

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF THE APOCALYPSE

Incorporated into the larger work of the Apocalypse, the author includes seven letters to churches in Asia Minor. No explanation is provided why these churches are deemed worthy of the author's attention, or why others are excluded. Ramsay suggested that they follow in a circular order, perhaps reflecting a mail route (Ramsay 1994:137). In that regard, then, the letters were not to be read individually but as an encyclical. As a corpus they addressed the spiritual concerns of the church of Asia Minor. Physical evidence for Ramsay's suggestion is lacking. However, the overlapping and repetitive nature of the letters does indicate that these letters reflect the spiritual challenges facing the church of Asia Minor in the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian during the last decade of the first century CE.

Ephesus (Rev 2:1–7). The city served an important role for the ancient Ionian people; according to Strabo's testimony it was "the royal seat of the Ionians" (Strabo Geog. 14.1.3). During the Archaic period (in 555 BCE) Croesus, the last king of Lydia, conquered the Ionian city (Herodotus Hist. 1.26), only to be followed a short time later by the Persians and Cyrus in 546 BCE. Following the Persian wars, it was a member of the Delian League, but sided with Sparta against Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE). It returned to Persian hegemony in 386 BCE until the conquest of Alexander, in 334 BCE.

The Diadochi Lysimachus (323–281 BCE) insisted that the residents move the city from its earlier setting to its present location between the two hills of Panayir Dagħ and Bülbül Dagħ. The new city was laid out according to a Hippodamian street plan (Paus. Descr. 1.9.7) and surrounded by the impressive Lysimachian wall (Strabo Geog. 14.1.21). An important topographical feature of Ephesus was its harbor. Strabo speaks of the problem of the silting of the Caÿster River (Strabo Geog. 14.1.24), but efforts to dredge the harbor appear to have kept Ephesus as a major commercial and shipping power in the Roman period.

The city was subject to the Pergamene rulers until it was willed to Rome upon the death of Attalus III, in 133 BCE. Its relationship with Rome in the early years of the empire was an unsettled one, but under Augustus the city flourished. It was awarded the title, "First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia" (Oster 1992: 2:543). Its importance in the province of Asia may explain the considerable amount of time that the Apostle Paul spent there, and perhaps even its place as the first city addressed in the Seven Letters of the Apocalypse.

The temple of Artemis at Ephesus was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world (Herodotus Hist. 1.148; Paus. Descr. 4.31.8, 7.5.4). The Greek goddess was the equivalent of the local Anatolian deity Cybele, goddess of hunting and fertility. Later the Ephesians claimed that both Apollo and Artemis were born in Ephesus and not Delos, the sacred isle (Tac. Ann. 3.60–63; cf. Strabo Geog. 14.1.20). The legendary sanctuary was destroyed and rebuilt on several occasions over the following centuries, but remained one of the most important in the ancient world (Ant. 15:89; Acts 19:23–41).

In contrast to the abundance of historical evidence, little actual physical evidence has been unearthed to attest the presence of the Jewish community at Ephesus. Josephus mentions a large Jewish community there already in the third century BCE (Ant. 12:125–126, 166–168, 172–173). Paul encountered followers of John the Baptist at Ephesus who were incorporated into the fledgling church (Acts 19:1–7). Christianity flourished at Ephesus, and the Ephesian church became an important center in Asia (e.g. Acts 18:19–28, 19:1, 20:16–17; 1 Cor 15:32; 1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:18, 4:12). According to Eusebius, the Apostle John wrote his gospel at Ephesus (Eus. Hist. eccl. 5.8.4), and Ignatius of Antioch attests to a Christian presence here at the beginning of the second century (110 CE; Ign. Eph. 1:3, 6:2). The city's importance continued into the Byzantine period, and it was the site of the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE.

Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11). Overshadowed somewhat by its sister port city to the south, Smyrna possessed its own illustrious past. According to Greek legend and local tradition, the city was the birthplace of Homer in the eighth century BCE (Strabo Geog. 12.3.27, 14.1.37; Paus. Descr. 7.5.12), and it was refounded on its third occasion by Alexander the Great (Aelius Aristides Or. 17.3–5, 18.2; Paus. Descr. 7.5.1–3). Under the Romans it was the early site of a temple to *Dea Roma* (Tac. Ann. 4.56), and later Tiberius awarded it with the coveted title of νεωκόρος (temple-warden) for the cult of Tiberius, Livy and the Senate (Tac. Ann. 4.55–56).

Apart from the letter of Revelation, no other reference is made to Smyrna in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the city is well attested in the Apostolic Fathers (Ign. Eph. 21:1; Ign. Magn. 15:1; Ign. Trall. 1:1, 12:1; Papias 2:1), indicating that the beginnings of Christianity in Smyrna were early. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was the victim of early Roman persecution of the Christian faith in Asia Minor (cf. Ferguson 1998:933–934; *Martyrdom of Polycarp*).

Evidence of a Jewish presence in Smyrna is likewise not in abundance, but an interesting inscription may touch on a line in our letter. An inscription from the Hadrianic period speaks of a public works project carried out by ΟΙ ΠΟΤΕ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ, which may be rendered, "the former Jews" or "those formerly of Judea" (cf. Kraabel 1982:455). The author of our letter refers to "those who say they are Jews and are not" (Rev 1:9). The question, of course, is whether he intended this to refer to those who were born Jewish, but who in his estimation no longer lived worthy of that identity. Or, instead, whether he referred to those who were proselytes to Judaism (or God-fearers), who, though they were

identified with the Jewish community, likewise in the author's estimation failed to live worthy of that association. In either event, the subsequent caustic description that they were "of the synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9) should not be read as an anti-Jewish invective. Nearly identical rhetoric is heard in the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Qumran Congregation, charging that their Jewish adversaries belonged to the *Congregation of Belial* (1 QHa 10:22).

Pergamum (Rev 2:12–17). Sixteen miles (26 km) from the Aegean Sea in the region of Mysia, the acropolis of Pergamum rises 1,000 feet (305 m) above the plains of the Caicus River. The city gained little attention until the Hellenistic period. Lysimachus, one of the Diadochi of Alexander the Great and king of Thrace, took possession of the territory and treasures of Antigonos Monophthalmus, after the latter's defeat and death at the Battle of Ipsus in 301 BCE (Diod. Sic. 20.107.3). The king appointed Philataerus to govern at Pergamum and entrusted to him his wealth for safekeeping (Strabo Geog. 13.4.1). When Lysimachus was killed by Seleucus I in 281 BCE, Philataerus retained possession of Lysimachus' treasury and used it to establish an independent principality ruled by the Attalid dynasty.

Under the Attalid, Eumenes II, Pergamum was able to free itself from Seleucid domination with the help of the Roman general, Scipio Asiaticus. Together they defeated the Seleucid, Antiochus III, at the Battle of Magnesia in 189 BCE. Pergamum was rewarded with independence and control of the Seleucid's territory in Asia Minor. The city-state entered its golden era and during this time founded its famous library and school of sculpture. Its identity as an independent kingdom ended with the last of the Attalids, Attalus III, who died in 133 BCE. He bequeathed his kingdom to Rome, which incorporated the territory into the Province of Asia.

Josephus records the Pergamenes' response to the decision by the Roman Senate in regard to a matter pertaining to the Jews of Pergamum (Ant. 14:247–255). Thus, it seems already in the days of John Hyrcanus a Jewish presence was known in this city. Cicero also mentions that Flaccus (c. 80 BCE) had secured at Pergamum the gold of the Jews from Asia that was intended for Jerusalem (Cic. Flac. 28.68).

Among the impressive buildings that cover the acropolis of Pergamum, two important structures may shed light on the elusive identity of "the throne of Satan" in our letter (Rev 2:13). To commemorate the defeat of the Celts in 230 BCE, a monumental altar to Zeus was constructed. Sacrifices continued on the altar night and day, seven days a week (Aune 1997:180). In addition, two centuries later, in 29 BCE, Pergamum was the site of the first temple in Asia, dedicated to *Dea Roma* and the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus (Dio Cass. 51.20.6; Tac. Ann. 4.37). Yet, the mention of persecution and martyrdom of a certain Antipas, "who was killed among you where Satan dwells" (Rev 2:13), suggests that the persecution experienced during the reign of Domitian—as well as the identity of the throne of Satan—was related to Roman emperor worship and not to the pagan cult of Zeus.

One other reference is worthy of brief mention. The author speaks of those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:15) and the teaching of Balaam (Rev 2:14). The Nicolaitans have already been mentioned in the letter to Ephesus (Rev 2:6), but we possess no other contemporary witness for the Nicolaitans or their teachings (Ferguson 1998:814–815). Nevertheless, the collocation in the letter to Pergamum of the Nicolaitans and those who hold to the teaching of Balaam may indicate that these two groups are to be identified.

The content of their teaching is further clarified by an explanatory statement about Balaam, "who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality" (Rev 2:14). The author's interpretation of the actions of the Moabite prophet belongs to the fascinating reinterpretation of the figure in post-biblical Judaism (Kugel 1998:801–810).

The trajectories of interpretation were driven by the moral and spiritual challenges that faced the Jewish community living in the Diaspora, as well as the early church. Although not guilty of these charges according to the biblical description, Balaam was recast to embody the dangers of idolatry and sexual immorality that endangered the early church and the Jewish community living in the Greco-Roman world. To that end, creative exegesis was employed to exploit aspects in the contours of the biblical narrative.

First, immediately following Balaam's departure the account in Numbers mentions the twin sins of "the teaching of Balaam": "While Israel dwelt in Shittim the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods" (Num 25:1). Together with this, the Hebrew wording in a subsequent mention of Balaam retains some ambiguity. The daughters of Moab are described by Moses,

Behold, these caused the people of Israel, in the matter of Balaam (בַּלְעָאָם, בְּרַב־בַּלְעָאָם) to act treacherously against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. (Num 31:16)

The phrase, בַּלְעָאָם, בְּרַב־בַּלְעָאָם be variously rendered, "in the matter, thing of Balaam" or "by the word of Balaam" (cf. LXX Num 31:16: τὸ ῥῆμα Βαλααμ). Later, interpreters used these words as the genesis to clarify the sudden and unexplained idolatry and sexual immorality committed by the Israelites in Numbers 25:1–2. Some interpreters even went so far as to record the very wording of Balaam's advice.

"You have in your countrymen, king," [Balaam] said, "women of outstanding beauty, and there is nothing to which a man more easily falls captive than a woman's beauty. . . . But you must instruct them not to allow their wooers to enjoy their charms at once. . . . One of those (women) should say, with saucy air: 'You must not be permitted to enjoy my favors until you have left the ways of your fathers and become a convert. . . if you are willing to take part in the libations and sacrifices which we offer to idols of stone and wood and other images.'"

(Philo Moses 1:294–298; cf. Midr. Tanh. Balaq 18)

It may be of some significance that at least in his reading of the biblical episode pertaining to Balaam, the Christian author demonstrates the same approach to the narrative as his Jewish contemporaries.

Thyatira (Rev 2:18–29). Situated between Pergamum and Sardis, Thyatira was a Macedonian settlement, according to Greek tradition (Strabo *Geog.* 13.4). Its history fell under the shadow of the Pergamene state and it served as a frontier outpost in the Hellenistic period. In antiquity it lay at the crossroads between Mysia and Lydia on the plains of a lesser Lycus River, a tributary of the Hermus River. Little archaeological evidence has been uncovered for this relatively obscure city. As Hemer remarked, “the longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities” (Hemer 1989:106). Inscriptional finds refer to a local guild of wool workers, dyers and fullers (Stambaugh 1992: 6:546). Accordingly, in Acts 16:11–15 we encounter Lydia, a Jewish sympathizer living in Philippi, “from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a *worshipper of God* (σεβομένη τὸν θεόν)” (Acts 16:14).

The author’s concern with idolatry and sexual immorality on the part of the churches of Asia Minor is continued in the letter to the church at Thyatira (Rev 2:20). Whereas the author employed the biblical figure of Balaam to epitomize the spiritual dangers that faced the church at Pergamum, he found Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, a fitting metaphor for a prophetess in Thyatira, who was “teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Rev 2:20). The caution against eating foods sacrificed to idols is voiced repeatedly, both in the New Testament (cf. Acts 15:28–29) and early Christian literature, “As for food, bear what you can, but be very much on your guard against food offered to idols, for it is worship of dead gods” (Did. 6:3; cf. Van de Sandt and Flusser 2002:238–270).

Sardis (Rev 3:1–6). The relative obscurity of Thyatira stands in stark contrast to the city of Sardis, an inland city on the banks of the Pactolus River. According to ancient legends, gold washed down in the river formed the basis for the wealthy Lydian kingdom. Sardis served as the capital and home to the legendary Lydian King Croesus (560–547 BCE). His rule marked the end of the Lydian kingdom, when he suffered defeat at the hands of Cyrus, king of Persia. “The city served in turn as the seat of a Persian satrap, as an administrative center for the Seleucids, and as a leading city of the Roman province of Asia” (Pedley 1992: 5:982). Historians record a devastating earthquake in 17 CE (Tac. *Ann.* 2.47; Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 2.86.200; Suet. *Tib.* 48.2; Strabo *Geog.* 12.8.18), but the city recovered and was rebuilt with help from Tiberius and Claudius.

Until recently the only structure still visible from Sardis’ glorious past was the temple of Artemis at the western base of the precipitous acropolis that rises 1,500 feet (460 m) above the Hermus plains. Major excavations in recent years have unearthed a Roman civic center with an expansive gymnasium (Greenwalt 1997: 4:484–487). Passage from its colonnaded palaestra to the Roman baths was through the Marble Court, a two-story arcade that has been mostly reconstructed.

Another significant archaeological discovery from the Roman period is what the archaeologists claim is one of the largest Jewish synagogues from antiquity. Even more intriguing, the synagogue shared a wall with the gymnasium complex. Its considerable size, with an estimated capacity of one thousand people, and its location demonstrate the prominent place of the Jewish community in this ancient city. The beginnings of the Jewish community in Sardis are unknown; however, some scholars read the mention of Sepharad in Obadiah 20 to be a reference to Jewish exiles at Sardis, “and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad (סַפְרָאד) shall possess the cities of the Negeb.” In addition, Josephus informs us that Antiochus III settled Jews in Asia Minor (*Ant.* 12:148–149) and later Jewish communities in the region appealed successfully to Caesar Augustus (*Ant.* 16:171).

Philadelphia (Rev 3:7–13). Today there is little to see from this ancient Asiatic city founded by Eumenes II, the king of Pergamum (197–159 BCE) or his brother Attalus II, whose loyalty to his brother earned him the nickname “Philadelphus” (Gasque 1992b: 5:304). The devastating earthquake that struck nearby Sardis, in 17 CE, likewise ruined Philadelphia (Strabo *Geog.* 12.8.18; 18.4.10; Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 2.85.200). In a sign of appreciation for the benefaction of Tiberius to rebuild their city, the citizens added “Neocaesarea” to its name. Still later, under Vespasian, the city took another imperial name, Flavius (Gasque 1992b: 5:305). Hemer has suggested that these actions may provide the background for the notion that Philadelphia will be a new city with a new name (Rev 3:12; Hemer 1989:157–158).

The author’s description of the one who is holy and true (Rev 3:7) draws from the wording of Isaiah 22:22, “And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.” He also repeats phraseology used earlier in his letter to the church at Smyrna (Rev 2:9) to describe the church’s adversaries, calling them “a synagogue of Satan” and those “who say they are Jews and are not” (Rev 3:9). The author’s statement presents a fascinating comparison to the letter of Ignatius of Antioch written about twenty years later to the same city, “But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear about Christianity from a man who is circumcised than Judaism from one who is not” (Ign. *Phld.* 6:1). It is unclear whether Ignatius knew our canonical letter, but his description of the uncircumcised man who teaches about Judaism presents an intriguing parallel to our author’s denunciation of those who say they are Jews but are not.

Laodicea (Rev 3:14–22). The city was founded on the southern banks of the Lycus River by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II, and named in honor of his wife, Laodice (c. 255 BCE). Pliny informs us that the king built the city on the site of a previous settlement called Diopolis (*Pliny Nat. Hist.* 5.105), so called after its patron deity Zeus. Its location shaped the city's history, 6 miles (10 km) south of Hierapolis, 10 miles (16 km) west of Colossae, and positioned on an important crossroads. "At Laodicea a northbound road left the Iconium-Ephesus highway and ran by Hierapolis to Philadelphia and the Hermus valley" (Bruce 1992: 4:229).

Like other cities in the region, Laodicea suffered from devastating earthquakes. During the reign of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Senate agreed to provide resources for the rebuilding of the city (*Suet. Tib.* 8). By contrast, when the city was hit with another major earthquake in 60 CE, it had the economic means (cf. Rev 3:17) to reconstruct the city without Rome's assistance (*Tac. Ann.* 14.27.1).

Two other attributes to the city attested by ancient authors provide background to our letter. The wool from the local sheep was said to have been of a very high quality and black in color (*Vitr. De Arch.* 8.3.14; cf. Rev 3:18). It also seems to have been the primary medical center for the region of Phrygia (Bruce 1992: 4:230). Ramsay drew significance from this and Galen's recommendation of an eye-salve made from Phrygian stone to suggest that it was the background for the author's charge to attain "salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see" (Rev 3:18; cf. Ramsay 1994:309).

Imagery in the opening and closing of the letter also draw from the local setting. Still visible today on the hills adjacent to Laodicea are remnants from the ancient siphon system that brought water to the city. On the site itself, remnants still stand of the water tower for distribution to the city's residents. Cold water was brought from Colossae and thermal waters from hot springs at nearby Denizli. Both the hot and cold water that were brought to the city had their useful purposes. The challenge lay in the transport of the water. If it became tepid in transport, then it became useless. The author uses the imagery of the city's water supply to describe the spiritual challenge for his readers. In their tepid spiritual state they have lost their usefulness to the Lord.

The author concludes with the image of the unexpected visitor, particularly apt for a city at an important crossroads in Asia Minor. Jesus and other first-century sages used the same imagery in story-parables to depict an owner, landlord or king who goes away on a long journey and returns at an unexpected hour. His return marks the hour to assess the diligence of his servants or subjects during their master's absence. The image of the unexpected return is to encourage his readers to remain diligent in their faithfulness to the Lord.