

CHAPTER 7

REVELATION, PART II

II. Things that are present, ch. 2-3

—The letters to the seven churches

Introduction to the Letters

Helpful sources

R. C. Trench, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Seven Churches of Asia* (1862)

William Ramsay in Hastings *Dictionary of the Bible* (articles under the seven city names, 1898-1902)

William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (1905)

Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (1957; note fold-out harmony chart after p. 68)

E. M. Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament* (1965)

Edwin M. Yamauchi, *New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (1980; many photos of sites)

Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (1986; very detailed)

Standard commentaries

Especially F. J. A. Hort (on ch. 1-3), and Henry Barclay Swete, pp. lv-xcviii (and note map on pp. 340-41)

Interpretation methods

1) Historical method

This method understands the seven churches to be seven actual, historical churches. The message given to each is suitable and adapted for the particular local condition of that church. Any applications for churches in other places or times should be based on normal exegesis, as with the other NT epistles.

2) Representative method

While not denying the historical churches, this view believes that these particular seven were chosen because their good and bad points represent those of the entire Christian church throughout history. Each is a particular “kind” of church. Each church is addressed in its representative, rather than its individual, character.

3) Prophetic method

While not denying the historical churches, this view believes that these particular seven churches represent seven progressive stages in the history of the church, from apostolic times until the second coming of Christ. These churches were chosen so that this prophetic program would fit.

Arguments for the prophetic view:

1. Can be made to fit with Philip Schaff’s pattern of church history (up to 1880); see Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, p. 51 (e.g., 2:10—10 “days” of persecution)

Schaff suggests 9 parts to church history, divided into three main divisions (ancient, mediaeval, modern; *History of the Christian Church*, Vol 1: *Apostolic Christianity*, pp. 14-16, 18-19; Schaff himself viewed the 7 churches in Revelation as representative of all kinds of churches throughout church history, p. 454):

1. Life of Christ & Apostolic (1-100)
2. Persecution by Romans (100-311)
3. United to Graeco-Roman Empire and migrations (311-590)
4. Planted among pagan nations (590-1049)
5. Papal hierarchy & scholastic theology (1049-1294)
6. Catholic decay & preparation for Reformation (1294-1517)
7. Reformation & Counter-Reformation (1517-1648)
8. Polemic orthodoxy & confessionalism & progressive movements (1648-1790)

9. Infidelity & revival in Europe & America; missionary movement (1790-1880)

2. Fills in gap of the church age in Revelation (esp. for futuristic view)
3. Many conservative supporters (Cohen 47-65; Walvoord 50-100, etc.)

Arguments against the prophetic view:

1. No such statement or indicator in the text
2. Order in church history seems arbitrary; ignores complexity of church history, leaves out history of Eastern Christianity
3. Gaps common in prophetic books
4. Other epistles not considered to be prophetic in this manner
5. Many conservative supporters for other views

Conclusion: historical view seems best; with applications appropriate to each age and church; same as the other epistles.

Pattern of the letters

—See chart in Tenney, p. 51; and fold-out harmony after p. 68

1. The address
2. Appearance or character of Christ, related to the particular church's situation
3. Commendation (except Sardis [a little] and Laodicea)
4. Condemnation (except Smyrna and Philadelphia)
5. Injunctions or counsel
6. Promised threats or rewards
7. Call to hear (7th place in #1-3; 8th place in #4-7)
8. Promise to the overcomer (ὁ νικῶν *ho nikon*, "the conqueror")

Contents of the Letters

Each of these letters, dictated by Jesus to John, is addressed to one of the particular churches, in the order of the circular mail route. Each letter describes Christ and the church's situation in a manner appropriate to the particular city.

Ephesus, 2:1-7

—Great temple of Diana (Asian adaption of Greek goddess Artemis), Acts 19:27, 34-35; one of the “seven wonders of the world”

—City in gradual decline because harbor silting up

v. 1, Description of Christ

Personal presence among the churches; cf. 1:12-13, 16, 20

vv. 2-3, 6, Good points

Toil, κόπος *kopos*

Patience, ὑπομονή *hupomone*, twice in vv. 2, 3; amplified in v. 3

Intolerance for “bad men”

Testing false apostles; cf. 2 Cor 11:13-15

Hate works of Nicolaitans (cf. “teaching” in v. 15)

Note on Nicolaitans:

The term's meaning is uncertain. It could be derived from the Greek words νικάω *nikao* + λαός *laos* (“conquer” the “people”), meaning those who lord it over other Christians (as in 3 Jn. 9-10). But probably it derives from a proper name, Nikolaos (*BAGD*). Irenaeus suggested that he was the same as the Nicolaus of Acts 6:5 (*Haer.* 1:26:3; 3:11:1, *ANF* 1:352, 426; Hippolytus agrees with Irenaeus). Tenney (pp. 60-61) links 2:6, 15 with Jezebel in v. 20, the sins being fornication and eating things offered to idols (cf. 1 Cor. 10:7-8).

v. 4, Bad points

Left first love (Matt 24:12)

v. 5a, The solution

Tenney: remember, repent, repeat

v. 5b, Threat

Remove the testimony (cf. v. 1, lampstand)

v. 7, Promise to overcomer

“You will be where I am, as I am now where you are”

Tree of Life; Gen 2:9; 3:21; Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2, 14

Paradise of God

Greek word (παράδεισος *paradeisos*) related to Old Persian word *pairidaeza*, “enclosure, garden.” Hebrew word thus פֶּרְדֵּיִם *pardēs*. Related Greek word used by Greek writers for “garden” of Eden, and in LXX.

In NT, word refers to heaven as well: Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 4 (cf. 2); phps. here in Rev 2:7.

Smyrna, 2:8-11

—Smyrna (modern Izmir) a beautiful and powerful port city north of Ephesus; still thriving

—Known for faithfulness to Roman alliance since earliest influence of Rome (cf. v. 10, faithfulness)

—7th century B.C., destroyed by Lydians; remained just a village for 340 years; refounded ca. 300 B.C. by Lysimachus, three miles SW from earlier site (cf. vv. 8, 10-11, death → life)

v. 8, Character of Christ

First and last, 1:17

Dead and lived (aor. “became alive,” resurrection)

Thus guarantees life (vv. 10-11; John 14:19; 2 Cor 13:4)

v. 9, Good things

Loyal to God in tribulation for faith (v. 10, “10 days”)

Poverty, but rich (in faith); 2 Cor 8:9; Jas 2:5

Persecution derived from false Jews

Note on “synagogue of Satan”:

These probably are not orthodox Jews who reject Jesus, but apostate Jews who are not even loyal to the OT and the Jewish law. They are fully Hellenized. A 2nd century A.D. inscription in Smyrna classes groups of citizens, and includes οἱ ποτὲ Ἰουδαῖοι *hoi pote ioudaioi*, “the erstwhile Jews,” indicating full citizenship (*HDB* 4:554-55). For example, the Jews of Smyrna disregarded their own law when they participated in the martyrdom of Polycarp in A.D. 155, by attending games at the stadium on the Sabbath, and by collecting wood on the Sabbath (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, ch. 13, *ANF* 1:42).

(No bad things mentioned)

v. 10a, Coming trials

Some to be imprisoned (devil does it)

Tribulation 10 days

A substantial but limited time (cf. 1 hour, 17:12)

Death (“be faithful until death,” “until” = ἄχρι *achri*)

vv. 10b-11, Encouragement

στέφανος *stephanos* of life, garland, crown of victory

“Of life,” gen. of apposition

No second death for overcomer, 20:6, 14; 21:8

Pergamum, 2:12-17

—Pergamum was the ancient capital of western Asia Minor; it warred with and often

nearly defeated the Gauls to the east. In 133 B.C., King Attalus III willed his large territory to the Romans. They gradually worked out the borders to resemble his kingdom—called it the province of Asia. Although Ephesus was the biggest and most important city, Pergamum remained the capital of the province until A.D. 129.

—As the capital, Pergamum was the first city in Asia to have temples dedicated to the worship of emperors, starting with Tiberius (A.D. 41-54); cf. v. 13.

—Martyrs were brought there for trial and execution; cf. v. 13.

—Pergamum also made and exported fine white parchment; cf. the white stone (*tessara*) in v. 17; not as 3:12, write on him.

v. 12, Jesus with sword in his mouth (cf. v. 16)

v. 13, Good things

Faithful in a difficult place, “Satan’s throne”

Ramsay: emperor worship

Yamauchi: altar of Zeus (“Zeus Soter,” now in Berlin museum, result of archaeology later than Ramsay)

A few others: Aesculapius, god of healing (snake on pole)

Hold fast name of God; do not deny faith

The martyr Antipas is otherwise unknown (but see *NIV Study Bible*’s note about tradition; cf. Mounce in the *NIC*); probably he was the first martyr in Asia, and stands for the rest; cf. v. 10, etc.

vv. 14-15, Bad things

Teaching of Balaam (Num 22-25; esp. 31:16)

Error of Balaam, Jude 11

Way of Balaam, 2 Pet 2:15

Content of teaching:

Eat things sacrificed to idols (cf. v. 20)

Commit fornication

—Cf. Acts 15:20

Teaching of Nicolaitans, cf. v. 6

Term “teaching” emphasizes tolerance for heresy

v. 16, Threat

War against them (teachers), with negative consequences for church

v. 17, Promise to overcomer:

Hidden manna; cf. John 6:48-51

White stone

New name; cf. Christians’ “trade names” to avoid persecution, secret and new baptismal names (*HDB* 3:751b)

Thyatira, 2:18-29

—Thyatira was an important city on the major Roman road about midway from Pergamum to Sardis. It was not honored with an imperial temple, but had several pagan temples, including temples for Tyrimnos (Apollo) and Boreitene (Artemis).

—The city was especially noted for inscriptions left by its powerful trade guilds (cf. Lydia of Thyatira, a seller of purple cloth, Acts 16:14). Fellowship in these guilds led to the sins of v. 20, because the guilds centered around pagan festivals. One major guild made bronze (cf. v. 18b).

v. 18, Description of Christ

Son of God (Matt 4:3), first time in Revelation

As opposed to pagan gods

Eyes, sees the sin of compromise, 1:14

Feet like bronze; comes to judge, 1:15

v. 19, Good things

Works

Love

Faith

Ministry

Patience

Steady growth

vv. 20-21, Bad thing

Jezebel the false prophetess, allowed to teach

Heresies common to the time and place, 2:14

Ephesus settled (2:6), but outlying cities have not yet gotten the message

Cf. beginning development in Paul, 1 Cor 10:15-22

vv. 22-23, Threat for continued disobedience

God's "divine church discipline"; cf. 1 Cor 11:30-32

vv. 24-29, Promise to the overcomer

Ignorance of evil a good thing; value of innocence ("hold onto it")

Believers to rule with Christ (quote from Ps 2:9; as Christ, Rev 12:5; 19:15)

Will also have fellowship with Christ, the Morning Star (Rev 22:16; 2 Pet 1:19)

Sardis, 3:1-6

—Sardis, in the Hermas River valley, was the ancient capital of Lydia; boasted the extremely wealthy king Croesus; later incorporated into the Roman province of Asia.

—It enjoyed an excellent location on a hill, and was easily defended. However, on two occasions the city was captured, apparently at night when guards were careless and let soldiers sneak up the hill (by Cyrus and the Medes, 549 B.C.; by Antiochus the Great of the Seleucids, 214 B.C.; cf. vv. 2-3).

—The city definitely was in decline, while Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum were prospering. "Sardis, though still a place of importance, was, beyond any other of the prominent

cities of Asia, a town of the past, retaining the name of greatness, but decayed from its former estate” (Ramsay in *HDB* 4:405; cf. vv. 1, 5).

v. 1, Description of Christ

7 spirits, 7 stars

Knows hearts, their real feelings and situation

vv. 1-2, Bad things

Dead

No works perfected

v. 4, Good thing

A few names who have not defiled their garments; Jude 23

“The things that remain” (v. 2)

vv. 2-3, Exhortation

Be watchful (warning, v. 3)

Establish the good things

Remember conversion (Heb 10:32-35)

Keep (it)

Repent

v. 3, Threat: Jesus to come unexpectedly

v. 4, Promise: walk in white with Christ

v. 5, Promise to overcomer

White garments, 6:11

Name not blotted out of book of life

An interesting contrast is the fate of Jewish believers on earth, whose names were

blotted out of the synagogue list; they thus lost the protection of Roman law.
There was much Jewish influence in Sardis.

Christ confess him before the Father and angels

Opposite of Mark 8:38; similar to Matt 10:32-33

Philadelphia, 3:7-13

Philadelphia was a relatively new city, founded only ca. 150 B.C. (cf. v. 12). It was located at the valley entrance to the central plain of modern Turkey—hence the “door” idea, vv. 7-8; cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12—door led Paul into Macedonia.

—Philadelphia held out the longest (with Smyrna) against capitulating to the Turks, until A.D. 1379; cf. v. 11.

—Not much is known about the city internally, to link it to details in this letter.

v. 7, Description of Christ

Holy

True

Has key of David

Isa 22:22 (Eliakim, over household of Hezekiah, 2 Kgs 18:18)

Cf. keys of death, 1:18

Cf. Peter’s keys, Matt 16:19

Opens and shuts

Provides opportunities; controls the kingdom; controls life and death

v. 8, Good things

Little power (new church?)

Keep word

Did not deny (even when persecuted? But v. 10)

(No bad things listed)

vv. 8-11, Encouragement

v. 8, Opened door in front

v. 9, False Jews (2:9) to recognize them

v. 10, Kept from coming persecutions (not tribulation)

“And I will keep you out of the hour,” κα’γὼ σε τηρήσω ἐκ τῆς ὥρας *ka’go se tereso ek tes horas*; cf. John 17:15, where *ek* is used this way twice, the second time referring to a time when the disciples will still be in the world

v. 11, Jesus coming soon (22:20)

With crown, so keep the faith

v. 12, Promise to the overcomer

Pillar in temple of God

Stay there permanently

God’s name on him

Name of New Jerusalem on him

Christ’s new name on him

Laodicea, 3:14-22

—Laodicea was located in the Lycus valley, near Hierapolis and Colossae (Col. 4:13). Probably already had received Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (Col. 4:16).

—In the Roman period it became very rich, even refused Roman aid when destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60; cf. v. 17.

—Laodicea was a center of banking; cf. v. 18 (“my gold, not the gold of the bankers”).

—Also a center of black wool trade; cf. v. 18 (“white, not black”)

—Manufactured sought-after “Phrygian powder,” used to cure weakness of the eyes; cf. v. 18 (“not your Phrygian Powder, but my eye salve”).

—Hot water springs located in nearby Hierapolis; cf. vv. 15-16

—City now utterly deserted

v. 14, description of Christ:

The Amen, Isa 65:16 (ASV margin); 2 Cor 1:20

Faithful and true witness

Not flattery from Christ

Beginning of creation, Col 1:15, 18 (NIV “ruler,” ἀρχή *arche*)

Stresses eternity, definiteness, decision

(Nothing good listed)

vv. 15-17, Bad things:

Not cold, or hot; lukewarm

False claims (rich), but . . .

Miserable, poor, blind, naked

vv. 18-19, Counsel (cf. above, description of city):

God’s gold

White garments, v. 5

Eye salve (discover God’s priorities)

Need for zeal and repentance

v. 20, Reward for repentance; John 14:23

v. 21, Promise for overcomer

Sit on Christ’s throne

As Christ in God's throne (cf. John 16:33)