

Seven churches and seven celestial bodies

(Rev 1,16; Rev 2-3)

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"In his right hand he held seven stars", says Rev 1,16 about "one like a son of man" who spoke to John in the vision. Similar words are repeated again in Rev 1,20: "as for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand...", Rev 2,1: "who holds the seven stars in his right hand" and in Rev 3,1: "who has ... the seven stars". The seven stars symbolize the seven angels (messengers) of the churches (Rev 1,20). Some parallel astronomical identifications of the stars were also proposed. They would be e.g. the stars of Ursa Minor or of Pleiades which are known to be divine attributes¹.

Even more interesting suggestions may be found in the books of Henoch. 1 Hen 18,13-16; 21,1-6 (Ethiopic) mentions seven fallen, sinful stars, but only a text from the Slavonic Book of Henoch - which is contemporary to the Apocalypse (late first century AD) - is of a major importance. 2 Hen 30,2-3; cf. 27,3 (manuscript J) names seven stars created by God as the sun, the moon and the five planets known in the Antiquity. Besides, they were widely recognized as the seven most important celestial bodies; for this reason they have given their names to the seven days of the week, from Sun-Day on. They were classified together by Greek astronomers and associated with seven movable spheres. The word ἀστὴρ used in the Revelation to denote the seven stars has obviously a wider meaning than our "star" (cf. e.g. Rev 2,28; 22,16).

It seems therefore probable that the seven stars held by the Son of Man are to be identified with the sun, the moon and the five planets. The whole image represents his full power over the univers.

Such interpretation of the seven stars from Rev 1,16.20; 2,1; 3,1 would find a decisive confirmation if we were able to discover any links between

1 E.g. W. BOUSSET, *Die Offenbarung Johannes*, MKNT 16, Göttingen 1906⁶, p. 196. H. KRAPP, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT 16a, Tübingen 1974, p. 46.

the seven churches from Rev 2-3 and particular celestial bodies. We should then trace the appropriate symbolic allusions in the messages addressed to the churches.

The most general ancient symbolism of planets is preserved in their Latin divine names we still use. Beforehand, they existed in Greek versions forged in the Pythagorean circles (VI-V century BC)². These Greek names can be found transcribed in 2 Hen 30,2-3 (manuscript J; Kronos, Afridit, Arris, the sun, Zeus, Ermis, the moon)³. The above order is of astronomical origin and based on the Ptolemaic one, but the places of Venus and Jupiter have been exchanged. Whatever order was used in the Revelation, some departures from the standard form can also occur there.

Let us now examine the messages to the seven churches:

Ephesus. If the order of the days of the week (the most popular one) is used here, the first place should belong to the sun. It seems likely, because Ephesus was the biggest city of the Roman province of Asia and its church was also of the first importance. The repeated mentions about the golden lampstands (Rev 2,1.5) could hide an allusion to the sunlight.

Nothing in the text suggests any association with the moon or with Saturn, the first (nearest) and the last in the astronomical Ptolemaic order.

Smyrna. Rev 2,8.10 speak about the death and the return to life. Could not the promise of the resurrection be placed just here because the moon after disappearing from our eyes immediately "revives"?

Pergamum. The third message should refer in some way to Mars, the symbol of war - and indeed it does. We read: "who has the sharp two-edged sword" (2,12). "I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth" (2,16). This coincidence confirms well the initial hypothesis and cannot be dismissed as accidental.

Thyatira. This place should belong to Mercure, but the message concerns most certainly Venus. We find its popular name at the end of the text: "I will give him the morning star" (2,28). Vv. 20-22 accuse the members of the local church of tolerating an immoral woman beguiling some of them to practise idolatry and immorality (and possibly sacral prostitution).

Sardis. We could now look for Mercure, guessing that its place was simply

2 F. BOLL, Stern Glaube und Sterndeutung, Aus Natur und Geisteswelt 638, Leipzig 1919², p. 58.

3 The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, ed. J.H. CHARLESWORTH, vol. 1, London 1983, p. 148-150.

permuted with the one belonging to Venus. The message however contains no clear reference, except maybe the words: "I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you" (3,3). Mercure appears at the end of the night when few eyes remain open - and moreover was considered the god of thieves...

Philadelphia. The only possible allusion to Jupiter is contained in the name of David (3,7): "who has the key of David". Jupiter was the royal star. It is often identified with the star leading the wise men to Jesus (Mt 2,2 etc.). They were able to interpret Jupiter as the star of a Jewish king because of a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn they had observed; Saturn could have symbolized for them the sabbath and hence the Jewish people.

Laodicea. The last place should belong to Saturn. This slowly moving planet was credited in astrology with producing sluggish gloomy temperament in those born under its influence. It fits in with the strongly worded description of this church as "lukewarm" (3,16). Saturn was also related to poverty⁴, which seems to be reflected in v. 17: "you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked".

The number of points where the messages to the churches coincide with the symbolism of the seven main celestial bodies appears significant. Nevertheless there is no question of submitting the whole plan to any astrological considerations. The author alludes to some popular associations rather than to any hermetic knowledge. There are only few meeting points between the star symbolism and the concrete situation of the churches. The order of the seven cities remains geographical (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum - from south to north; Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea: from Pergamum towards the south-east). The vagueness of the symbolic allusions made it possible to harmonize this order with the order of the celestial bodies; only the situation in Thyatira pushed the author to introduce a change. The symbolism of celestial bodies remains in Rev 2-3 a purely literary device which helps to put some order in the distribution of images among the seven sections of the text. Its presence is nonetheless sufficient to confirm that the seven stars from Rev 1,16.20; 2,1; 3,1 are to be interpreted as the sun, the moon and the five planets.

4 cf. BOLL, op. cit., p. 60.