WORDS COME TO LIFE
THE WORK FOR THE “CORPUS HELLENISTICUM NOVI TESTAMENTI” 1)

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All at once the title of this lecture stood before me, suddenly and unexpectedly. I cannot tell you, if there was a hidden, yet real connection here with the name of the particular book of the New Testament, from which the text I was working upon was taken. In any case it occurred to me, while studying an at first sight insignificant detail of the Book of Revelation. The well-known vision of Apoc. xvii pictures the whore Babylon and the Beast with seven heads and ten horns. In explanation of the latter part of this description we are told that these horns are ten kings and that “these are of one mind (mian gnomèn echousin) and give over their power and authority to the beast” (vs. 13). Upon this feature an interesting light is thrown by what is said in vs. 17: “for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose (viz. the destruction of the harlot) by being of one mind (poièsai mian gnomèn) and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled”. This repetition makes it clear that this “one mind” was an important and striking feature to the writer of the Apocalypse; its origin he saw in God who handled these Kings as puppets. In spite of this fact the commentaries give no attention to this expression; it seemed sufficiently clear. Neither in the rest of the N.T. nor in the Septuagint is the combination of mía gnomé found; so it was not an important motive in the Bible.

But in reading a contemporary of the Apocalyptic who worked in the same part of the world, viz. Dio Chrysostom, I had met with

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1) This lecture was given at the School of Theology, Claremont (Cal.) in connection with “Corpus Hellenisticum Colloquium” held at the “Institute for Antiquity and Christianity” (April 20-22, 1970); afterwards it was offered to Iowa State University (religious department) and the Schools of Theology in Vanderbilt University (Nashville, Tennessee) and Emory University (Atlanta, Georgia).
a passage that had caught my eye. At the end of a speech on “Concord” a prayer is offered to various Gods “that from this day forth they may implant in this city a yearning for itself, a passionate love, a singleness of purpose (mian gnomēn), a unity of wish and on the other hand, that they may cast out strife and contentiousness and jealousy, so that this city may be numbered among the most prosperous and the noblest for all time to come” (Orat. 39, 8). It is worth noticing that this “pagan” text sees the origin of this mia gnomē among men in the gods; so it may in one way or another be seen as a parallel to the N.T. passage. But if this were the only thing it could not be called very helpful or bring us much further. However, there is a good rule that tells us that words as such have not much meaning, but do derive it from their context. Now this context in Dio looks as though it is totally different from that of the Apocalypse (city versus kings; peacefulness against destruction).

But if we read the text of Dio we meet here a train of thought that is also found elsewhere in Greek literature. So I collected all texts where the expression mia gnomē occurs. When each text was taken by itself it did not throw light on the passage in Revelation 17, but when taken all together they had one or two common factors: all had to do with the existence of the state and all expressed with these two words an ideal situation. In Greek thinking about the state the conception of “Concord” (Homonoia) is always greatly praised, its absence loudly lamented; party-strife and sedition tore the cities to pieces, were a constant danger. One of the ways to get this desired harmony is expressed by these words mia gnomē. This “one consent” is the essential condition for the internal and external well-being of a state. With the great variety of individual opinions in a democracy the emergence of such harmony was not self-evident, and more or less a wonder.

This technical term, derived from Greek political thought is applied in the Apocalypse to the situation of ten potentates who are autocrats, but now make a common cause. The result of our investigation is that the term “mia gnomē” was not a vague, undescriptive expression, but one that had very definite connotations for Greek ears. Within the setting to which they belong these

1) See my contribution: “MIA ΓΝΟΜΗ, Apocalypse of John XVII 13, 17” in: Studies in John, presented to Professor Dr. J. N. Sevenster, Leiden 1970, p. 209-220 where the material on which the statements in this introduction are based, can be found.