truth" (John 16. 13) into which the Spirit of the Truth was to guide the Lord's people. They contain the things which the Lord could not speak on earth, for the time for it was not then. They contain the "things of Mine which He shall take and shall show unto you". The number of these Epistles, *seven*, is perfect. Their order also is perfect.

2. THAT THIS ORDER IS NOT CHRONOLOGICAL BUT TOPICAL and didactic is made clear beyond all question by the fact that the Holy Spirit has placed the Epistles written first of all (Thess.) *seventh* and last in the list. The question whether the order in which the Holy Spirit has presented these Epistles is the order in which we find them in our Bibles must, therefore, be answered by the teaching of the Spirit Himself as unfolded to us in His own Divinely perfect arrangement of the Epistles, instead of according to man's idea, which strives to evolve a doctrinal system according to the chronological sequence usually accepted.

Although the chronological sequence of the Epistles has its own wonderful lesson to impart (see A. 2 above), as we trace in order the gradual unfolding of the teachings of the Spirit in connection with "the progress of doctrine", from Pentecost to Paul's imprisonments, yet these other teachings are fully presented to us by our Divine Guide in the *experimental order* in which the Epistles to the seven Churches are sent out.

In all the hundreds of Greek manuscripts of the N. T. the order of these Epistles never varies. The general order of the books of the N. T. takes the form of groups, viz. (1) the four Gospels; (2) Acts; (3) the so-called "general" Epistles; (4) the Pauline Epistles, and (5) the Apocalypse (Ap. 95). But while the order of these five groups varies in some of the manuscripts, and the Pauline Epistles vary in their position with respect to the other four groups, and while the Pauline Epistles themselves vary in their order (e.g. *Hebrews* in some cases following *Thessalonians*, see p. 1823, 5 (e)), the order of these seven Church Epistles is invariably the same.

3. It is ignorance of this Divinely given standard that results in the deplorable attempts to "square" the teachings of our Lord in the Gospels, which concern the kingdom of heaven (Ap. 114) and the Jewish Polity, with the teaching of Paul the apostle and bondservant of Jesus Christ in the Church Epistles. And so, when it is found that they cannot be "squared", we have the unseemly utterances and procedure of those who throw over the "Pauline doctrine", as they term it, in favour of "the teaching of Jesus", with contemptuous references to "the Hellenistic tendencies of Paul's mind", &c.; and such statements as "the Master's words must be preferred to a disciple's"; "we must get back to Jesus", and so on. All of which and similar utterances make abundantly clear the fact that the Divine teaching of the Holy Spirit, in fulfilment of the promise of the Lord in John 16. 13, is not only overlooked or not understood by some, but is deliberately ignored and rejected by others who employ them.

Any Christian who does not give earnest heed to

¹ See Int. Notes to each Epistle.

what has been written specially for his instruction is liable thus to be led away. Every word of Scripture is for him and for his learning, but not every word is about him. But these Epistles are all about him and about the special position in which he finds himself placed with reference to the Jew and the Gentile; the old creation and the new; the "flesh" and the "spirit"; and all the various phenomena which he finds in his experience.

4. In connection with the order in which these "Church" Epistles come to us, we notice first of all that they are grouped in two divisions of three and four (see above, B). Three stand out distinct from all the others as being *treatises* rather than *epistles*, and as containing so much more doctrinal matter¹ as compared with that which is *epistolary*. This will be seen from the detail Structure (p. 1660) which gives the contents of each. These three are *Romans*, *Ephesians*, and *Thessalonians*. And the four are placed between these three in two pairs, each pair containing respectively *reproof* and *correction*, in contrast to the other three, which contain *doctrine* and *instruction* (according to 2 Tim. 3. 10).

ROMANS comes first as containing the primaries of Christian education (see Introductory Notes, p. 1661). It starts by showing *Man* (Gentile and Jew alike) as utterly ruined and helpless, lost and ungodly sinners; how the saved sinner has died together with Christ, and together with Him is risen to "newness of life"; made a son and heir of God in Him.

EPHESIANS takes up from this point, beginning not with *Man*, but with God. It reveals to us the knowledge of God and of His purposes in Christ. The heading up of all things in Christ in "a dispensation of the fulness of times" (1. 10), and the formation of a joint-body of Jews and Gentiles as a "church" (Ap. 186), by which God's manifold ("variegated") wisdom may be made known "unto principalities and powers in the heavenlies" (3. 10).

THESSALONIANS, written first of all the Epistles, are placed in this connection last of all by the Holy Spirit. Herein is given the special revelation concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. They stand last and alone, being followed by no other Church Epistle. If we have "ears to hear", this fact proclaims that,—

5. It is useless to teach Christians the truths connected with the Lord's Coming until they have learned the truths in the other Epistles. Until they know and understand from *Romans* what they are by nature, and what God has made them to be in Christ Jesus,—sons and heirs, joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8. 17); until they know and understand that even now God has "blessed them with all spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (Eph. 1. 3), they have no place for, and no understanding of, the truths concerning His return from heaven.²

To sum up:—The saved sinner is shown

In *ROMANS*, as dead and risen with Christ:

In *EPHESIANS*, as seated in the heavenlies IN Christ:

In *THESSALONIANS*, in glory for ever with Christ.

¹ Lightfoot (*Biblical Essays*, p. 388) says of *Romans* and *Ephesians*: "Both alike partake of the character rather of a formal treatise than of a familiar letter."

² The Introductory Notes and Structure in each case show the scope of the Epistle and its teaching.

193

THE "MYSTERY".

The English word "mystery" is a transliteration of the Greek word *mustērion*,¹ which means a sacred secret.

It occurs in the Septuagint Version (280 B.C.) nine times as the equivalent for the Chaldee *raz*

¹ It is from *mueo*=to initiate or admit to secrets; and *mustēs* was used of the person so initiated.

in the Chaldee portion of "Daniel", which means to conceal; hence, something concealed that can be revealed, viz. in Dan. 2. 18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47, 47, and 4. 9.

It occurs frequently in the Apocryphal books; which, though of no use for establishing doctrine, are of great value in determining the meaning of Biblical usage of Greek words. In these books *mustērion* always means

the *secret* of friends, or of a king, &c.¹ See Tobit 12. 7, 11. Judith 2. 2. Wisdom 2. 22 (transl. "mysteries"); 14. 23. Eccles. 22. 22; 27. 16, 17, 21. 2 Macc. 13. 21. (R. V.). The passage in Judith is remarkable: for Nabuchodonosor calls his captains and great men together just before entering on a campaign, and "communicated with them his secret counsel", lit. "the mystery of his will". This is exactly the same usage as in Eph. 1. 9, except that the Gr. word for will or counsel is different.²

By the end of the second century A.D. it was used interchangeably with *typos* (= type), *symbolon* (= symbol), and *parabolē* (= parable).

When we find the Greek word *mustērion* rendered *sacramentum* in the Latin Vulgate of Eph. 5. 32, it is clear that it was used as meaning a *secret sign* or *symbol*, and not in the modern meaning put upon the word "Sacrament", i.e. "holy mysteries".

It is evident to all that God has made known His will "at sundry times and in divers manners" (Heb. 1. 1, 2). He also kept certain things secret, and revealed them from time to time according to His purposes and counsels. Hence the word *mustērion* is connected with several *concealed* or *secret* things in the New Testament.

1. It was used of the *secrets of the kingdom*; which had been concealed, until the Lord revealed them to His disciples (not to the People) in Matt. 13. 10, 11. It had not before been known that the kingdom would be rejected, and that there would be a long interval between that rejection and its being set up in glory. This was concealed even from the prophets who foretold it (1 Pet. 1. 10-12).

2. In Rom. 11 it is used in connection with the duration of Israel's blindness. That blindness itself was not a secret, for it had been foretold in Isa. 6. 9, 10. But the *duration* of the blindness was kept a "secret" from Isaiah and only revealed through Paul (Rom. 11. 25).

3. It was used of a fact connected with resurrection, which had never before been made known to the sons of men.

The Lord had spoken of it to Martha (John 11. 25, 26), but though she believed it, she did not understand that to those who should be alive and remain to His Coming the Lord would be "the life", and they would "never die" (v. 26).

The Thessalonians who "received the word" were not left in ignorance of it (1 Thess. 4. 13), for the Lord's words in John 11. 25, 26 were explained to them.

But in 1 Cor. 15. 51 the secret was fully and plainly shown; and it was that "we shall not all sleep". Up to that moment the universal belief had been that we must all die (cp. Heb. 9. 27). Thenceforward it was revealed and made known for faith that all would not die, but that those who are alive and remain (lit. remain over) unto the Lord's Coming will not die at all (see note 1 Thess. 4. 15, and cp. Phil. 3. 14).

4. Side by side with these Divine secrets there was the secret of the [foretold] lawlessness (2 Thess. 2. 7. Cp. Dan. 12. 4). It was already working during the dispensation covered by "Acts"; and had the nation repented at the call of those "other servants" of Matt. 22. 4 (Acts 2. 38; 3. 12-26; &c.), those secret counsels of "the lawless one" and "the transgressors" would have "come to the full" (Dan. 8. 23). But now they are postponed and in abeyance until the appointed time.

5. But "the great secret" which concerns us to-day was not revealed until after the close of that dispensation covered by "Acts". (See Acts 28. 17-31 and App. 180 and 181.)

Paul was not commissioned to put in writing the "purpose" of God which was "before the overthrow of the world" (Ap. 146), until that dispensation was ended.

What this "great secret" was can only be learned fully from the Prison Epistles. There alone can we find the things which had been concealed and kept secret "since the world began" (Rom. 16. 25); "which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men" (Eph. 3. 5); "which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God" (Eph. 3. 9); "which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest" (Col. 1. 26), where "now" (Gr. *nun*) with the pret. = just now, recently.

The special Scriptures which describe this secret are the postscript of Rom. 16. 25, 26. Eph. 3. 1-12. Col. 1. 24-27.

The mention of "the mystery" in Rom. 16. 25, 26 has perplexed many, because the revelation of it is specifically propounded in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Hence it has been suggested that the Epistle originally ended at Rom. 16. 24 with the *Benediction* (or even at v. 20 (see the marginal notes in the R. V.), and that the *ascription* (vv. 25-27) was added by the apostle after he reached Rome (1) in order to complete the Structure by making it correspond with the ascription in ch. 11. 33-36; and (2) to complete the *Epanodos* or *Introversion*, and thus to contrast "God's gospel", which was revealed of old by the prophets of the Old Testament and never hidden (1. 2, 3), with the mystery which was always hidden and never revealed or even mentioned until 16. 25-27. See Longer Note p. 1694.

In any case, while there is no doubt about the general order of the Epistles, the actual dates are conjectural, and rest only upon individual opinions as to the internal evidence (Ap. 180). And, after all, Rom. 16. 25-27 is not the revelation of the mystery as given in the Prison Epistles, but an ascription of glory to Him Who had at length made it manifest by prophetic writings (not "the writings of the prophets", for it is the adjective "prophetic", not the noun "prophecy" as in 2 Pet. 1. 20). *Romans* and *Ephesians* are thus brought together as the two central Epistles of the chronological groups: the one ending one group, and the other beginning the next, both being treatises rather than epistles, and both having Paul for their sole author, while in all the other Epistles he has others associated with him.

As to the great secret itself, it is certain that it cannot refer to the blessing of Gentiles in connection with Israel. This is perfectly clear from the fact that that was *never a secret*. Both blessings were made known at the very same time (Gen. 12. 3); and this well-known fact is constantly referred to in the Old Testament. See Gen. 22. 18; 26. 4; &c. Deut. 32. 8. Pss. 18. 49; 67. 1, 2; 72. 17; 117. 1. Isa. 11. 10; 49. 6. Luke 2. 32. Rom. 15. 8-12.

But the secret revealed in the Prison Epistles was never the subject of previous revelation.

In Eph. 3. 5 it is stated to be "now revealed". This cannot mean that it had been revealed before, but not in the same manner as "now"; because it is stated that it had never been revealed at all.

It concerns Gentiles; and it was "revealed unto His holy apostles¹ and prophets by the Spirit", that the Gentiles should be joint-heirs, and a joint-body,² and [joint] partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel (see the Notes on Eph. 3. 5, 6).

We cannot know the whole purpose of God in keeping this concealed all through the ages; but one thing we can clearly see, viz. that had God made it known before, Israel would of necessity have had an excuse for rejecting the Messiah and His kingdom.

¹ In subsequent Revisions of the Sept., *Theodotion* (A. D. 160) uses it for the Heb. *sed* (Job 15. 2. Ps. 25. 14. Prov. 20. 19). See Notes *in loc.*

² In Judith 2. it is *doulē* (Ap. 102. 4), while in Eph. 1. it is *thelēma* (Ap. 102. 2).

¹ These were not those of the Old Testament dispensation, but were the subjects of a promise by the Lord Himself in Matt. 23. 34. Luke 11. 29, which was fulfilled in Eph. 4. 4, 11. See the notes on these passages and Ap. 189.

² Greek *sussōmos*, a remarkable word occurring only here in the N. T.

As to ourselves, the question of "Who is in the secret?" does not arise. For we are not to suppose that all who do not know of it are "lost".

One thing we know, and that is: it is made known for "the obedience of faith", or for "faith-obedience" (Rom. 16. 26).

It is a *subsequent revelation*; and the question is, do we believe it and obey it by acting according to it?

Abraham had several Divine revelations made to him. From his call in Gen. 11 he was a "righteous" man. In ch. 12 he believed God concerning His pro-

mises of the future. In ch. 13 he believed God concerning the promise of the Land. But in ch. 15 God made a further revelation concerning the seed which He would give him; and it is written, "Abraham believed in the Lord, and it was counted (or imputed) unto him for righteousness".

Even so with ourselves and the subsequent revelation of the mystery in the Prison Epistles. Let us believe it, and we may be sure that it will be counted unto us for something, for some blessing, which those who refuse to believe it will lose.

194

"THE SPIRITS IN PRISON" (1 Peter 3. 19).

A correct understanding of this passage may be obtained by noting the following facts:

1. Men are never spoken of in Scripture as "spirits". Man *has* spirit, but he is not "a spirit", for a spirit hath not "flesh and bones". In this life man has "flesh and blood", a "natural" (or psychical) body. At death this spirit "returns to God Who gave it" (Ps. 31. 5. Eccles. 12. 7. Luke 23. 46. Acts 7. 59). In resurrection "God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him" (1 Cor. 15. 38). This is no longer a "natural (or psychical) body," but "a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15. 44).

2. Angels are "spirits", and are so called (Heb. 1. 7, 14).

3. In 2 Pet. 2. 4 we read of "the angels that sinned"; and in 1 Pet. 3. 19, 20 of spirits "which sometime were disobedient... in the days of Noah". In 2 Pet. 2. 4 we are further told that these fallen angels are reserved unto judgment, and delivered into chains (i. e. bondage or "prison"). Cp. Jude 6.

4. The cause of their fall and the nature of their sin are particularly set forth by the Holy Spirit in Jude 6, 7.

a. They "left their own habitation".

b. This "habitation" is called (in Greek) *oikētērion*, which occurs again only in 2 Cor. 5. 2, where it is called our "house" (i. e. body) with which we earnestly long to be "clothed upon"; referring to the "change" which shall take place in resurrection. This is the spiritual resurrection body of 1 Cor. 15. 44.

c. This spiritual body (or *oikētērion*) is what the angels "left" (whatever that may mean, and this we do not know). The word rendered "left", here, is peculiar. It is *apoleipō* = to leave behind, as in 2 Tim. 4. 13, 20, where Paul uses it of "the cloke" and the "parchments" which he left behind at Troas, and of Trophimus whom he left behind at Miletum. Occ. Heb. 4. 6, 9; 10. 26. Jude 6.

d. They "kept not their first estate (*archē*)" in which they were placed when they were created.

e. The nature of their sin is clearly stated. The sin of "Sodom and Gomorrha" is declared to be "in like manner" to that of the angels; and what that sin was is described as "giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh" (Jude 6, 7). The word "strange" here denotes other, i. e. *different* (Gr. *heteros* = different in kind. See Ap. 124. 2). What this could be, and how it could be, we are not told. We are not asked to understand it, but to believe it. (See further in App. 23 and 25.)

5. In Gen. 6. 1, 2, 4 we have the historical record, which is referred to in the Epistles of Peter and Jude. There these "angels" are called "the sons of God". This expression in the Old Testament is used always of "angels", because they were not "begotten", but created, as Adam was created, and he is so called in Luke 3. 38 (cp. Gen. 5. 1). It is used of angels eight

times: Gen. 6. 2, 4. Job 1. 6; 2. 1; 38. 7. Ps. 29. 1 (R.V. m.); 89. 6 (R.V. m.); and Dan. 3. 25. In this last passage there is no article, and it does not mean "the Son of God", but "a son of God", i. e. an angel who was sent into the furnace (Dan. 3. 28), as one was into the den of lions (Dan. 6. 22). In one passage (Hos. 1. 10) the English expression is used of men, but there the Hebrew is different, and it refers only to what men should be "called", not to what they were.

6. Returning to 1 Pet. 3. 19, the expression "the spirits in prison" cannot be understood apart from the whole context. The passage commences with the word "For" (v. 17), and is introduced as the reason why "it is better, if the will of God should (so) will, to suffer for well-doing, than for evil-doing. FOR (v. 18) Christ also suffered for sins once (Gr. *hapax*)—a Just One for unjust ones—in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death indeed as to [His] flesh, but made alive as to [His] spirit." This can refer only to His spiritual resurrection body (1 Cor. 15. 45). In death His body was put in the grave (or sepulchre, i. e. *Hadēs*), Acts 2. 31; but His spirit was "commended to God". Not until His spirit was reunited to the body in resurrection could He go elsewhere. And then He went not to "Gehenna", or back to *Hadēs*, but to *Tartarus* (2 Pet. 2. 4. See Ap. 131. III), where "the angels who sinned" had been "delivered into chains". To these He proclaimed His victory.

7. The word rendered "preached" is not the usual word *euangelizō* (Ap. 121. 4), but the emphatic word *kērussō* (Ap. 121. 1); which means to *proclaim as a herald*. Even so Christ *heralded* His victory over death, and the proclamation of this reached to the utmost bounds of creation.

It was "better" THEREFORE to suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing. He had suffered for well-doing. He suffered, but He had a glorious triumph. "Therefore" (runs the exhortation), "if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye" (v. 14), and it concludes "Forasmuch then as Christ suffered on our behalf as to the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind; for He that hath suffered in the flesh hath done with sin; no longer to live [our] remaining time according to men's lusts, but for God's will... For to this end, to those also who are now dead, were the glad tidings announced, that though (Gr. *men*) they might be judged according [to the will of] men, in [the] flesh, yet (Gr. *de*) they might live [again] according to [the will of] God, in [the] spirit": i. e. in resurrection (1 Pet. 4. 1, 2, 6).

The above is suggested as the interpretation of the expression "the in-prison spirits", in the light of the whole of the nearer and remoter contexts.

¹ In the first passage (Gen. 6. 2) the Alexandrine MS. of the Septuagint has "angels" (not "sons"), showing how it was then understood.

² For the supply of this ellipsis see Rom. 8. 27, 28, and cp. 1 Pet. 4. 19.