

Unlocking the Book of Revelation: the Seven Letters - Part II

Chapters 2 and 3

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One of the challenges in understanding the Book of Revelation is grappling with the multiple layers of meaning that is imbedded in this amazing work. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the seven letters addressed to seven churches in chapters two and three.

Before introducing the seven letters, John was transported by the Spirit “on the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10), that is, on Sunday the special day of worship when Christians commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus (Acts 20:7; Lk 24:1-7). The prophet Ezekiel was also transported to different locations by the Spirit (Ezek 2:2 3:14; 11:1; 40:2). Scholars identify the important connection between Revelation and Ezekiel.¹ M. D. Goulder sees the step-by-step pegging of the two books as the formation of a lectionary to be read together at public Christian worship.²

John describes his vision of Jesus using images from both Ezekiel and Daniel, which depict Jesus in his divinity and his humanity. Jesus’ hair is white like that of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9). His voice is described like the rumbling of God’s glory (Ezek 43:2). He has the appearance of “one like a son of man” (Dan 7:13). “His face is like the appearance of lightening, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the noise of a multitude” (Dan 10:6). Jesus’ long robe identifies him as the true high priest (Ex 28:4; Sir 45:8). The “keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1:18) signify that Jesus has the power over life and death. The image of the seven golden lampstands draws from the *menorah*, the branched candelabra, which burned in the Temple (Ex 25:31-39; Zech 4:2). In Revelation it symbolizes the seven churches.

In this brief review of the preamble to the seven letters, the intricacy of Revelation is already evident together with John’s allusions to five Old Testament books in just a few verses. This raises the question, why the complexity in an inspired work that aims to reveal Jesus Christ not obscure him? I believe the answer lies in the impossibility of adequately capturing the supernatural realities of John’s vision with the finite limitations of human language. Faced with this impossible task, John relies on the reality of the covenant, which is the great theme weaving in and out of every book of the Bible, and multiple Old Testament images that give a glimpse of heavenly realities.

The covenant is the oath by which God weds himself to his people. This unique family bond carries with it mutual obligations and promises. It is not surprising that the biblical notion of the covenant finds a reflection in the structure of the ancient Near Eastern peace treaties between kings and their vassals. After all, culture developed from the descendants of Noah’s

¹ Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, Dominion Press (1987), pp. 20-25; Albert Vanhoye, “L’utilisation du Livre d’Ezechiel dans l’Apocalypse,” *Biblica* 453 (1962), pp. 436-476 (esp. pp. 473-476); Philip Carrington, *The Meaning of the Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1931), p. 65.

² Goulder, “The Apocalypse as an Annual Cycle of Prophecies,” *New Testament Studies* 27, No. 3 (April 1981), p. 350.

family with whom God renewed the covenant he made with Adam. These ancient treaties had a five-part structure:³

1. **Preamble** – Identified the lordship of the king stressing his greatness and his nearness
2. **Historical Prologue** – Provided a review of the king’s relationship with the vassal, emphasizing the blessings the king bestowed
3. **Ethical Stipulations** – These enumerate the vassal’s obligations
4. **Sanctions** – The blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience are listed
5. **Succession Arrangements** – This dealt with the continuity of the covenant in the future

Each of the seven letters can be viewed from the perspective of this covenantal structure, which is summarized in the table below.

Covenantal Arrangement of the Seven Letters

	Preamble	Historical Prologue	Ethical Stipulations	Sanctions	Succession Arrangements
Church of Ephesus	2:1	2:2-3	2:4-5a	2:5b	2:6-7
Church of Smyrna	2:8	2:9	2:10a	2:10a	2:11
Church of Pergamum	2:12	2:13	2:14-15	2:16	2:17
Church of Thyatira	2:18	2:19	2:20-21	2:22-23	2:24-29
Church of Sardis	3:1	3:2	3:3a	3:3b	3:4-6
Church of Philadelphia	3:7	3:8	3:9	3:10-11	3:12-13
Church of Laodicea	3:14	3:15-17	3:18	3:19-20	3:21-22

There is another interesting facet to the seven letters in that each letter addresses moral issues that were challenging the seven churches. However, at the same time these evils are reflected in the history of the human race from the dawn of civilization in Eden to the apostolic age. Furthermore, these same issues will repeat in the subsequent history of the Church because humans always battle against the same enemies and temptations: the world, the flesh and the devil. Therefore Revelation is a wake-up call that comforts the afflicted and to afflicts the comfortable. In the discussion below it will become evident how each of the letters recapitulates important segments of salvation history.

1. Ephesus: the Garden of Eden and judgment on false prophets (2:1-7)

John employs language that recalls *Eden* in the Book of Genesis. Jesus announces Himself as the *Creator*. In John’s gospel Jesus is also depicted as the Creator: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1:3). Here he is the one “who holds the seven stars in his right hand.” Jesus “walks among the seven golden lampstands” in

³ Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, Dominion Press (1987), pp. 13-20

judgment, just as God walked in Eden (Gen 3:8). Jesus reminds the church that it has “fallen” and threatens to remove the “lampstand from its place” just as Adam and Eve were removed from Eden (Gen 3:24). However, if they conquer they can “eat from the **tree of life** (Gen 2:9; 3:22) that is in the *paradise* of the Lord.”

2. Smyrna: the Patriarchs and judgment on the enemies of Israel (2:8-11)

In describing the situation in Smyrna, John draws from scenes in the lives of the *Patriarchs*. In the expression “who died and came to life” John recalls the resurrection of *Isaac* from Abraham’s dagger (Gen 22:1-14; Heb 11:17-19), *Joseph’s* salvation from the death of slavery and imprisonment (Gen 37:18-36; 39:20 - 41:45), and *Israel’s* freedom from the death of bondage in Egypt. The Patriarchs experienced “tribulation” and “poverty” as wandering aliens. The persecution by the false Jews in Smyrna is reminiscent of Ishmael’s persecution of Isaac (Gen 21:9; Gal 4:22-31). Slander caused Joseph to be cast into prison (Gen 39:13-20), but he was given a crown as prime minister of Egypt. Finally, the ten plagues in Egypt are portrayed in the ten days of tribulation.

3. Pergamum: the Wilderness and judgment on a false prophet and a evil king (2:12-17)

In the letter to Pergamum imagery is borrowed from Israel’s wandering in the desert. References are also made to “*manna*” and the “*white stone*” with a “*new name*” worn by the High Priest (Ex 28:9-12). Reference is also made to the false prophet *Balaam* and the evil king *Balak*, whom the Jews encountered before entering the Promised Land. As the chosen people approached Canaan from the east, the Moabite king, Balak, sent for Balaam to curse Israel.

Balaam practiced divination (Josh 13:22). Rooted in Balak’s request was the pagan superstition that specific incantations could drain an enemy’s power. God intervened, first telling Balaam not to go, then warning him, and lastly causing Balaam to bless rather than curse Israel (Num 24-25). God’s protection also forced Balaam to proclaim that no occult power can harm God’s people. “For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel” (Num 23:23). After Balaam’s attempts to curse Israel resulted in his blessing Israel, he devised the crafty scheme to get God to curse Israel. He advised Balak (Num 31:16) to employ Midianite women to seduce the Israelites into adultery and idol worship. Although initially successful, the plot ultimately failed when the priest Phinehas drove his spear through the bodies of Zimri, the Simeonite, and Cozbi, the Midianite woman, in the very act of idolatrous intercourse. God doesn’t call wimps to be priests!

4. Thyatira: Davidic dynasty and judgment on the royal harlot (2:18-29)

This is the longest letter to the seven churches. Imagery of the Davidic monarchy is utilized in addressing the church in Thyatira. Jesus uses his title, the *Son of God* to emphasize that he is the promised fulfillment of the great king who would come from the Davidic line (Acts 2:24-36; 13:22-23; Ez 34:23-24; 37:24-28; Hosea 3:5; Jer 30:9; Ps 2:7; 89:19-37). *Jezebel*, the Phoenician princess who married King Ahab, is mentioned. She was the woman who led God’s people into apostasy (1 Kgs 16:29-34; 21:25-26). She supported 850 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19) and suppressed worship to Yahweh (1 Kgs 18: 4, 13). Elijah’s dramatic confrontation with the prophets of Baal is dramatically narrated in 1 Kings 18:20-40. Both she and those who commit adultery with her are threatened with *tribulation* (2 Kgs 9:22).

Jezebel was killed when she was hurled from a window to the pavement below. Jeru then rode over her corpse, which was eaten by dogs (2 Kgs 9:33-37). The letter also recalls the three and a half years of punishment God visited upon Israel (1 Kgs 17:1; Jas 5:17). The expression “power over the nations” (Rev 2:26) alludes to sharing in the messiah’s reign (2 Sam 7:19; 8:1-14; Ps 18:37-50; 89:27-29), which finds an echo in the concluding verse which evokes Psalm 2:9.

5. Sardis: Judgment on the monarchy and judgment on the dead (3:1-6)

In this letter John borrows imagery from those events in the history of the monarchy which led to the destruction of Solomon’s temple and captivity in Babylon. Key expressions like: “*alive*,” “*dead*,” “*awake*,” “strengthen what remains,” and “a few names” recalls the prophetic language about Israel’s apostasy, judgment and the faithful remnant (Is 1:5-31; 2: 12-21; 6:9-13; 26:20-21; 65:8-16; Jer 4:5-31; 7:1-7; 12-15; 8:11-12; 11:9-13; Ez 37:1-14; Mic 1:2-7; Zeph 1).

6. Philadelphia: Return from Exile and judgment on the synagogue of Satan (3:7-13)

The language employed in this letter reflects the Jews return from Exile under *Esra* and *Nehemiah*. The imagery used of the synagogue and the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem also reflects the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Like those returning exiles, the Christians in Philadelphia have “little power” (Rev 3:8). The conflict the exiles experienced from “false Jews” on their return to Jerusalem (Esra 4; Neh 4, 6; 13) is reflected in the expression: “Those of the *synagogue of Satan* who say that they are Jews and are not” (Rev 3: 9). “The *hour of trial*” (Rev 3:10) alludes to the persecution suffered under Antiochus Epiphanes (1 & 2 Maccabees; Dan 8;11).

7. Laodicea: Pharisaical Judaism and judgment on the Lukewarm (3:14-22)

The image of foul water, boastfulness of its wealth and self-sufficiency while oblivious to its inner poverty and nakedness, captures the pride of *Pharisaical Judaism*. Jesus distinctly portrayed this spirit in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple (Lk 18:8-14). Three times in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus calls the Pharisees “blind guides” (Mt 14:14; 23:16; 23:24). The warning that Christ will vomit them out of His mouth is a reference to the covenantal curse of Lev 18:24-28.

Conclusion

The important message of the seven letters can be summarized in one word – Repent! That message was not heeded. As a result these once thriving churches fell away from the Gospel, were overrun by Muslim armies and are under Muslim control today. Consider who were in the apostolic church in Ephesus: St. Paul, St. John the Evangelist, the Blessed Mother, Apollos, three daughters of the Apostle Philip, and Mary Magdalene. Today, there is no church in Ephesus!