Background: The seven churches of Revelation 2-3

**Author:** St. John, who was exiled there by the Romans as punishment for his ministry. He was the last of the original 12 apostles alive at this time; all the others had been martyred. Church fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries record that in the last decades of his life John lived in Ephesus and led the church of Asian Minor from there. The church historian Eusebius claims that Emperor Domitian exiled John to Patmos in AD 95. By this time John would have been about 90 years old. It is unclear what happened to John later, but he may have been released and may have spent his last years in Ephesus.

**Date:** Most reliable scholarly estimates put the date at about 90–100 AD; claims for earlier or later dates are dubious. It was the last book written in the New Testament. The writing of the book would thus have been during the reign of Roman emperor Domitian 81-96), Nerva (96-99), or possibly Trajan (99-117).

Domitian was the first to begin wide-scale persecution of Christians. Nero persecuted Christians in Rome, mainly out of personal dislike (and his disturbed and twisted mental state). At that time emperor worship (worshiping the emperor as a deity or descendant of the Greek-Roman gods) was common, but not legally required. Domitian was the first emperor to require all subjects of Rome to actually worship the emperor, and because Christians refused to participate in the state religion, in his reign Christians were persecuted for the first time on a wide scale throughout the empire on a purely religious basis.

**Location:** Patmos is a small island off the NW coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), about 16×9km in size. The Romans used isolated locations like Patmos as places of exile for political prisoners. The seven churches were located in the western portion of the Roman province of Asia Minor (Turkey), which was formerly the kingdoms of Lydia and Pergamum before they were annexed by Rome in the late 2nd century BC.

In ancient times, Turkey was known as Anatolia, the home of the ancient Hittite empire (concurrent with ancient Old Testament kingdoms and Abraham). Later the area consisted of various smaller kingdoms and states – Lydia, Pergamum, Phrygia, Mysia, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, etc. It was taken over by the Romans and annexed as a province called Asia Minor. Later in history it was the center of the Western Roman empire, the Byzantine empire, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. It was taken by the Turks in the 1300's and later became the center of the Ottoman empire, until after World War I, when Attaturk ended the corrupt Ottoman empire (an Islamic state) and founded a modern, secular, democratic state known as Turkey.

**Genre:** Revelation (Latin revelatio, Greek apokalypsis) or the Apocalypse means “revealing, unveiling”. It is of course prophetic, but prophecy literally means “speaking forth, declaring”, i.e., declaring God’s truth, and is not just predictive. In fact, most of the Old Testament prophetic writings were not predictive, but calls to repentance, salvation, instruction, obedience, and judgment.

Apocalyptic literature is a special type of prophecy, as seen in Zechariah, parts of Daniel, and parts of other OT prophetic books. It is also found in non-biblical Jewish religious writings, especially in the intertestamental period until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (400BC – AD 70); these writings were nationalistic in purpose – Jewish apocalyptic literature was motivated by messianic expectations and hope of deliverance from Roman control. Apocalypse was also common in some non-biblical writings in the time of the early church, which were mostly heretical writings that attempted to legitimize heretical teachings by false teachers. Apocalyptic literature (whether genuine or not) is characterized by some of the following features:

- heavy use of symbolism
- a messianic emphasis or message of deliverance
futuristic emphasis, long-range predictive prophecy, or the future of human history foretold

- a “revealing” of spiritual truths that were previously secret or hidden
- description of the end of human history, divine judgment, and/or the ultimate conflict of good vs. evil
- spiritual visions, and/or an angelic messenger involved in giving the vision to the recipient

**Theme.** Because of the widespread persecution of the church at the time, the book’s main theme is about spiritual warfare and Christian hope. It is designed to explain the spiritual battle that persecuted believers are caught up in, the conflict between good and evil, God’s purposes in human affairs, and the coming judgment of the wicked. It is a book of hope, designed to explain why they were suffering, and their hope in eternity, divine judgment of the wicked, and Christ’s return. It also contains specific words of warning and encouragement for believers in the context of spiritual warfare, such as those to the seven churches in ch. 2-3.

**Purpose of studying Rev. 2-3.** These Bible studies are intended to examine Christ’s evaluation of these churches, their spiritual state, and the quality of their service. The focus should be practical for our own lives. Discussing futuristic and predictive aspects of prophecy is not relevant to these studies. [Regarding possible futuristic interpretations of Rev. 2-3, see the last section below.]

**Religious background.** At this time in church history a number of false teachings created problems for the church, as false teachers tried to draw people away from the church, or tried to infiltrate the church and spread their views within the church. Paul had to rebuke Jewish legalizers, who insisted on following Jewish circumcision and other rituals in addition to faith in Christ as necessary for salvation, in his epistle to the Galatians. Gnosticism started to develop at this time, teaching that one had to have their esoteric spiritual knowledge – complex knowledge of angelic and divine beings – in order to attain salvation. Gnostics believed that matter and the body were evil, and often followed a legalistic lifestyle to deny bodily and material desires. They denied the incarnation of Christ (a combination of divine and human), and taught instead that Jesus was either a spirit being without a physical body, or a person who for a while attained divine enlightenment or indwelling of a spirit being. Gnostic elements are refuted in the opening to 1 John and parts of Colossians. Other movements tried to blend religions – syncretism – by incorporating pagan elements into Christianity. This is referred to in the message to the church at Pergamum and Thyatira.

Another problematic false teaching is antinomianism (from Greek meaning ‘against the law’) or libertinism, the very opposite of legalism. These refer to a lifestyle or doctrine that attempts to justify some degree of worldly living, immoral lifestyle, or even pagan practices, in a supposedly Christian framework. (Libertinism refers more to a general lifestyle without necessarily any attempt at theological justification, while antinomianism is an attempt to theologically justify it.) This involves abusing God’s grace and forgiveness to allow or justify sinful practices, or interpreting Scripture more liberally to accommodate worldly or pagan practices. This can include sexual immorality, drunkenness, and other immoral practices associated with paganism. Thus, antinomianism at this time went hand in hand with syncretism of pagan and Christian elements. One such movement was the Nicolaitans, followers of the heretic Nicolas, which the Ephesian church had to deal with.

**The seven churches.** These seven churches were picked probably because of their strategic locations in important economic, cultural, and political centers; their proximity and relevance to John (where he had ministered in Asia Minor, and near where he was staying at Patmos); and because together they form a representative sampling of different types of church bodies, in different states of spiritual well-being – a microcosm of the church as a whole, for examination and evaluation, and as examples for us to learn from.

A unique message is given to each church, including a unique opening and closing, directed specifically to each church’s situation. Each is addressed via “the angel of the church in...”; this seems to be more of a formality; the Greek word for ‘angel’ (αγγελός, angēlos) literally means ‘messenger’. The churches were addressed in geographical order, forming a circular pattern (see map).

**Ephesus** was one of the most important commercial and export centers in Asia Minor, located along several key trade routes. It belonged originally to the kingdom of Pergamum and was bequeathed to Rome by King Attalus III of Pergamum in his will when he died in 133BC. It was in a strategic location for the church to promulgate the gospel to other regions, and by virtue of John’s (apparent) leadership there, it was probably the pre-eminent church
in the region.

Pagan religions flourished in Ephesus. There were temples dedicated to the imperial worship of some of the caesars. The main temple was the huge Temple of Artemis (Diana, goddess of the moon, childbirth, and the hunt), one of the wonders of the ancient world, and four times as big as the Parthenon of Athens. Aquila and Priscilla brought Christianity there in AD 52 (Acts 18), and Paul spent two years there on his next missionary journey. While during Paul’s stay, he faced strong and even riotous opposition from followers of Artemis, led by the silversmith Demetrius (Acts 19). Later Timothy ministered there (1 Tim. 1:3).

Ephesus is praised for taking a stand against wicked people and false teachers, such as the Nicolaitans who advocated following immoral and pagan practices under the banner of spiritual liberty. They are praised for their perseverance under duress—a time of false teachers, a corrupt society, and persecution. But they are reprimanded for their lack of vital, fervent spirituality. They may be good at standing for correct doctrine and theology and against false religious teachings, but their hearts were in the wrong place. It was spiritually dysfunctional, because the main purpose of Christianity—the personal, real, intimate relationship with Jesus—was lost on them. In practice, they denied the Lord’s presence, and hindered the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). As a result, Jesus threatens to remove his presence—his lampstand—from them. A church that focuses too much on doctrine and neglects God’s presence, personal devotion, and the love of God (and hence, love toward others) is in danger of losing God’s blessing, presence, and power.

Jesus begins the message in Rev. 2 by referring to himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars and seven lampstands symbolize the seven churches. Holding the seven stars in his right hand represents his authority over his churches. The lampstands symbolize the divine presence. In the OT Jewish temple, a single gold lampstand (the menorah, i.e., candelabrum) burned oil to supply light. The church is supposed to be a light to the world and show God’s presence to the world. Here, especially, this reminds the readers that Jesus is in the midst of his church, and his presence is with us as a church when we worship and serve together. This serves as a reminder to the Ephesian church, which has grown lukewarm and forgotten God’s real presence.

The conclusion addresses those who overcome, that is, believers—who have overcome the corrupt world and the forces of evil (Rev. 21:7, 1 John 4:4) by virtue of their salvation in Christ. The promise to eat from the tree of life naturally invokes the image of paradise Genesis 2-3. ‘Paradise’ came from the Persian word for pleasure garden, but biblically it is “God’s garden” where Adam and Eve enjoyed full intimacy with God and full innocence before Him. This is to remind the Ephesian church that the whole point of Christian life is not doctrine or theology, but a real, personal, intimate relationship with God.

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1 Or Alashehir; it means either “reddish city” (due to the volcanic soil in the region, which made it fertile for growing grapes) or “city of God” (Allah shehir) in Turkish. At times it was also called Neocaesarea (during the reign of Tiberius, out of gratitude to Rome for aid in rebuilding after the great earthquake of AD 17) and Flavia (under the reign of Vespasian, AD 70-79). Smyrna today is known as Izmir.

2 Two famous incidents of Attalus II’s devotion to his brother King Eumenes II: (1) Upon a false rumor of Eumenes’ assassination, Attalus took the throne, and then relinquished it when Eumenes returned from Greece; (2) Attalus resisted Rome’s encouragement to overthrow his brother and make himself king. Thus, he was called Attalus Philadelphus. The area was annexed by Rome after Attalus III died in 133BC.
of the trade routes, but also to promote Greek culture in the region. This “missionary” attempt to spread Greek
culture and language worked well enough that by the 1st century AD Greek had replaced the Lydian language in the
area. The region was famous for fertile vineyards, which contributed to its prosperity. The area suffered periodically
from earthquakes, and the city is located along a fault line. The city was severely damaged by an earthquake in AD
17, which it recovered from due to Roman financial assistance. It was famous for its wine industry, its athletic
games, a large number of pagan temples, and its religious festivals. Because of its wine growing industry, worship
of Dionysus (Bacchus, the god of wine, in other words, the god of parties and pleasure) was the primary pagan cult.

Spiritually, the Philadelphian church faced an uphill battle, not only from the pagan environment, but from
strong opposition from non-Christian Jews (v9), who excommunicated Christian Jews from the synagogue. They
seemed to have “little power” – maybe a small congregation that didn’t seem to make much of an impact on the
unbelieving city, yet they remained faithful and persevering. The non-believing Jews relied on their religious and
national heritage rather than true faith for their claim to be God’s people. A true Jew is one inwardly, not outwardly
(Rom. 2:28-29) and the church is the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). Those who practice false religion and oppose
God’s true people play into the devil’s hands (John 8:44, 2 Cor. 11:14-15).

In contrast, Jesus encourages them by reminding the mistreated Christians there that He is the holy and true one
(v7) who has real power over the kingdom (the keys in v7 symbolize power and authority) – cf. the promise of
spiritual authority and power given in Matthew 16:19. They may be weak, but in Him they are strong and still have
power to accomplish God’s work in the kingdom. Just as the city itself is a commercial gateway and a center for
promoting Greek culture, Jesus has opened a door for them to do the work of the kingdom and to spread the gospel
in spite of the difficult spiritual battle they face – and the city was strategically located for spreading the gospel to
other areas. He promises them that someday their opponents will have to convert or be forced to acknowledge that
these Christians are God’s people. He promises protection in the midst of trial or tribulation that is to come
(probably the further persecution that is yet to come from Rome) in v10. The believers are promised a crown – a
wreath (στέφανο~, stephanos) given as a victor’s crown in olympic style athletic contests that were so popular.
They are also promised to be made a pillar in God’s temple, which symbolizes spiritual stability, permanence,
strength, and presence (cf. Gal. 2:9, 1 Tim. 3:15). This stands in contrast to all the pagan temples of the city, and
in contrast to the unstable ground in an earthquake zone that the city rested on. While opponents deny they are
God’s people, God promises that they will be recognized as His people, that God will acknowledge them, and they
will always be with Him (v9). God’s approval will be stamped on them, they will be God’s, and God will be their
new identity. God’s name denotes His character, nature, and identity, and the fact that they belong to God will be
obvious to all, as His name will be written on them. These are strong words of hope and encouragement to a church
facing opposition and limited success in ministry.

Laodicea is modern day Eskihisar; it was in a valley along two important trade routes, and was 9km from Hierapolis
and 16km from Colossae, with high mountains to the south. It was founded in the 3rd century BC by the Greek king
Antiochus II and named for his wife Laodice. A large number of Jews later settled in the area. The church was
probably founded by Paul on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:10).

It was the wealthiest city in the region of Phrygia. The fertile ground in the surrounding plateau region provided
good grazing for sheep, which supplied a glossy black wool that was very famous and expensive. This led to the
development of a major textile industry in the city and the modern equivalent of pricey designer brand clothes. The
agricultural and commercial prosperity attracted the banking industry to Laodicea. The city was also famous for a
nearby medical school, 20km to the NW. The school was famous for ophthalmology and for pioneering
heterogeneous mixtures of medicines. This led to the creation of a nard or salve for treating eye diseases known as
“Phrygian powder” for which the city was also famous\(^3\). The city became so wealthy that after a devastating
earthquake of AD 60, the city was able to rebuild itself without any financial aid from Rome.

Its main weakness was the lack of a water supply; its location was chosen for road routes rather than for natural
resources. Water had to be imported via aqueducts (long systems of stone pipes) from natural springs near modern
day Denizli, 9km south of Laodicea. In fact, the Laodicea area was famous for its natural springs – not surprising,
since it is a region of seismic activity. Hierapolis was famous for its hot mineral waters, which were popular with

\(^3\)Phrygian powder, or collyrium (κολλυριον), was a popular eye salve and was even exported. It consisted
of a medicinal powder mixture that was mixed with oil and applied to the eyes as a doughy paste.
Romans and Greeks for their curative and medicinal properties for all kinds of ailments or general good health. Colossae was well known for its cold pure spring water that was popular as a source of refreshment. One particular spring flowed from Hierapolis, forming a river that flowed into a pool over a cliff near Laodicea. By the time the water reached that pool, it had cooled down to a lukewarm temperature, and the cliff was covered with calcium carbonate. The water in that pool was distasteful to unsuspecting persons who tried to drink it and would have spit it out.

The church is reprimanded not just for its lack of spiritual fervor in v15-16, but for its spiritual ineffectiveness that results from its complacent attitude. They are judged for failing to be a source of healing to the spiritually sick world, or a source of refreshment to the weak. Instead, Jesus wants to spit or vomit (ἐμεῖν, emeō) them out. He continues with ironic criticism, which suggests a good number of people in the church may not have been genuine believers, since he offers a gospel invitation in v20. The city is a wealthy city, and the believers are likewise proud and complacent, putting too much trust in themselves and their wealth. Jesus tells them they are spiritually poor, blind, and naked, in stark contrast to the city’s wealth derived from its textile, banking, and pharmaceutical industries. White clothes stand in contrast to the city’s famous black garments, and throughout Revelation represents the believers’ righteousness. In God’s eyes, they have nothing, and need to obtain true treasure, and can only obtain it from Him.

The introduction of the messages reminds them that God is faithful and true, in contrast to their hypocrisy and unfaithfulness. They were actually inhospitable to Jesus, leaving Him outside their church, so Jesus asks the fake or hypocritical Christians to actually invite Him in to their church or hearts and fellowship with Him (v20) – in Ancient Near Eastern culture, having a meal with someone was associated with approval and personal intimacy, and even as a sign of a covenant. The conclusion promises that those who overcome will reign with Christ. Jesus promised his disciples that they would reign with Him (Mt. 19:28), and all believers are to reign with God (2 Tim. 2:12). This is an apparent reminder to Laodicea about the seriousness of Christian life, that it requires responsibility, and that we should be focused on heavenly things, not earthly things or ourselves.

The rest of Revelation. Understanding the rest of Revelation cannot be addressed very well here. The following visions are unusual and difficult, and some have baffled scholars for ages. Easy answers cannot be given here, only guidelines on how you might go about looking for answers. First, it is important to consider how the original 1st century readers would have understood it, and what St. John intended when he wrote it – and what God intended in giving it. This requires a good understanding of the religious, historical, and cultural context of the Greco-Roman and Jewish world of the time, literary genres of prophecy and apocalypse, and the Old Testament background to which many visions refer. It is also important to avoid many sensationalistic, popular commentaries and Christian media programs that attempt to provide quick, easy, simplistic answers to interpretation, for example, interpreting it based on current events. They disregard sound principles of biblical interpretation, how the church throughout history has understood it, and the overall instructive purposes of the book. They specifically break with sound, scholarly, evangelical and orthodox principles of interpretation by ignoring its purpose, the nature of the symbolism, the historical context, and the author’s intent.

It is better to look at some good scholarly commentaries by different theologians who take different approaches, examine them, and decide for yourself – after reading Revelation through many times on your own without ideological preconceptions from just one school of thought. You should avoid jumping on the bandwagon of just one viewpoint, but listen to different scholarly viewpoints and come to your own conclusions based on the evidence – different approaches will work better than others for different parts of the book.

A good survey of different approaches cannot be given here. But basically, a particular vision might be better understood in a few possible ways, depending on the context. One approach is to view a vision as instructive about an aspect of spiritual warfare, Christian hope, and spiritual living. For example, the incense in ch. 8 is a biblical symbol of prayer, and this is probably teaching about the power of prayer in the realm of spiritual warfare. The two witnesses in ch. 10 may be symbols of the gospel, the power and testimony of God’s word, or the testimony of Christian martyrs. Some visions address the current situation of the church or things that were to happen soon afterwards.
Some visions refer to what was happening to persecuted believers at the time, and give them spiritual insight into their situation. For example, the beast in Rev. 13 would have been understood by 1st century Christians as a symbol of Rome and the Roman emperor. Some scholars would argue that by extension, it also describes the ungodly world system that is opposed to God, especially rulers and earthly powers that are opposed to God and to believers. Some would argue that by extension the vision of the Roman beast also applies to an evil supreme ruler called the Antichrist who is to come at the end of human history. But a purely futuristic interpretation that focuses only on an Antichrist and ignores how 1st century Christians would have understood ignores sound rules of interpretation. Some visions are clearly predictive and futuristic in nature – very likely, Jesus’ return in ch. 19, and certainly the last chapters on the judgment and the eternal order.

**Futurism and Rev. 2-3.** Some groups take a very futuristic approach to most of Revelation, particularly dispensational premillenialists, who believe in a rapture, a period of great judgment (“the tribulation”), Christ’s second coming, and a 1000-year kingdom on earth. (Adherents to this school of thought should take care to stick with sound scholarly work within this approach, and avoid its sensationalistic popular versions.) Within this school of thought are some who tend to take a sensationalist approach, and even some who follow a futuristic interpretation of Rev. 2-3. In your Bible study it is unlikely that you will encounter such individuals, but if you do it is important to keep the study focused on a practical interpretation, avoid futuristic rabbit trails, and to remember the following.

This overly futuristic approach to Rev. 2-3 claims that the seven churches represent and predict particular stages of the Christian church throughout church history. They claim that Ephesus represents the 1st century church, persecuted Smyrna represents the spiritual state of the Christian church under Roman persecution for several centuries afterwards, and the following churches represent later historical stages of Christianity; Philadelphia represents the reawakened church of the Reformation or post-Reformation eras, missionary movements, and revival periods; and Laodicea represents the apostate, back-slidden church of today up to the end of the world. This view has many problems:

1. These two chapters were directed to actual churches, and must be interpreted accordingly. Such an interpretation ignores what it was intended to mean to the people of the seven churches and other 1st century believers, or imposes a “double interpretation” where it has a message to the original audience and a second futuristic interpretation. This violates established principles of interpretation of evangelical / orthodox biblical scholarship (and basic literary and linguistic principles of interpretation). The practical spiritual value of the teaching of Rev. 2-3 is lost or demoted.

2. It is historically inaccurate and simplistic. The early church was by no means a time of spiritual laxness like Ephesus of Rev. 2. The church from the late 1st century until A.D. 313 (“Smyrna”) was at times strongly persecuted by Rome, but at other times was left alone (but socially disfavored) by Rome, depending on the emperor in power. In the 1st – 5th centuries the church also had problems with heretics (cf. Pergamum, Thyatira). Throughout many periods in history, the church has been strong (cf. Philadelphia) and sent out many missionaries (e.g., the first several centuries of the church, the 17th – 21st centuries), or has been lax, often at the same time, depending on local congregations and denominations.

3. This in fact depends on an oversimplified interpretation of church history. It is not accurate to generalize the church at a given point in history, when the life of the church has varied greatly from place to place and even within short time periods for a given area. This view focuses on Protestant Christianity, and rests on anti-Catholic stereotypes that the medieval Catholic church was all corrupt or spiritually moribund (Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis). This view is in fact ethnocentric. It focuses on the state of Christianity in the West, where the Christian religion in North America and Europe has been affected greatly by worldly influences, syncretism, and theological liberalism, but it ignores the fact that in much of the world Christianity is growing and often spiritually strong (esp. in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, East Asia).

**References.**