

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE SITUATIONS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES (2-3)

Of the seven churches, Paul was instrumental in founding the one at Ephesus (Ac. 18:19-21; 19:1—20:1). Though he did not know the Laodiceans personally (Col. 2:1), he wrote a letter to them which did not survive (Col. 4:16). The other churches were likely the result of mission outreaches by Paul's colleagues or other Christians from the churches Paul started (cf. Col. 1:6-7).

Ephesus

According to Justin Martyr, John spent his last years at Ephesus (*Dialogue with Trypho* 81:4). He took Mary, Jesus' mother, to Ephesus, was then exiled to Patmos, and eventually was released, after which he returned to Ephesus. The situation of the Ephesian church in the Book of Revelation was a tension between correct theology and a love for others. The church had been careful to defend the faith against imposters, who falsely claimed apostleship. They resolutely opposed the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:15).¹ In the process of their defense of the Christian faith, however, they had ceased to love. A concern for doctrinal purity is important, but it must be balanced with love. Too many churches in the battle for orthodoxy, like Ephesus, have become harsh, suspicious, inflexible, and intolerant in their dogmatic-stances. The true mark of Christianity is love (Jn. 13:34-35).



The harbor road and amphitheater at Ephesus has been excavated and is a popular stop for tourists. This view is from above the huge theater looking along the Arcadian Way to the harbor in the center background.

Smyrna

The believers at Smyrna were facing heavy-attacks from the Jewish community. It is to be remembered that Jesus predicted as much (Mt. 10:17). Much earlier, Herod Agrippa I had executed James bar Zebedee, because "it pleased the Jews" (Ac. 12:2-3a). Besides the persecutions mentioned in the New Testament, we know that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was martyred in AD 62 in Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1). In the late 70s, after the fall of Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders included within their synagogue liturgy the *birkat ha-minim*, a curse upon Jewish Christians, which in effect drove them from the synagogues. When Christians were forced out of the synagogues, they lost their status as a sect of Judaism, which was a *religio licita* (= legal religion) in the Roman Empire. Without the privilege of being grandfathered into Judaism, it would be very easy for hostile Jews to expose their Christian neighbors to government authorities. For John, then, the Jewish community was not truly Jewish,

¹ We do not have any specific information about this group except that the early church fathers identified it as being associated with a certain Nicolaus of Antioch (cf. Ac. 6:5) and said that its members shared wives among themselves in a communal type of lifestyle, D. Beck, "Nicolaitans," *IDB* (1962) 111.547-548.

that is, though they claimed the true worship of God, they had rejected God's messiah and thus were not the true Israel. Rather, it was the Christian community that was truly Jewish (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; Phil. 3:2-3).

It is probably worth pointing out that the Smyrna congregation was just the opposite from the Laodicean congregation. Whereas Laodicea was materially rich but spiritually poor (3:17), Smyrna was materially poor but spiritually rich.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the 2nd temple, Christians (like Paul) continued to worship in the synagogues. How did the birkat ha-minim change that privilege?*
- *Do you think John intends Christianity to replace Judaism, or is he redefining the boundaries of Jewishness in order to include everyone with faith in Christ?*



Gods and giants fight on the north façade of the great altar from Pergamum, now displayed at Berlin's State Museum.

THE BIRKAT HA-MINIM

A part of the weekly synagogue service in the 1st century were the Eighteen Benedictions. After the Christians refused to join in the Jewish Revolt against the Romans in AD 66, and the consequent fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the 2nd Temple, the rabbis added to the benedictions the following curse upon Christians and Romans.

“For the apostates let there be no hope, and let the arrogant government (i.e., Rome) be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the Nazarenes (i.e., Christians, cf. Acts 24:5) and the heretics be destroyed in a moment, and let them be blotted out of the book of life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.”

Pergamum

Pergamum was a center for the cult of Asclepius, a mystery religion, and it was the first city in Asia to have a temple dedicated to Augustus and Rome.² John bluntly describes Pergamum as “Satan’s throne.” One believer, Antipas, already had been martyred for his Christian faith. Apparently in fear of this opposition, some Christians were compromising their Christian stance. They were beginning to eat at pagan feasts in pagan temples, and like Balaam (cf. Nu. 22-25; 31:15-16), they advocated a syncretism of Christianity and pagan religion. This might very well have entailed the acceptance of sacred prostitution, which was well known among the ancient Greco-Roman religions.

Christianity is an exclusive faith, not an eclectic one. Whereas the church at Ephesus had sacrificed love for the sake of doctrinal purity, the church at Pergamum had sacrificed Christian distinctiveness on the altar of tolerance.

² The cult of Asclepius claimed to produce physical healings when visionary snakes would lick the wounds of the worshipers while they were sleeping in the shrine, H. Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 173-176. Emperor worship, of course, became the fundamental reason behind many of the governmental persecutions of the Christians. Christians refused to claim Caesar as Lord.

Thyatira



Identified by Marjo Korpel, University of Utrecht, this seal and seal impression contains the name Jezebel. It features common Egyptian symbols popular in Phoenicia, Jezebel's home country before becoming the Queen of Israel (Israel Museum).

Thyatira, like Pergamum, was locked in a struggle with paganism. The imagery representing pagan syncretism is the figure of Jezebel, who had sought to displace Yahwehism with Baalism in Israel (cf. 1 Ki. 16:29-33; 18:13; 19:1-2; 21:25-26). A non-Israelite, Jezebel was dedicated to the Ba'al cult of the Canaanites. Not only did she worship the fertility gods and goddesses, promoting idolatry and sexual license, she began to kill off the true prophets opposing her (1 Kg. 18:4). She even stooped to murdering citizens, who, like Naboth, would not knuckle under (1 Kg. 21:1-14). Hence, like the Old Testament prophets, John views syncretistic religion as a sort of spiritual harlotry and capitulation to paganism (cf. 17:5).

Thyatira was a city with a large number of trade guilds, and all the workers were required to pledge themselves to the religion of the guild, including the worship of Apollo and the gods and goddesses from Lydian, Macedonian, and Greek

culture. Mandatory attendance at trade dinners, which often concluded in unrestrained debauchery, was common. To make matters worse, a self-acclaimed prophetess urged that all this was quite acceptable. So, while the Christians at Thyatira had some commendable virtues with regard to social work, their social conscience was no substitute for infidelity in their moral conscience. Unless they changed their course, they could expect destruction: "I will strike her children dead!" or as it says in the Greek text, "I will kill her children with death!" Still, just as in the days of Elijah and Jezebel, there were a few who remained pure (cf. 1 Kg. 19:18).

Sardis

The exact situation in Sardis is perhaps the most difficult to discover of all the seven churches. Apparently, the Christians there were not facing stiff opposition from the Jews or from the Roman authorities, and they were not forced to defend themselves against any encroaching heresy. Instead, they were being lulled into a spiritual lethargy. They were nominally Christian, but not much more. The character of their Christianity smacked of mediocrity instead of vitality.

God does not assess things by conventional standards. From a worldly point of view, all the signs of prosperity were there in the church at Sardis. Yet, when the Lord looked at it, he saw death. The death of a church is not primarily based on its lack of size, programming, liveliness in worship forms, or religious activity. Rather, it is based on its relationship to the Lord. In Sardis, there was no passion for the things about which God was passionate.

God's warning to Sardis might actually be subtly based on its history. The city had been built on an impregnable acropolis with nearly vertical cliff faces. Nevertheless, twice in its history the city had fallen to enemies, not because of inherent weakness, but because the defenders had been careless. Assuming they were safe, they had not even posted a guard. Still, as in Thyatira, there were a few faithful disciples in Sardis, and they were the ones who Christ said would be clothed in white.

Philadelphia

Evidently the congregation at Philadelphia had experienced problems with their Jewish opponents as had Smyrna. The reference to Jesus Christ holding the “key of David,” especially since it does not appear in the original Christological description of chapter 1, probably indicates that the true entrance into the kingdom of God was through Jesus rather than through Judaism. Just as Eliakim had replaced the egotistical Shebna (Is. 22:15-24), so Christ had replaced the proud Jewish constituency as the true way to God. The open door into the house of David speaks metaphorically of the church’s access into the kingdom of God.

The promise of protection from the time of great distress (cf. Da. 12:1; Mk. 13:14-20; II Th. 2:1-12) may be taken either as preservation “through” the distress or prevention “from” facing the distress. The Greek preposition is inconclusive.³ In light of the rest of the book, however, it is probably better to take it as being kept “through” the time of distress.

Laodicea

One of the richest commercial centers in the empire, Laodicea had interests in banking and textiles. Its material prosperity had diluted the church’s Christian commitment to the point of mediocrity. Her Christian testimony was like tepid water. Christ counseled her to find eye-salve to cure her spiritual blindness, an allusion, no doubt, to the “Phrygian powder” used in Laodicea’s medical school to make eye-salve and marketed extensively in the Roman world. One of the disadvantages of Laodicea was its water supply, which was filled with calcium carbonate. It did not come from native springs, but rather, from the Lychus River, where it was transported by an aqueduct some five miles to the city. It was tepid and nauseous, frequently mixed with white mud. Hence, the admonition, “...you are neither cold nor hot...” (3:16), is a play on the water conditions of the city. The saddest part was that the Christians in Laodicea were completely unaware of their spiritual shortfall. Rich and self-satisfied, they needed spiritual eye-salve so they could see clearly.



*Remains of the Roman Aqueduct at
Laodicea*

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Why do you think John references historical figures like Balaam and Jezebel as prototypes for pagan infiltration?*
- *Is it possible to substitute social consciousness for moral consciousness in the modern church?*

³ Dispensationalists, by tying together the church ages scheme with this verse, often assert that the Greek text must be taken to mean “out of” in the sense of a rapture before the tribulation. This puts more weight on the preposition *ek* than it can bear. Such is a possible interpretation, but by no means is it a necessary one, nor is it the best one contextually. Jn. 17:15, for instance, uses the same preposition, and it is abundantly clear that it refers to a being kept “through” rather than an escaping “from” a trial.