

*The Letters to the Seven Churches  
of Asia in Their Local Setting*

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Hemer explains his purpose on page 2:

It will therefore be our concern in part to examine the racial, religious and social composition of the cities, their problems and ways of thoughts, and to seek to correlate our inferences from the text with the study of the environment. Our primary aim will be to determine what the letters meant to their original readers. In the process we may hope to find some elements to contribute to a picture of the church and the period between A.D. 70 and 100.

On page 4 Ramsey lists historical events that can be correlated fairly closely with events in the reign of Domitian:

- 1) Rev 3:17 connected to Laodicea's unaided recovery from the earthquake of Nero's reign. Hemer argues a strong probability that the reference in Rev is to a later stage of that reconstruction which is mentioned in the sibylline oracles.
- 2) Rev 6:6 alludes to an edict issued by Domitian in A.D. 92 to restrict the growing of Vines in the provinces.
- 3) Rev 2:7 referenced to the abuse of the right of asylum in Ephesus. This is known from the letters of Apollonius of Tyana.
- 4) An explanation is offered of the synagogues of Satan in Rev 2:9 and Rev 3:9 linking them with conflicts operative under Domitian. Hemer connects this to the insertion of the curse of the minim in the synagogue service about A.D. 90.
- 5) Again Rev 6:6, Philadelphia's problems might have been intensified by the occurrence of widespread phenomenon in Asia Minor an inscription at Pisidian Antioch of A.D. 93 is helpful here.
- 6) At bequest made in Ephesus called the salutaris request marks a resurgence of paganism in the city. This might be explained as a reaction against the revival of Christian zeal among the recipients among the apocalyptic letter.

These are specific parallels, these six, but certain expressions while not necessarily referring to explicit datable events offer parallels with contemporary evidence, and indications in general point to a Domitianic date.

Hemer paints a position that the Christians in the developing decades after A.D. 70 were faced with a cruel dilemma. First, they were being pressured from the Roman side and pagan society by sacrifice to the emperor and expected to participate in the religious aspect of guilds in social life, which would be the "Nicolaitan" answer. On the other hand, pressure came from Judaism on whatever terms would gain a person acceptance in

the synagogue. So Christians living in these decades either could go ahead and participate in the emperor worship and avoid problems with the state or could re-identify with Judaism as a licit religion and avoid problems with the Roman state.

However, the Jews themselves were putting even more pressure on Christians because of the situation after A.D. 90 when Jews began expelling Christians from the synagogues with addition in the 18 benedictions of the synagogue service of a curse against the Menim (heretics = Christians). Domitian's heavy-handed insistence on emperor worship just made the problem worse for Christians.

Hemer suggested another related problem for the church of this time period was that of scriptural authority. About this time, the gospel and "the books of the heretics" were refused as sacred scripture, apparently, and so maybe the Jews were beginning to react to Christian claims of authority for their writings, which began to distinguish the Christian writings from the Jewish writings as needing more and more proof for the Old Testament application to New Testament meaning. This interpretation is exactly what Jews were rejecting, so a question of scriptural authority was developing. Hemer then surmises that we should suppose that the curse of the Menim and the definition of the Jewish Scriptures worked together to confront Christians who withdrew from emperor-cult participation with a combined threat of both rejection and of inducement to doubt the foundations of their faith. This combined threat, Hemer speculates, provided a double reason for seeking acceptance in the synagogue (p. 12).

[Footnote on the interpretation of the meaning of the term "angels" in Rev 1:20. Hemer goes with the conclusion that the *aggeloi* are simply personifications of the churches themselves.]

## Ephesus

1) A factor in the racial bitterness which persisted in the city seems to have been the result of the importance and status of the Jewish community in Ephesus likely that a body of Jews have possessed citizenship since the time of the Seleucid.

2) The importance of the Old Testament background specifically in the case of the tree of life (v. 7). This was an idea prominent in Jewish tradition. However, though prominent in Jewish tradition the question still arises why this particular form of promise was chosen. Its background in the city tradition seems to explain. The letter to Ephesus seems to indicate a coming systematic persecution of the church in Asia that is expected by the writer. This would be in accord with the revival of paganism and the imperial cult at Ephesus under Domitian.

3) Identification of the "false apostles." It's hard to say whether these come from a background of Judaism or from a background of Libertarian teachers. Either background would have offered attractive solutions to the difficulties of the persecuted church. Hemer seems to think that the libertarian teachers probably give the background. Pagan pressures and the libertarian teachers would then accord with the reference to the Nicolaitans.

- 4) The Ephesian letter has strong Asian background which indicates that the writer must have known the city intimately. The case here is cumulative.
- 5) The phrase “tree of life.” This phrase may have carried the connotation of the cross of Christ to the original readers of Rev 2:7.
- 6) The connection of tree and paradise may have had pointed local analogy in the tree and the temenos/asylum of artemis which gave them a special meaning for those who lived at Ephesus, that is, the cross was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner in contrast with the tree which marked the asylum for the unrepentant criminal.
- 7) The theme of movement and change important in the history of the city of Ephesus. Rev 2:5 may be applied to the prospect of a removal to the site and beneath the power of the artemisium.
- 8) Connection to the new Jerusalem passage later in Rev where there also is access to a tree of life within the Holy City.

### **Smyrna**

- 1) Writings from those such as Aelius Aristides and the life of Apollonius of Tyana. These writings illustrate illusions to ideas current in contemporary thinking in the city of Smyrna that seem to be present in the letter to Smyrna.
- 2) The etymology of the word “smyrna.” The symbolism develop weeping, burial, resurrection attached to smyrna may have been reflected in the portrayal of the city of suffering so there may have been a connection in the very name of the city itself with its history.
- 3) The introductory address of verse 8 may be related to the local tradition of the city’s history which represented this city as risen again from oblivion. This point may have been overworked by Ramsey because the history of the city may be more continuous than Ramsey and others allow. The continuous nature of the history can be illustrated from Aristides.
- 4) Two elements in the literature may be significant about the city. First is the very meaning of Smyrna related to Myrra and the simile of the Phoenix. Both of these symbols were also used in early Christian literature and that may have facilitated the identification of the fortunes of the city with the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, the words of Rev 2:8 may have been directed against the beginning of the docetism which Ignatius attacked a few years later.
- 5) The background of verse 9 is the bitter opposition of the community against the Christians especially antagonism of the Jews of Smyrna is illustrated from later documents of the local church there.
- 6) The separation of Christian and Jewish communities may account for the comparative lack of Jewish allusion in this letter. “Second death”, a phrase commonly held to the Rabbinic perhaps answered a Jewish taunt in Smyrna.
- 7) An allusion in verse 10 is a proverbial faithfulness of Smyrna is accepted and further illustrated.
- 8) The crown of life probably had very various connotation for a Smyrnaen reader. John probably enlisted significance of this familiar symbol. Probably oriented it to the coming of Christ and implied contrast with the crown presented to a human person(?) at his parousia.

9) The ten days of tribulation - possible connections with local history and literature might be suggested. Expressing them may have some local inspiration for it.

10) Extensive literary parallels in a later document of the Smyrnaean church. The literature especially relates to Polycarp and Pionius points to the continuing influence of our letter in the local church.

### **Pergamum**

1) History of the city helps explain several features of this later character. Religious policy of its kings foster ruler worship. The city's importance of the first center of the imperial cult should be set against this background.

2) Qualification of Ramsey's argument about Pergamum as capital of Asia. However, the "throne of Satan" probably does refer to the primacy of the imperial cult and of the sword as referring to the proconsular authority. There may be incidental allusion to the great shrines of the city especially the throne alter of Zeus Soter and the worship of Asklepios Soter both associated with the serpents. The bible uses the serpent as an emblem of Satan.

3) Context supports interpretation given in #2. Verse 16 the sword associated with authority of the spoken word particularly the sentence of the judge. The mortar Antipas may have been remembered as a first victim or a testate so that there definitely was in some time past the time of Christ.

4) The institutions of Christ and of Caesar seem to have parallel development especially in proconsular Asia.

5) The problem of Nicolaitanism in the literature later references to the sect of suspect either as near entrances from Rev here itself or as colored by later developments. Evidence for a Jewish settlement in this city is very slight so it is surprising to find allusion to Jewish tradition especially the comparison with Balaam, however, Balaam's name or a play upon that name already may have been current in Christian and Jewish controversy.

6) The broader affinities of Nicolaitanism represents accommodation with pagan society and imperial cult but is hard to identify.

7) Hidden manna worded in the Jewish tradition ultimately derived from Exodus 16:32-34. Perhaps the background and the pressures of emperor cults and a third understanding of its significance may involve the question of its relationship with the "white stone."

8) The "white stone" discussed at length several partial analogies and noted a critical study of the background helps to define the area of choice.

9) The ruling (?) best understood as the name given to the individual rather than a (?) of (?). So the usage here is different from the usage in Rev 3:12. This preference is at a factor in the choice of analogies for the "light stone"

### **Thyatira**

1) Identification of chalkolibanos possibly a defined alloy of copper or bronze with metallic zinc. An etymology for the word of suggestive, hypothetical but a natural answer

to the philological objection against early attempts so that chalkolibanos was a trade term whose meaning is familiar in Thyatira.

2) An unremarkable city that characteristics, one being the great development of trade gills. Hemer connects these trade gills to the early history of the Garrison City. These trade gills were important for the development of instruments for the Garrison fortress stationed there. The religion and organizations tried to acquiesce for a syncretistic reconciliation of diverse elements in the population.

3) Judaism in Thyatira has real evidence of its origin of status. However, the legal inscription which is called the Sambatheum Inscription which bears some testimony to the possible influence of a syncretistic magical Judaism present at the time of the writing of Rev.

4) Much of this letter is difficult to assess. However, many of its pages seem to be related to practices involved in the local trade bureau.

5) Identity of Jezebel unknown. Probably an influence from member of the church. Most specific alternative can be substantiated.

6) The character of Jezebel's teaching. The background of the apostolic creed of Acts 15 is illustrative. The temptation to immorality and idolatry likely connected with the practices of trade gill. Jezebel probably taught that a Christian should participate in them for the sake of his livelihood and represented moral scruples as a denial of Christian liberty. However, this type of teaching would deny the agreed principles of Acts 15 on Christian conduct in pagan society. It is a question however, whether Jezebel's teaching was the same as the Nicolaitanism.

7) Promises in verses 26 and 27 are discussed with reverence to background in Psalm 2:8-9. Ramsey is followed in his allusion to the weakness of the church at the mercy of organized pagan society.

8) Morning star. None of the suggestive explanations seems sufficient. It needed no explanation to the original leaders. The difficulty seems to be our ignorance of some contemporary fact or situation. Numbers 2417 may be in the background. Perhaps the saying was pressed into service in the current controversy for the name of Balaam may have been a current slogan so the expression might symbolize sovereignty immortality or priority. And the writer later represents Christ as himself embodying the qualities of true morning star like Balaam was not.

## Sardis

1) Sardis long history and legend, it should become proverbial. A numeral ancient literary parallel shows the reasonableness of allusion to this history in the letter.

2) The account at Croesus in the history of Herodotus a remarkable example of the tendency for the ancients to find moralistic anecdote in the interpretation of historical events. The sudden reverse of reversal of Croesus' lost of his kingdom had extraordinary impact on the Greek world because it was remembered centuries later. A classic story of pride before a fall and misplaced trust in rituals' lack of vigilance.

3) Topography of Sardis illustrates its repetition for strength but this repetition for strength was belied by event. Also the earthquake of A.D. 17 a disaster of almost unparalleled magnitude. Several passages in Rev may reflect local memory of these seismic phenomena.

4) Ramsey's picture of Sardis as a city in decay in New Testament times is overdrawn. It had recovered from disaster and competed for the honor of a neocorete and continued to have some commercial prominence.

5) The influence of Judaism at Sardis seems to be early proof of existence of an Aramaic speaking community in the city in the Lydian-Aramaic bilingual. The argument that there was actually a large Jewish city(?) in Sardis, which is often rejected to similarly(?) is now corroborated by recent epigraphic from the great synagogue.

6) Pagan religion at Sardis seems to show preoccupation with the scenes of death and resurrection.

7) Literary relationships of the present letter are peculiar. Old Testament background not as prominent but remarkable references to worlds attributed to Jesus in the synoptic tradition striking parallels with the Ephesian letter and situational links with the later chapters of Rev.

8) Portrays seven spirits of God. Best explains in connection with parallels elsewhere in Rev which suggest Zechariah 4:2-10 underlines them all.

7 (?) full of activity of the spirit in meeting the need of every church even that at Sardis.

9) Verses 2 and 3 -point to the allusion to the history of the city.

10) The white raiment - not necessarily explained by analogy with Rev 3:18. Ramsey's comparison with the Roman triumph is attractive. But (?) had long testified it from Sardis. The majority of the church were unprepared for the parousia of their king. But when he came the waiting few should walk with him in his triumphal procession.

11) The "victor" cannot be rigidly distinguished from the "few" of the previous verse. The book of life recalls the cities and registers common to the Jewish and Hellenistic world and image at in an ancient center of royal archives. Perhaps here a majority of the church had gained acceptance in the synagogue at the cost of the implicit denial of the name of Christ. A faithful few perhaps faced delusion from the synagogue register, a matter of serious import under Domitian because of a law of the protection of a licit religion. However, in this letter they are assured that their names should never be deleted from the heavenly books so they were resisting a temptation like that which the synagogue of Satan had imposed on the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. This also helps explain the peculiar reiteration of Onoma in the letter which would suit the emphasis on the book or register.

## **Philadelphia**

1) Early history of Philadelphia is problematic. Some assumptions made can be questioned.

2) Affirmative feature of the local tradition of a city that's which prided itself on a corresponding lawyer to review the proverbial brotherly love of Eumenes and Attalus.

3) Ramsey argued that Philadelphia was intended to be a "missionary city." This is questioned. However, interpretation of the "open door" of verse 8 as denoted evangelistic opportunity and the analogy (?) for example 1 Cor. 16:9 may well be correct.

4) The earthquake disaster of A.D. 17 probably meant that the practice of living outside the city continued long after that. The volcanic soil was very suitable for vines but not enough wheat was grown so the city probably suffered during periodic famines. Rev 6:6 is argued to refer to Domitian's edict against vines of A.D. 92. (?) that would

have a exceptional severity for Philadelphia. This edict violated the code that was even observed by conquering (?) That is, to protect Vines because they were so hard to cultivate sometimes taking centuries, however for Domitian to issue this edict was very odd, very cruel. So the character of Christ might be set against the disillusionment with the imperial God, a final promise of strength and stability addressed to a church in a city of repeated earthquakes were living “outside” had become a way of life.

5) No early record of a presence of a community of Jews in Philadelphia, however, “synagogue of Satan” as at Smyrna was taking to be a reference to a body of ethnic Jews who rejected the claims of Christians to be the spiritual Israel.

6) Old Testament background seems to be applied to the local situation ideas from various relevant packages on which the author is meditating. Verse 7 derived from Isaiah 22:22 presents Christ holding power of ignition and excommunication in the heavenly kingdom. This reinforces suggestions about the background of local Jewish opposition which appeared to hold back power does not exclude the possibility that door used in verse 8 can be used with a different evangelistic idea.

7) The problems of verse 10 were discussed. The promises of victory were addressed to a church facing the prospect of disaster.

8) Allusion to pillar in verse 12 not clear. Several distinct contexts might be merged together. Exodus 28:36-38, the inscribed columns before Solomon’s temple other ideas.

9) The expression the name of the city of My God recalls the fact that Philadelphia has taken new names and titles from the family of the imperial God.

10) The evidence of the later church at Philadelphia is particularly relevant in this case as influence of the letter gives possible impact into the original interpretation of it.

11) Lightfoot is followed in his understanding of the Astheia to be a reference to the Old Testament who was in issue of authority and appears that Jewish opposition now possessing an acknowledged canon of scripture was attacking Christian documents. The church then was being challenged to prove its case from the Old Testament and the case acclaimed to be able to do so was in dispute.

12) Philadelphia as a notable center of early Christian property. Probably connected to these controversies over authority. Such controversy then were a formative factor in the later history of the church. The development of Montanism may then be connected with the district in and around Philadelphia. The mountainous claim to provide inspired teaching additional to the apostolic writings may have been an extreme answer for the challenge to those very writings. The expectation among mountainous of the decent of the new Jerusalem near Petuba is a concept derived from Rev and seems to be related to the city of Philadelphia.

## **Laodicea**

1) An influential Jewish community existed in the Lycus cities but it was closely assimilated for the character of pagan society. Laidocian letter is different from the others. The Old Testament background is not as strong and some striking symbols which have no apparent Jewish background are widely recognized as containing local allusions.

2) Three connections to Colossians:

- a. The reference to the Amen, the Jewish phrase, has close parallels to Colossians and the relationship of Colossians 1 to Rev 3:14 is more than literary, the two passages are addressed to related situations.
  - b.
  - c.
- 3) Lukewarmness - related to the local water supply as suggested by Rudwick and Green. The term denotes ineffectiveness rather than half heartedness. Hot refers to the city of Hierapolis and cold refers to the city of Colosse.
- 4) The phrase I am rich, v. 17 alludes to the after math of the great earthquake of A.D. 60. There was an ostentatious self-sufficiency in the refusal of help from Caesar to rebuild the city. Of these revealing monuments, the monumental triple gate that's donated, may have been in mind in the writing of Rev 3:20.
- 5) Evidence for the manufacturer of an eye house in Laodicea seems inconclusive. Some considerations do support the idea however. These would be the local medical school which probably produce influential specialist in ophthalmology also tentative reasons for identifying the phrygian powder with a substance found locally.
- 6) Contrast between white raiment, v. 18, and the clothing made from the wool of a local breed of black sheep accepted and further illustrated.
- 7) Rejection of Ramsey's relegating verse of 19 - 22 to an epilogue. Hemer would say they are integral to the letter and related to the local situation.
- 8) The reference to the door v. 20 best explained against the background of (?) 5:2. Also corrupt Roman officials exploited the local wealth of Laodicea and enforced hospitality for their staff that fell heavily and persistently on the city of Laodicea in contrast Christ pleads for the willing hospitality of the individual heart.
- 9) Verses 20 and 21 allude to the Zenonid dynasty. The Laodecian family which became the greatest in Asia minor after Polemo shut out an invader and received a throne as the prize of victory.
- 10) The reference in a Rev 3:20 is primarily personal and present rather than eschatological. This is argued from the thought of the passage and from the background.
- 11) Evidently the church at Laodicea was very open to sectarian Judaism and syncretistic influences. This may explain why the letter makes little contribution to a wider understanding of the problems of the church in Asia. The letter to Laodicea offers no light on persecution or on racial and religious tension. Such trials and conflicts were acute only when Christians stood apart from Judaism without compromising pagan standards. At Laodicea they compromised.