

# First Vision: Letters to the Seven Churches

## Overview

Tentatively, we follow the common suggestion that the overall book consists of four visions, each introduced by John’s statement that he “became” or “was carried” “in the Spirit” (chart):

Rev. 1:10 **I was γίνομαι in the Spirit** on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice,

Rev. 4:2 And immediately **I was γίνομαι in the spirit**: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.

Rev. 17:3 So **he carried me away ἀποφέρω in the spirit** into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, ...

Rev. 21:10 And **he carried me away ἀποφέρω in the spirit** to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,

Each of these introduces a coherent section of the book:

- 1:10-3:22 consists of the seven letters to the churches, prefaced by a vision of the Lord instructing John to write those letters.
- 4:1-16:21 consists of three series of seven judgments, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, prefaced by a vision of the heavenly throne room from which the judgments are sent.
- 17:1-21:8 introduces the great whore, the kingdom of antichrist, and describes its defeat by the Lord and the establishment of his kingdom.
- 21:9 reveals the Lamb’s bride, the New Jerusalem.

These four sections are chiasmic: the outer two focus on the Lord’s dealings with his own people, while the inner two describe his judgments on the world. Figure 1 shows the resulting overall structure.

In this first section, the Lord appears to John (1:9-20) and dictates seven letters that he is to write to the seven churches of Asia (ch. 2-3).

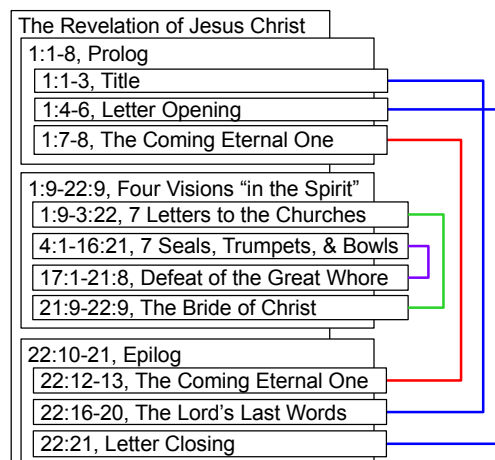


Figure 1: Structure of the Revelation

## 1:9-20, Commission by the Lord

**1:9 I John, who also am your brother, ... in Jesus**

**Christ,**—The verse is probably to be read as a chiasm.<sup>1</sup> “Brother” goes with “in Jesus Christ,” while “companion” goes with “in the tribulation and kingdom and patience” (chart).

In v. 1 he emphasized that he was just one among many servants of the Lord, recalling the Lord’s instruction to him in Matt 20:27, “whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.” “Brother ... in Jesus Christ” recalls Mat 23:8, “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are **brethren**.”

1 Heb 2:9 is another example of chiasm operating at the level of sentence syntax.

**and companion**—“Companion” κοιωνός G2844<sup>2</sup> means one who has something in common with other people. It describes the relation among the partners in the Zebedee Fishing Company:

Luke 5:10 James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were **partners** with Simon.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John shared in the fish business. What do we share as Christians?

**in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience**—These three things are the common possession of believers, as ships, sails, and nets were of the fishing company. In Greek, the phrase reads “in the tribulation and kingdom and patience.” “In the” appears only once, at the very start. The three elements are not identical,<sup>3</sup> but are closely related to one another: present tribulation, the future kingdom, and the patience that enables them to endure from the first to the second. The argument is the same that Paul offers to encourage the Thessalonians:

2Th. 1:4 So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your **patience** and faith in all your persecutions and **tribulations** that ye endure: 5 Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the **kingdom** of God, for which ye also suffer:

**was in the isle that is called Patmos**, —Patmos was one of several islands used as a penal colony, and John’s reference to tribulation shows that he is there because of his

**for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ**.—These two terms, first mentioned in 1:2, summarize the Bible: God’s OT revelation and the teaching of the Lord Jesus, amplified in the NT. Later verses show that these are the cause of persecution (chart):

6:9 And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for **the word of God, and for the testimony** which they held:

12:17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep **the commandments of God**, and have **the testimony of Jesus Christ**.

So we are not surprised that John also suffers for his devotion to these.

John describes two circumstances that lead to his first vision.

**10 I was in the Spirit**—Literally, “I came to be in the Spirit.” The Spirit brought him into an altered state of consciousness; compare Acts 22:17, “come to be in a trance,” and Acts 12:11, “come to oneself.” The first circumstance is that God’s Spirit took control of his mind.

**on the Lord’s day**,—The second was that it was “the Lord’s day.” Some people seek to identify this with “the day of the Lord,” the day when the Lord returns, and suggest that John is saying that the HS has given him a vision of this great coming day. While he will ultimately have a vision of this event, the language here is not the expression that both the NT and OT use for that coming day, ἡμέρα G2250 κυρίου G2962. Rather, it designates the day with an adjective that marks it as belonging to the Lord. The only other instance of this adjective in the NT is 1 Cor 11:20, “the Lord’s supper.”

John is keeping track of what day of the week it is. It appears that in spite of his exile, he has tried to set apart the first day for a time of meditation and prayer, and it is on such an occasion that the Lord appears to John.

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2 This is the majority reading. The TR reads συγκοινωνός G4791, the same word with prefixed preposition “with,” which appears only three times in the MT: Rom. 11:17; 1 Cor. 9:23; Phil. 1:7.

3 Because these are impersonal nouns, the GS rule does not show identity (Wallace p. 287).

**and heard behind me a great μέγας voice, as of a trumpet, 11 Saying,**—The “great voice of a trumpet” puts John back at Sinai. When the people arrived there,

Ex. 19:16 And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a **thick cloud** upon the mount, and the **voice of the trumpet** exceeding **loud μέγας**; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. ... 18 ... and the whole mount **quaked** greatly ... .

This verse in Exodus mentions another feature of Sinai that we have already seen: “he cometh with clouds” (1:7), and as the book unfolds, we will see many references to earthquakes. John is experiencing the Lord of Sinai.

Elsewhere in the NT, we are told that the believer now has nothing more to do with Sinai (chart). Paul uses it as an image of the bondage of unbelieving Israel, and directs the believer’s attention to the heavenly Jerusalem:

Gal 4:22 For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. 24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the **mount Sinai**, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. 25 For this Agar is **mount Sinai** in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. 26 But **Jerusalem which is above is free**, which is the mother of us all.

The writer to the Hebrews develops the image further:

Heb 12:18 For ye are not come unto **the mount** that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, 19 And **the sound of a trumpet**, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: 20 (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: 21 And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) 22 But ye are come unto **mount Sion**, and unto the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, ...

If we “are not come unto the mount” with “the sound of the trumpet,” why does the Lord come to him with all the symbolism of the God of Sinai? As Toplady writes in his hymn, “A debtor to mercy alone,”

The terrors of law and of God  
with me can have nothing to do;  
my Savior's obedience and blood  
hide all my transgressions from view.

But Revelation emphasizes that not everyone has taken advantage of the “Savior’s obedience and blood.” The law that God established at Sinai is eternal. If we receive the Lord Jesus, we receive his imputed righteousness, his own perfect obedience to that law. But unbelievers must still face it themselves, and this book promises that God will hold them to account.

**I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and,**—Not in MT

**What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.**—John is charged to record the vision and

distribute it among the churches. As we have discussed, these were not the only seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. But they likely formed a central route along which a letter could be carried, and by choosing seven, the number of completeness, the Lord implies that the message is for all the assemblies of his people.

**12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;**—Compare Exod 25:31-37; instead of a single candlestick with seven branches, John sees seven independent candlesticks, reflecting the change from the centralized organization of the people of God in the OT to the decentralized organization in the NT (chart).

The Jewish candlestick held seven separate oil lamps. One task of the Jewish High Priest was to tend the lamps, filling them with oil and trimming or replacing the wicks (chart):

Lev. 24:2 Command the children of Israel, that they bring unto thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamps to burn continually. 3 Without the vail of the testimony, in the tabernacle of the congregation, shall Aaron order it from the evening unto the morning before the LORD continually: it shall be a statute for ever in your generations. 4 He shall order the lamps upon the pure candlestick before the LORD continually.

In the OT, the high priest tended a single centralized candlestick. Now John sees the risen Lord tending seven distributed candlesticks. His “garment down to the foot” (1:13) echoes the LXX description of the priest’s garments:

Ex. 29:5 And thou shalt take the garments, and put upon Aaron the coat (LXX the foot-length robe)

Zech. 3:3 Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. 4 And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment (a foot-length robe).

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, describes not only the long robe but also the breast-high position of the girdle, or belt:

Antiq. 3:153 Over this he wore a linen vestment, ... This vestment reaches down to the feet, ... 154 it is girded to the breast a little above the elbows, by a girdle often going round,

So the fundamental picture is of the Lord, as high priest, tending his churches, as the high priest tends the lampstand. The imagery reminds us:

- of our responsibility to shine as a church, bringing glory to the Lord;
- of our autonomy, in contrast to the integrated lampstand of the Jewish tabernacle;
- of our Lord’s care for us, guiding us to ever greater brightness for him.

John continues with even more details of the one who is among the candlesticks.

**13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. 14 His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.**—Each of the elements in this description draws on an OT character, as shown in Table 1. In the OT

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Verse	Description	Origin	Significance
13	one <b>like unto the Son of man</b> ,	Dan 7:13 one <b>like the Son of Man</b> came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days	<b>Man</b>
	clothed with a <b>garment</b> ἐνδύω G1746 down to the <b>foot</b> ποδῆρης G4158,	Ex. 29:5 And thou shalt take the garments, and <b>put upon</b> ἐνδύω Aaron the <b>coat</b> ποδηρῆς, Zech. 3:4 I will <b>clothe</b> ἐνδύω thee [Joshua the HP] with change of <b>raiment</b> ποδηρῆς. Antiq. 3:153 Over this he wore a linen vestment, ... This vestment reaches down to <b>the feet</b> ποδῆρης,	<b>Priest</b>
	and <b>girt about the paps</b> ...	Antiq. 3:153 ... a linen vestment, ... 154 it is <b>girded to the breast</b> a little above the elbows, ...	
	and <b>girt</b> ... with a <b>golden girdle</b> .	Dan. 10:5 Then I lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a certain man ... whose loins were <b>girded with fine gold of Uphaz</b> :	<b>Conqueror of kings</b>
14	<b>His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow;</b>	Dan. 7:9 I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was <b>white as snow</b> , and the <b>hair</b> of his head like the pure <b>wool</b> :	<b>God</b>
	and his <b>eyes</b> were as a flame of <b>fire</b> ;	Dan. 10:6a ... his eyes as lamps of fire,	<b>Conqueror of kings</b>
15	And his <b>feet</b> like unto fine <b>brass</b> , as if they burned in a furnace;	Dan 10:6b his feet like in colour to polished brass,	
	and his <b>voice</b> as the <b>sound of many waters</b> .	Ezek. 43:2 And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and <b>his voice was like a noise of many waters</b> :	<b>God</b>
16	And he had in his right hand <b>seven stars</b> :	Amos 5:8 Seek him that maketh the <b>seven stars</b> and Orion, ... The LORD is his name: (Job 9:9; 38:31)	
	and <b>out of his mouth</b> went a sharp twoedged sword:	Isa 49:1 The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. 2 And he hath made my <b>mouth like a sharp sword</b> ;	<b>Servant of the Lord</b>
	his countenance was <b>as the sun shineth in his strength</b> .	Judg. 5:31 So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD: but let them that love him be <b>as the sun when he goeth forth in his might</b> .	<b>Righteous man</b>

Table 1: John's Vision of the Lord Jesus

these refer to different entities. John draws on passages that he knows to describe what he sees. The One who appears to John shares characteristics of all of them.

These features fall into three groups. The first three and last two (**red** last column) describe special men in the OT, the priest and the servant of the Lord. The central group (**blue** last column) alternates between clear statements of deity and one who is the conqueror of earthly kingdoms.

Consider first his presentation as a man with a distinct role (chart).

**13a And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man**,—The first description comes from the judgment on the empires of this world in Daniel 7:

Dan 7:9 I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. ... 13 I saw in the night visions, and, behold, **one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.**

**clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps**—We have already seen that these two descriptions mark him as a priest.

Again at the end of the description, he is presented as a man with a distinctive role:

**16b and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword:**—This image comes from one of the Servant Songs in Isaiah, in Isaiah 49. These poems describe “the servant of the Lord,” who sometimes is identified as Jacob, but culminates in Isaiah 53 with the redeemer who dies and rises for his people. The Servant of the Lord is a man, but (like the priest in 1:13a) a man specially devoted to the service of the Lord.

**and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.**—The final description comes from the conclusion of the song that Deborah and Barak sang to celebrate the Lord’s victory over the hosts of Sisera. It describes “them that love him,” the people who love and serve the Lord, as contrasted with the Lord’s enemies.

In between these characteristics of a righteous man in the roles of priest and servant of the Lord, we find six features that come from OT passages that emphasize the Lord’s ultimate dominion over all nations of the earth (chart). The description alternates between references to the angelic conqueror of Daniel 10 and clear characteristics of full deity.

**13b girt ... with a golden girdle. 14 ... his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace;**—The material of his girdle, the flaming eyes, and the feet shining like brass recall Daniel’s vision in ch. 10. To understand the significance of these features, we need to recall the context.

In response to Daniel’s fasting and praying for three weeks, a heavenly being appears to him. The being explains his delay by conflict with the prince of Persia (10:13), and says that after his departure he must do battle with the prince of Greece as well (chart):

Dan 10:12 Then said he unto me, Fear not, Daniel: for from the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come for thy words. 13 But **the prince of the kingdom of Persia** withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of Persia. ... 20 ... and now will I return to fight with the **prince of Persia:** and when I am gone forth, lo, **the prince of Grecia** shall come.

The passage is extremely important in revealing the heavenly conflict that lies behind this world’s geopolitical struggles. John recognizes the one who appears to him as the leader of God’s forces in this angelic conflict.

**14 His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow;**—Between the golden girdle and the flaming eyes, the description of his hair takes us back to Daniel 7, which we read as the context of the initial reference to “one like unto the son of Man.” That story focused on the interaction between the son of Man and the ancient of Days, between the Father and the Son. Now we are surprised to read that the one who has already been identified with the Son of Man bears the distinguishing mark of the Ancient of Days!

**15b and his voice as the sound of many waters.**—The phrase comes from Ezek 43:2. After recording the departure of the glory of the Lord from the temple in ch. 8-10, in ch. 43 he sees that glory return to a future temple. This glory, like the white hair of Rev 1:14 and Dan 7:9, is a characteristic of deity, and the voice that John hears is like the voice that Ezekiel describes.

**16 And he had in his right hand seven stars:**—The emphasis on the speaker's deity continues in 1:16 with the seven stars. A Jewish reader could not avoid the allusion to the seven stars of the constellation of the Pleiades, which Job and Amos cite as under the control of God.<sup>4</sup> In 1:20, we will learn that the seven stars, like the seven candlesticks, symbolize the seven churches named in 1:11. But we must not miss the allusion to the divine nature of the one who controls the stars.

As with the titles of eternity that we surveyed in 1:8, some of these features show the full deity of the Lord Jesus. Yet some of them (the priest, the servant of the Lord, the shining righteous man) also reflect his humanity, confronting us squarely with the mystery of the incarnation.

**17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.**—Like the Israelites before Mount Sinai, John is terrified. So must everyone be, when confronted with God, the lawgiver:

Rom 3:19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

In the presence of God's holiness, all of us will be overwhelmed by our personal wickedness. This has always been the response of those to whom God reveals himself (see note). Notably, people fall on their faces when fire descends from God:<sup>5</sup>

Lev. 9:24 And there came a **fire** out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and **fell on their faces**.

or when they behold the glory of the Lord:<sup>6</sup>

Eze 1:28 This was the appearance of the likeness of the **glory** of the LORD. And when I saw it, **I fell upon my face**, and I heard a voice of one that spake.

John's response reflects the overwhelming glory with which he has been confronted. But the Lord comforts him:

**And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not;**—Like falling on the face, the divine word of comfort "fear not" has deep OT roots, occurring 78x in the OT, of which 13 are in Isaiah. The two Hebrew words translated "fear not" form 26/23k words in Isaiah (1 out of 1000 words), vs. a third that many 156/427k) for the whole OT.

Throughout the OT, this word is supported by the promise of God's presence to defend:

Is. 35:4 Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, **fear not**: behold, **your God will come** with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you.

Is. 40:9 O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, **be not afraid**; say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**

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4 Swete: "To the Semitic mind the stars of heaven were in the Hand of God (cf. Job 38:31 f., Isa. 40:12), and would fall (Mc. 13:25, Apoc. 6:13) if the support were withdrawn."

5 Also Judg 13:20 (Manoah and his wife), 1 Ki 18:38-39 (at Elijah's sacrifice on Carmel)

6 Also Ezek 3:23; 43:3; 44:4

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Is. 41:10 **Fear thou not; for I am with thee:** be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

So we expect a promise of God’s presence, and now the speaker reveals himself to be God.

**I am the first and the last:**—We noted before the numerous titles of eternity that are assigned either to the Father or to the Son in this book (Table 2, chart). This the last of these titles to appear, and will recur in 2:8 and 22:13. See the note for discussion of its OT background.

Ref	The One who is, and who was, and who is to come ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος	Alpha and Omega τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠ	The First and the Last ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος	The Beginning and the Ending ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος	Who is in View?	Evidence
1:4	<b>X</b>				Father	“God”; Trinitarian greeting
1:8	X	<b>X</b>		(x)	Father	The eternal Lord, 1:4 Almighty = (LORD of Hosts)
1:11		(x)	(x)		Son	Stands in the midst of the candlesticks, 1:12
1:17			<b>X</b>		Son	Was dead, is alive, 1:18
2:8			X		Son	Writer to Smyrna
4:8	X				Father	Vision from Isaiah 6
21:6		X		<b>X</b>	Father	He that sat upon the throne (21:5); father (21:7)
22:13		X	X	X	Son	The one who comes quickly (22:12)

*Table 2: Titles of Divine Eternity in the Revelation. (x) indicates an occurrence of the title in the Textus Receptus (and thus the AV) but not in the Majority Text. **X** is the first occurrence.*

While the Greek phrase does not appear in a relevant context in the LXX, the corresponding Hebrew expression does appear three times in Isaiah, describing the Lord God:

Is. 41:4 Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, **the first, and with the last; I am he.**

Is. 44:6 Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; **I am the first, and I am the last;** and beside me there is no God.

Is. 48:12 Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; **I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.**

**18 I am he that liveth,**—“I am” is italics; there is no verb in Greek. This participle, “the living one,” is a third description, parallel to “the first and the last”: “I am the first, and the last, and the living one.” The sentence break comes after “liveth.” The unity of this description, together with



“the first and the last” as a title of the Lord, leads us to recall the repeated title, “the living God” (θεος ζων).<sup>7</sup> This title has two implications.

Especially in the OT, it often emphasizes the Lord’s power against his enemies. These enemies are typically idolaters, and the writer contrasts them with the true and living God.<sup>8</sup>

Jos 3:10 And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that **the living God** is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Hivites, and the Perizzites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Jebusites.

1Sam. 17:36 Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath **defied the armies of the living God**.

2Kings 19:16 LORD, bow down thine ear, and hear: open, LORD, thine eyes, and see: and hear the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent him to reproach **the living God**.

Jer 23:36 And the burden of the LORD shall ye mention no more: for every man's word shall be his burden; for ye have perverted the words of **the living God**, of the LORD of hosts our God.

This implication of the title would encourage the believers who were facing persecution from the pagan Roman government. They are empowered by dead gods. We serve the living God.

The second implication comes from the distribution of the title in the Bible. It appears at most 20x in the OT,<sup>9</sup> and 17x in the NT, which is only one-third as long. Thus the title is 2.5x more common in the NT than in the OT, probably reflecting the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The full meaning of the claim that God is living becomes clear only when people try to kill him.

This three-fold title, “the first, and the last, and the living one,” is unambiguously a title of deity. It is entirely appropriate for a creature to feel fear in the presence of God. Yet the speaker goes on to emphasize his humanity, as the one who became dead and yet lives. He has personally overcome death, and assures his followers of his ability to protect them as well.

**and was [γινωμαί became] dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore,**—Once again, we confront the mystery of the incarnation. The previous three titles (the first, the last, the living one) are clearly titles of God. In fact, Peter confesses the Lord Jesus to be “the Christ, the son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). Yet the speaker continues with two characteristics that can only be predicated of the Son.

The difference in verbs is critical. “I became dead” but “I am alive.” Life is his enduring, ongoing state; death was something he accepted temporarily.

He has already called himself “the first and the last,” and could characterize himself in terms of any of his actions in the history of the world. He chooses to describe the past in terms of his death, the present in terms of his resurrection life, and the future as the continuation of that life.

**Amen;**— “Amen” is a response by one person to what another says (1 Cor 14:16), so we should probably understand this as an exclamation by John.

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7 Deut. 4:33 LXX; 5:26; Josh 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26 MT, 36; 2 Ki 19:4, 16; = Isa 37:4, 17; Esth. 6:13 LXX; Psa. 42:2; 84:2; Jer. 10:10 MT; 23:36 MT; Dan 4:22 LXX; 5:23 LXX (bis); 6:20 MT, 26; Hos 1:10; Matt. 16:16; 26:63; John 6:69; Acts 14:15; Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16; 1 Th. 1:9; Heb. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:10; 6:17; Rev. 7:2; 15:7. 20x in the OT, 17x in the NT,

8 This contrast is particularly clear in Dan 5:23 LXX.

9 If we include both MT and LXX, which do not always agree

**and have the keys of hell [hades, the place of the dead] and of death.**<sup>10</sup>—Hell here is not the eternal lake of fire, but Hades (G86), the OT Sheol (H7585), the place where the dead await the final judgment. The Hebrew word is often translated “grave” in the OT, but that is more properly קבר H6913, usually translated ταφος G5028.

At the outset, we should note that in this present age, believers do not experience Hades, but upon death enter immediately into the presence of the Lord:

2Co 5:6 Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: 7 (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) 8 We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

In the OT, death is pictured as a place with strong gates. God rebukes Job by pointing out numerous things that God can do and Job cannot, and one is to overcome these gates (chart):

Job 38:17 Have the **gates of death** been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?

But he promises that one day he will overcome this powerful prison and deliver his people:

Hos 13:14 I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be [better, “where are”] thy plagues; O grave, I will be [“where is”] thy destruction:

Paul quotes this promise in 1Cor. 15:55.

The Lord will use these keys at the last resurrection:

Rev. 20:13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and **death and hell** delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. 14 And **death and hell** were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

The world thinks of death as final. Our Lord, by dying and rising again, has demonstrated that he has the power to open the gates of Hades and bring out those who are imprisoned there.

This background sheds new light on something our Lord said in the gospels:

Matt 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and **the gates of hell** shall not prevail against it.

The church is given the power over the gates of hell. By preaching the gospel we deliver people who are under sentence of death. But the Lord retains ultimate authority.

**19 Write [therefore] the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;**—It is common to associate the three clauses of this expression with three sections of the book (chart): what John has already seen (ch. 1), the description of the churches of the first century (ch. 2-3), and the distant future (ch. 4-22) (chart).

There are a number of difficulties with this view (see note). Most notably, we will find references to future events in ch. 2-3, and descriptions of past and present events in 4-22. It is preferable to understand the first clause in parallel with 1:11, “What thou seest, write in a book,” and 21:5, “Write, for these words are faithful and true.” The last two clauses then apply to all of the book:

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10 MT reverses the order of the nouns, “death and hell.” The pair appears in 27 verses in the Greek Bible. In 22 verses death comes first, perhaps reflecting the sequence of experience: first one dies, then one enters into hell. In 9 verses, hades is first. Two verses (Ps 48:1; 49:14) have “hades, death, hades,” while two more (Rev. 6:8; 20:14) have “death, hades, death.”

throughout, both in ch. 2-3 and 4-22, we will read of things that have already occurred, and of things that still lie in the future.

**20 The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks.**—Consistently throughout the Bible, we are offered explanations of vivid symbols. Where such explanations are lacking, we should be cautious.

**The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches:**—Big question: are these the correspondents of the churches, or superhuman angelic characters? Throughout the rest of the book, “angel” is a superhuman being. The problem with this identification is that John is commanded to write to these individuals in ch. 2-3, and it seems strange that one who receives the message from Christ’s angel (1:1) should then be charged with delivering it to other angels, and in particular charging the angel with the sins associated with the churches.<sup>11</sup>

The word ἄγγελος G32 is used in the NT to refer to human messengers as well as heavenly ones (chart):

Luke 7:19 And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come? or look we for another? ... 24 And when the **messengers** of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?

The Lord goes on to call John himself the ἄγγελος promised in Mal 3:1,

Luke 7:27 This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my **messenger** before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Later, we read,

Luke 9:51 And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, 52 And sent **messengers** before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him.

The simplest solution seems to be to consider the seven “messengers” as envoys sent from the churches to visit John in exile. Perhaps they brought material help; they may enquired of his well-being, or sought his counsel on issues, much as we see in the Corinthian correspondence. Now he sends them back with a message for the churches that they represent, and as members of those churches, they share in the praise and criticism that he expresses.<sup>12</sup>

We see examples of such ministry during Paul’s time in prison. To the Philippians he writes,

Php 2:25 Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger,<sup>13</sup> and he that ministered to my wants. ... 4:18 But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the

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11 The interpretation referring the “angels” to heavenly beings who are held accountable for the actions of the churches might be aligned with 1 Cor 6:2, 3. But it seems easier to understand these as being messengers sent by the churches to John.

12 For the use of 2s pronouns addressing the churches, see frequently throughout Deuteronomy, where the nation Israel is often addressed this way.

13 Paul calls Epaphroditus an ἀπόστολος G652, “one sent,” which emphasizes the authority vested in him by the sending church. The word ἄγγελος G32 emphasizes the message carried. The two word families can describe the same individual; in Lk 7:27, “send” is ἀποστέλλω G649, from the same root as ἀπόστολος, while “messenger” is ἄγγελος.

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things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.

And at the end of 2 Timothy he describes a series of visitors:

2 Tim. 4:9 Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: 10 For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry. 12 And Tychicus have I sent to Ephesus. 13 The cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments.

Prisoners depended on faithful friends for their maintenance. In fact, our Lord enjoins us to visit imprisoned saints:

Mat 25:34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: 36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: **I was in prison, and ye came unto me.**

Most likely, the “angels [messengers] of the churches” are such visitors, sent by the churches of Asia with food and clothing for John, to encourage him, bring him news, and carry his counsel back to the various congregations among which he had ministered.

The “angels of the churches” are a reminder to us that local assemblies should stay in touch with one another. The autonomy of the local church is a very important doctrine, but we should not pervert autonomy into isolation. We need to stay in touch with other assemblies, and where appropriate share in their needs and ministry.

**and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.**—As we have seen, this image conveys in a striking way our responsibility to shed the light of the gospel to our friends, neighbors, and colleagues, under the constant supervision and provision of our High Priest, the Lord Jesus.

## 2:1-3:22, The Seven Letters

### Overview

These letters follow a strongly stereotyped structure (Table 3, chart). One purpose of such repetitive structures is to emphasize points by deviating from the structure. Noteworthy deviations mark:

- Two groups of letters, distinguished by whether the promise to overcomers **precedes or follows** the command to hear
- **Chiastic praise and criticism** in the first church of each group
- **No criticism** for Smyrna and Philadelphia
- **No praise** for Laodicea; in Sardis, it is only an afterthought

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	Ephesus, 2:1-7	Smyrna, 2:8-11	Pergamos, 2:12-17	Thyatira, 2:18-29	Sardis, 3:1-6	Philadelphia, 3:7-13	Laodicea, 3:14-22
Command to write	1a	8a	12a	18a	1a	7a	14a
Title from ch. 1	1b	8b	12b	18b	1b	7b	14b
Message	2-6	9-10	13-16	19-25	1c-4	8-11	15-20
I know thy works	2a	9a	13a	19a	1c	8a	15a
Praise	2-3	9b	13	19		8-11	
Exhortation		10				11b	
Criticism	4-5		14-16	20-23	2-3		15-20
Exhortation	5		16		3		18-20
Praise	6			24	4		
Exhortation				25			
Promise to Overcomers				26-28	5	12	21
Let him hear	7a	11a	17a	29	6	13	22
Promise to Overcomers	7b	11b	17b				

*Table 3: The Structure of the Seven Letters*

## 2:1-7, Ephesus

The NT gives us much detail on the church at Ephesus. A survey of this background shows several salient facts (chart) that will help us understand the first of the seven letters.

Paul preaches in the synagogue there after leaving Corinth, on his way to Syria at the end of his second missionary journey, Acts 18:18-22 (chart). He finds an encouraging reception among the Jews. When he leaves, Aquilla and Priscilla remain and carry on the testimony.

The history of this couple illustrates the cosmopolitan nature of the city. Paul met them in Corinth, where they resided after fleeing Rome under Claudius (18:1-3). They arrive with Paul from Corinth, and were hosting the church in their home when Paul later wrote 1 Corinthians from there (chart):

1Co 16:8 But I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost. ... 19 The churches of Asia salute you. Aquilla and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

Then we find them back in Rome, when Paul writes to that city:

Rom 16:3 Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus:

But by the time of Paul's second imprisonment, they are back in Ephesus, the home of Onesiphorus:

2Ti 4:19 Salute Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus.

**Fact:** Ephesus had many transient visitors, people (like Aquilla and Priscilla) who would be there for a while and then pass on.

Another of these travelers is Apollos, a zealous believer from Alexandria who knew only of John's baptism when he arrived in Ephesus. Aquilla and Priscilla instruct him (18:24-26), and he later ministers faithfully in the church in Corinth (Acts 19:1; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6, 22; 4:6).

Ephesus seems to have been particularly open to this Johannine version of Christianity, for after Paul's visit to his home church in Antioch (chart), he makes his way through Galatia back to

## First Vision, Seven Churches

Ephesus (19:1-7), and finds twelve disciples there of the same persuasion. “Disciple” μαθητης G3101 is Luke’s standard word in Acts for a follower of the Lord Jesus, and the implication is that these twelve are in fellowship with the church, in spite of their defective understanding.<sup>14</sup>

**Fact:** Because of the high turnover in the population, the church in Ephesus would encounter many people (like Apollos and these twelve) of diverse background and sometimes varying details of belief.

After Paul’s return, he ministers for more than two years, and performs many miracles (Acts 19:8-10, 20), leading to a rich harvest.

The growth of the new faith raises concerns among the local businessmen (19:23-28), because as people turned to the Lord, they abandon their devotion to Diana, the goddess particularly honored at Ephesus, and no longer purchase her idols. The result is a riot, which the town clerk calms by assuring the people (19:35-37).

**Fact:** The city was fanatically devoted to the goddess Diana (Roman), identified with the Greek goddess Artemis. Her temple at Ephesus was known as one of the seven wonders of the world. She was goddess of hunting, and her sanctuary included a wooded reserve with a sacred tree under which an idol stood.<sup>15</sup>

Paul leaves Ephesus to visit the churches in Greece (20:1-3). Then he heads back to Jerusalem. He initially plans to pass by Ephesus (20:13-16) because he is eager to return to Jerusalem. Ephesus, at one time a coastal city, was now 3-4 miles inland, its harbor (Figure 2, chart) silted up by the Cayster river, precluding a long stop.

**Fact:** The city, vying with Smyrna and Pergamos for the title “the first and greatest city of Asia,”<sup>16</sup> was the largest city of the province, a position fueled in earlier days by commerce through its sheltered harbor. However, the silting of the



Figure 2: *The Silting of Ephesus’s Harbor (Ramsay, p. 212)*

<sup>14</sup> It is strange that Aquilla and Priscilla did not correct this error, after their experience with Apollos. 1 Cor 16:8, 19, written during Paul’s two years in Ephesus, shows that they were in Ephesus during this time. At some point they left Ephesus and returned to Rome (Rom 16:3). Is the episode with the 12 disciples of John perhaps some time after Paul’s return to Ephesus, at a point when Aquilla and Priscilla had already left the city?

<sup>15</sup> Hemer 41-45.

harbor, which led to Paul's decision to pass by the city, anticipated its commercial and political decline.

But when the ship reaches its next regular harbor, Miletus, Paul realizes he must speak to the elders of the church (see Note), so he summons them (20:15-17) for an exhortation rich in principles for the governance of NT assemblies. In particular, he warns them of the danger of false teachers (20:29-31) and encourages them to follow his example of self-support (20:32-35).

**Fact:** The church at Ephesus was well-established, with functioning elders.

Paul's visit to Jerusalem after leaving Miletus leads to his arrest, his appeal to Caesar, and his journey to Rome, where at the end of Acts, about AD 61, we find him under house arrest. During this time he wrote several epistles: Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians. It is helpful to compare this last epistle with 1 Corinthians. Both of them have as their theme the church. But their approaches are quite different. 1 Corinthians deals with a series of practical challenges facing the congregation there, reflecting an immature and struggling church. Ephesians is more theological, reflecting the maturity of the congregation there.<sup>17</sup>

**Fact:** The church at Ephesus is theologically mature.

Acts ends with Paul's imprisonment in Rome, but Philemon 1:22 anticipates his release, and leaving Rome he probably traveled and ministered for two more years before being reimprisoned and executed under Nero. During this time, he writes 1 Timothy and Titus, helpers whom he had assigned to help the churches in Ephesus and Crete, respectively (chart).

1Ti 1:3 As I besought thee to abide still at **Ephesus**, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they **teach no other doctrine**, 4 Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.

He particularly warns Timothy about the danger of false teaching, motivated by gain:

1Ti 6:3 If any man teach otherwise, and **consent not to wholesome words**, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; 4 He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, 5 Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, **supposing that gain is godliness**: from such withdraw thyself.

**Fact:** As Paul predicted in Acts 20, the church faced false teachers and leaders greedy of gain.

These seven background facts will clarify the message of this epistle.

**2:1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;—**  
The Lord identifies himself in terms that recall 1:13, 16:

Rev. 1:13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, ... 16 And he had in his right hand seven stars:

But there are subtle differences:

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<sup>16</sup> Trench; Swete cites the relevant inscription

<sup>17</sup> A similar pairing is evident in Galatians and Romans. The theme of both is the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, but Galatians focuses on practical challenges to the gospel, while Romans provides the theological foundation for the gospel.

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In 1:16, he simply has the seven stars in his hand. Here, he grasps them, holding them tightly (κρατέω G2902). Trench comments:

He holds these stars in his grasp,—words full of comfort for them, if only they are true to Him; none shall pluck them out of his hand (John 10:28) . . . but words which are full of fear for the unfaithful, for the idol shepherds (Zec 11:17), who feed themselves and not the flock (Eze 34:1-10). Them too He holds in his grasp, and none can deliver them from his hand.

In 1:13, he simply is in the midst of the candlesticks. Here he is walking, actively visiting each church, observing its conduct, and caring for its needs.

**2 I know thy works**,—This statement introduces the body of each epistle (Table 3). In itself, it does not indicate good works, for it is used of Laodicea, a church that receives only criticism.

At first glance, the singular pronoun “thy” seems to refer to the messenger carrying the letter. But clearly, the Lord has the entire church in view. In such cases, it is probably better to understand the singular as emphasizing the unity of the church,

Rom 12:5 So we, **being many, are one body** in Christ, and every one members one of another.

1Co 10:17 For we **being many are one bread**, and **one body**: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

1Co 12:12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and **all the members** of that one body, **being many, are one body**: so also is Christ.

This use of the singular to refer to a corporate group goes back to the OT:

Deu 6:4 Hear [singular], O Israel: The LORD **our** God is one LORD: 5 And **thou** shalt love the LORD **thy** God with all **thine** heart, and with all **thy** soul, and with all **thy** might.

The verse refers to the Lord as “our God,” yet the exhortation is to “thou.” This interchange of singular and plural to refer to the nation as a whole, often in the same paragraph, is particularly common in Deuteronomy. It shows that the singular can be used to refer to a corporate body, and that’s probably how it’s being used in Revelation 2-3.

The Lord says to each church, “I know thy works.” We rejoice in the grace of God, for we are justified “by grace, through faith, not of works” (Eph 2:8-9). But this does not mean that the Lord does not care about our works. Good works are one of the purposes for which he has created us (Eph 2:10), and he constantly monitors them.

The body of the epistle to Ephesus, like that to Thyatira, is chiasmic, moving from praise to criticism and back to praise (Table 3). Consider the first section of praise:

**and thy labour κόπος G2873, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: 3 And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured καπιώω G2872, and hast not fainted κάμνω G2577.**—

This section is chiasmic (Table 4, chart), with general commendations of their effort surrounding a description of their specific work.

2a		3 TR	3 MT
labour	↓ ↑	not fainted	<b>not</b>
patience		laboured	<b>laboured</b>
cannot bear evil		patience	hast
		borne	patience and <b>hast borne</b>
2b tried false apostles			

*Table 4: Chiasm in 2:2-3*



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The TR and with it the KJV deviate from the majority of manuscripts in v. 3. The TR echoes “labor” of 2a with the corresponding verb “labored” and adds “and hast not fainted,” a different verb. But the majority of mss read “and hast patience, and hast borne for my name’s sake, and has not labored,” negating the verb that corresponds to “labor” in 2a.

The motive for the change in the TR seems clear: if the Lord knows their labor, how could he then say, “thou has not labored”? But the same thing happens to his statement, “thou canst not bear them which are evil,” which in v. 3 becomes (in both TR and MT) “thou hast borne.” The Lord is playing with the words, reversing the statements about both their labor and their bearing to force us to think more clearly about his meaning.<sup>18</sup>

We can understand these superficially contradictory descriptions better if we first understand the center of the chiasm.

**and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:**—Recall that designating a messenger as an apostle emphasizes that they carry the authority of the one who has sent them. We have seen that many people passed through Ephesus. Some of those who visited the church sought to bolster their prestige by claiming falsely to represent some respected individual or congregation, perhaps churches such as Antioch or Jerusalem. It is likely that such deception would be invoked to support further false teaching, such as that against which Paul warned the elders when he met them at Miletus (Acts 20:28-30), and later warned Timothy (1 Timothy 6).

Perhaps because of Paul’s warnings, the church was diligent in examining those who came to it. Consistent with the theological maturity we see in Ephesians, it did not tolerate such error. We have other, even later testimony to this diligence.

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch about AD 100, who was martyred in Rome sometime early in the second century. While being transported there, he wrote seven letters, three of which were to churches among these seven (Ephesus, Philadelphia, and Smyrna). He commends the Ephesians for this same virtue (6:2):

Now Onesimus of his own accord highly praiseth your orderly conduct in God, for that ye all live according to truth, and that **no heresy hath a home among you**: nay, ye do not so much as listen to any one, if he speak of aught else save concerning Jesus Christ in truth.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of this central commendation, we can understand the contradictory frame.

*Labour—hast not laboured*: This word family refers first of all to fatigue,<sup>20</sup> and then to activity that produces fatigue. They have spared no effort in examining the claims of those who come among them. Yet they have not tired in this labor. Compare Paul’s experience:

2Co 4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. 8 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; 10 Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

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18 Compare the use of superficially contradictory statements in Proverbs, e.g., 26:4-5.

19 Lightfoot, J. B., & Harmer, J. R. (1891). *The Apostolic Fathers* (p. 139). Macmillan and Co.

20 The Greek word family is both dominant and dedicated to  $\lambda$  in the LXX.

*Cannot bear evil—hast borne:* The church had experienced much opposition. The key example in Acts is the opposition of the silversmiths. This opposition they had borne patiently. What they did not bear was error within the church. This distinction is again consistent with Paul’s teaching:

1Co 5:9 I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: 10 Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. 11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. 12 For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? 13 But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

*Patience:* This virtue is subsumed in the second half by the positive sense, “hast borne.” In the first half, it reminds us that while zealously guarding against error, they are not rash, but bear up under opposition, both internal and external.

But zeal for orthodoxy is not enough. The Lord has criticism as well as praise for the church.

**4 Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee,**—“Somewhat” does not weaken the charge,<sup>21</sup> but has the sense of “something,” and is added by the translators to make the sentence smoother. To have something against someone is to be offended by them, threatening fellowship (chart):

Matt. 5:23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that **thy brother hath ought against thee**; 24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

Mark 11:25 And when ye stand praying, forgive, **if ye have ought against any**: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

The Lord is doing to Ephesus (and will do later to Pergamos, 2:14, and Thyatira, 2:20) what he instructed his disciples to do in Matt 5:24. He recognizes a sin on their part that threatens their fellowship, and comes to them to seek reconciliation.

How have they offended him?

**because thou hast left thy first love.**—When we read exhortations to love, we naturally ask to whom the love is addressed. Was their first love for the Lord, or for their brethren?

As their “first love,” it is probably their love for the Lord, when the Spirit first opened their eyes to show them his love for them. The exhortation here recalls Jeremiah’s message for Jerusalem:

Jer 2:2 Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, **the love of thine espousals**, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. . . . 5 Thus saith the LORD, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that **they are gone far from me**, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?

Pure doctrine is important, but if it replaces the Lord himself as the center of our devotion, it can become an idol, a manifestation of “the pride of life” (1 Jn 2:16). They no longer “love the Lord” with “all” their “heart” (Deut 6:5). Ephesus has become so preoccupied with doctrinal purity that it has left its love for the Lord. One reason that our weekly gathering at the Lord’s table is so

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21 The word is added by the translators. John himself softens the similar criticism to Pergamos (2:14) and (in TR) to Thyatira (2:20), but there is no softening here.

important is that it constantly brings our minds back to the one who “hath loved us, and hath given himself for us” (Eph 5:2).

But if we love the Lord, we will love the brethren as well:

Heb 6:10 For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed **toward his name**, in that **ye have ministered to the saints**, and do minister.

Our fellowship with one another is based first of all, not on shared doctrine, but on “our fellowship ... with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

Focus on correct doctrine as the ultimate good can lead us to an uncharitable attitude toward those who differ from us on details.

The church’s loss of love may have called to the minds of some the history of their harbor. The waters of the Cayster River, which flowed into the harbor, also carried silt that eventually deprived Ephesus of its harbor and thus its prosperity. A focus on doctrinal purity to the neglect of love can silt up a church, and make it useless to the Lord.

**5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works;**— Note the three commands (chart). Compare 3:3, where Sardis receives a similar command:

Rev. 3:3 **Remember** therefore how thou hast received and heard, and **hold fast**, and **repent**

*Remember:* Compare the exhortation to the Hebrews,

Heb. 10:32 But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions;

Remember your first love for the Lord: the joy of knowing that your sin was forgiven; the excitement of hearing God speak directly to you through his word; the zeal you felt in serving the Lord.

*Repent:* Recognize that you have fallen away from your original intimacy with the Lord.

We usually think of repentance as something that unbelievers do in the process of becoming Christians:

Mat 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, **Repent:** for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Act 2:38 Then Peter said unto them, **Repent**, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Act 3:19 **Repent** ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

But here the Lord exhorts a church, a group of people who already profess belief, to repent of sinful behavior. We see the same thing with Corinth:

2 Cor 7:8 ... I made you sorry with a letter, ... 9 Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that **ye sorrowed to repentance:** for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

*Do:* Show your repentance by “the first works.” Note the repetition of the adjective. A restoration of the **first love** will result in the **first works**. Recall again;

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Heb 6:10 For God is not unrighteous to forget **your work, and [the] labour of love which ye have shewed** toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

**or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.**—Relate to the loss of the harbor and subsequent decline in the stature of Ephesus. Spiritually, if the church continues to “silt up,” replacing a vibrant love for the Lord and for one another with cold theological detail, it will no longer enjoy the presence of the Lord.

When we studied the battle of Aphek in 1 Samuel 4, we reviewed the repeated pattern in Israel’s history of how the Lord endowed a sanctuary with his presence, only to remove it when the people persisted in their sin (Table 5, chart). The threat here is comparable, but adapted to the new nature of the church—no longer a single many-branched lampstand, but a collection of independent lampstands. Under the Levitical system, there was a single sanctuary, which the Lord could enter or leave. Now the many individual sanctuaries gather around the Lord, and if one of them persists in sin, it is removed from the glory of his presence.

**6 But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I ἐγώ [emphatic] also hate.**—Ephesus, like Thyatira, has a second praise section after the criticism.

This sect of false teachers is named in Scripture only here and in the letter to Pergamos (2:15). The earliest explicit definition of them comes from Irenaeus, who lived between AD 130 and 200. His most famous work is a refutation of various heresies that were current in the church (“Against Heresies,” often cited by its Latin name *Adversus Haereses*). In that work (AdvHaer I.26,3) he identifies them with followers of Nicolas of Antioch, who was one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles in Acts 6:5. He writes:

The Nicolaitanes are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, [when they are represented] as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practise adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. Wherefore the Word has also spoken of them thus: “But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.”<sup>22</sup>

	Tabernacle	Solomon’s Temple	Zerubbabel’s Temple
Entrance of the Glory of the Lord	Exod 49:33-34 the Glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle	1 Ki 8:11 the glory of the Lord filled house of the Lord	Hag 2:7 the desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory
Corruption in the sanctuary	1 Sam 2-3, sons of Eli	Ezek 8, 18 Sept 592 BC	Matt 23 31 March AD 33 (Tuesday)
The Glory of the Lord abandons the sanctuary	1 Sam 4:11 the ark of God was taken ... 4:21-22 I chabod ... the glory is departed from Israel, for the ark of God is taken	Ezek 10:18 Then the glory of the LORD departed from off the threshold of the house	Matt 23:38 Your house is left unto you desolate ... 24:1 And Jesus went out and departed from the temple
		11:23 And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city, and stood upon the mountain which is on the east side of the city.	24:3 And as he sat upon the mount of Olives ...
The sanctuary is destroyed	Philistines, ~1050 BC	Babylon 28 Aug 587 BC	Rome 10 Aug AD 70
Dead worship	1050-957 BC	592-587 BC	AD 33-70

Table 5: How Sanctuaries Begin and End

Irenaeus came from Smyrna, where he sat under Polycarp, a disciple of John. So his interpretation may go back to John himself. The two errors of fornication and idolatry come up repeatedly in these letters (2:14, 20). This licentiousness reflected the Greek-Roman culture of the time, where each trade guild had its patron deity and gathered in orgiastic banquets. As a “proselyte” (Acts 6:5), Nicolas was not born and raised Jewish, but had converted to Judaism from this culture. In receiving Christ, he may have abandoned his Jewish commitment, and with it the strict moral standard that rests on the law but was so inconvenient in a pagan culture.

If this identification with Nicholas is correct, he may be one of the false apostles in 2:2. At one time he went out with apostolic authority, but erred in his teaching. We will consider this term again in Pergamos (2:15), where the context suggests a symbolic interpretation of the name.

**7 He that hath an ear, let him hear**—This admonition appears repeatedly in the synoptic gospels, in the plural (Mt. 11:15, 13:9, 13:43; Mk. 4:9, 4:23; Lk. 8:8, 14:35), though curiously, never in John’s other writings. It typically follows a parable or symbolic saying; all three synoptics have it after the parable of the soils (chart).

Matt. 13:9 Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

It thus suggests the need for careful attention to the deeper meaning of what has been said. Recall the warning in the prophets to rebellious Israel,

Ezek 12:1 The word of the LORD also came unto me, saying, 2 Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; **they have ears to hear, and hear not:** for they are a rebellious house. (cf. Jer 5:21).

Our ability to understand the Lord’s revelation depends on our attitude toward him. In order to understand, we must bring a readiness to do what he says.

John 7:17 If any man will [is willing to] do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.

In the Revelation, the exhortation appears at the end of each of the seven epistles, and then in 13:9, after the description of the beast from the sea.

**what the Spirit saith**—The Lord Jesus anticipates that the delivery of the letters by the messengers will be accompanied by the moving of the HS among them.

**unto the churches;**—Note the plural. Each church is expected to pay attention, not only to its own letter, but to those addressed to the others as well.

**To him that overcometh νικάω G3528**—This is John’s word. He uses it 24/28 x in the NT, mostly (17x) in the Revelation.

In each of these seven letters, and at the end of the book, the verb is the condition of a promise:

Rev. 2:7 To **him that overcometh** will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

Rev. 2:11 **He that overcometh** shall not be hurt of the second death.

Rev. 2:17 To **him that overcometh** will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, ...

Rev. 2:26 And **he that overcometh**, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

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Rev. 3:5 **He that overcometh**, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, ...

Rev. 3:12 **Him that overcometh** will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, ...

Rev. 3:21 To **him that overcometh** will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Rev. 21:7 **He that overcometh** shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

The verb means “to conquer,” whether in battle or in a legal case. Elsewhere in John (the gospel and 1 John), the Lord and his people always overcome the forces of evil (chart).

John 16:33 These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have **overcome** the world.

1Jn 5:4 For whatsoever is born of God **overcometh** the world: and this is the **victory** that **overcometh** the world, even our faith.

Certainly, the promises to the churches anticipate the victory of the righteous. And in ch. 4-5, the enthroned Lamb is introduced as victor:

Rev. 5:5 And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath **prevailed** to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.

During the conflict of ch. 6-20, the forces of evil triumph for a time:

Rev. 6:2 And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth **conquering**, and to **conquer**.

Rev. 11:7 And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall **overcome** them, and kill them.

Rev. 13:7 And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to **overcome** them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations.

Yet even during this time of persecution, God’s people can be victorious—not by false accusations or force of arms, but by their faithful witness:

Rev. 12:11 And they **overcame** him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

And at the end, the Lord wins the ultimate victory:

Rev. 17:14 These shall make war with the Lamb, and the **Lamb shall overcome them**: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: ...

The promises to overcomers remind us that we are part of this conflict and are called to victory.

**will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of my God.**—The promise recalls Adam’s exclusion from the garden of Eden and its life-giving tree (chart):

Gen 2:9 the tree of life also in the midst of the garden [LXX paradise].

Gen 3:22 ... lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: 23 Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.

At the end of the book, when the forces of evil have been suppressed, God’s people will once more have access to this tree:

Rev 22:1 And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the **tree of life**, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ... 14 Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to **the tree of life**,

This promise is valid for every church. It is probably given to the Ephesians because of the temple of Diana. The temple featured a garden with a sacred tree, shown in coins of the period (Figure 3). Believers were expected to abandon their participation in idolatry, and they would no longer have access to that beautiful park. The Lord reminds them that there awaits them a far more beautiful garden, where grows the true tree of life.

The majority reading speaks of “the paradise of my God.” The expression “paradise of God” appears 4x in Ezekiel (Ezek. 28:13; 31:8 (2x), 9), a book that John knows very well, in reference to Eden. “My God” reminds us that while the Revelation emphasizes the full deity of the Lord Jesus, it preserves the fundamental mystery of the relation between the Father and the Son.

The big lesson of the church of Ephesus is the warning not to let our love for the Lord stagnate, but to stand for him, even if we are excluded from this world’s pleasures, knowing that a paradise far greater than that of any pagan temple awaits us.



Figure 3: Ephesian (EΦ) tetradrachmas, from 200 BC (top, British Museum 2003,0402.4) and 370-380 AD (bottom, by cgb.fr, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20894068>). Obverse: bee, emblem of Artemis, a Greek goddess identified with Diana. Reverse: stag and sacred tree

## 2:8-11, Smyrna

This is the shortest of the seven epistles (Figure 4, chart), and it deals most directly with the persecution of believers at the hands of Satan’s followers. The two may be related. The Lord wants our eyes to be open to the opposition that believers will face, even “unto death,” but does not dwell morbidly on this theme.

**8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write;**—Smyrna is not mentioned as a city elsewhere in the NT. But the word means “myrrh,” and occurs twice in this sense (chart):

Matt. 2:11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and **myrrh**.

John 19:39 And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of **myrrh** and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

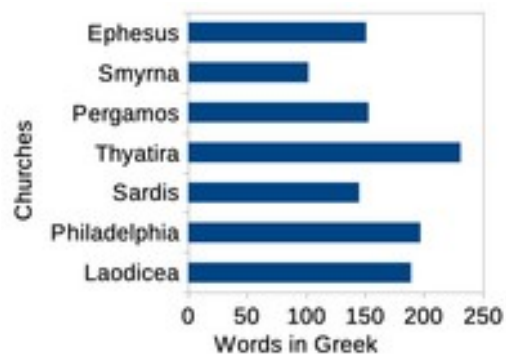


Figure 4: Lengths of the Seven Letters

The Egyptians used myrrh to embalm the body in the hope of resurrection. And in fact the city's history was a model of resurrection. Founded about 1000 BC as a Greek colony and reputed to be the birthplace of Homer, it was destroyed by the Lydian people about 600 BC, but then refounded by Alexander the Great and his successors about 290. Thus its own history as a city was a picture of resurrection.

The “crown of life” in 2:10 recalls a common ancient description of the city, with its citadel atop a high hill, as “crowned” (Figure 5). Aristides described Smyrna as a statue sitting with her feet on the sea, and her head rising to heaven and crowned with a circlet of beautiful buildings (Ramsay 258). Coins from ancient Smyrna show a woman crowned with battlements (Figure 6).



Figure 5: The Acropolis of Smyrna (Mount Pagos) crowned with fortifications (from Mark Twain, *Innocents Abroad*, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Innocents\\_Abroad/Chapter\\_XXXIX](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Innocents_Abroad/Chapter_XXXIX))

The letter to Smyrna, the second in the series of seven, has three similarities with that to Philadelphia, the next to last:<sup>23</sup>

- These are the only two churches to receive no criticism.
- Both contend with “the synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9).
- Both are characterized as having a crown (2:10; 3:11).

**These things saith the first and the last,**—As in 1:17, the title is that used of Jehovah in Is. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12. He omits “and the living one,” but continues as in 1:18,

**which was dead,**—As in 1:18, literally “became dead.”

**and is alive;**—As in 1:18, the emphasis is not that he became alive again, but that he is characteristically alive.<sup>24</sup>

The Lord's reminder of life after death is particularly appropriate for believers in a city that was reborn after being destroyed for 300 years.

**9 I know thy works,**—Again, the general statement is followed by specifics, this time only commendation for the church (but criticism for their adversaries)

**and tribulation,**—The word appears 5x in Revelation, including 2:9, 10. As usual (cf. John 16:33 and Acts 14:22), it refers to the persecution that unbelievers bring against believers, not to God's judgment on unbelievers. The Lord will shortly describe what they can expect.

**and poverty, (but thou art rich)**—Civil opposition might cost them in terms of this world's goods. The various trades were organized into



Figure 6: Coins of ancient Smyrna with crown. Top: Ramsay p. 259. Bottom: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_1896-0601-69](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1896-0601-69)

<sup>23</sup> The verb πειραζω G3985 “to test” is used in both letters (2:10; 3:10), but Smyrna will suffer it, while Philadelphia is promised to be spared.

<sup>24</sup> The verbless clause of 1:18, ζῶν εἶμι, here becomes an aorist (illustrating the timelessness of the aorist).



religious guilds that held periodic banquets given over to worship of the guild’s patron deity and fleshly indulgences.<sup>25</sup> Refusing to participate in such events would be bad for business. But those who suffer material poverty for their faithfulness to the Lord are rich in the goods of eternity, as James recognizes (chart):

James 2:5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

**and I know the blasphemy**—The verb probably refers to blasphemy against God.<sup>26</sup> Paul’s strategy in persecuting the church was:

Acts 26:11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to **blaspheme**; No doubt, he forced them to say something like “Jesus is accursed” (1 Cor 12:3). Later, he himself faced angry mobs shouting this same blasphemous language, in Antioch

Act 13:45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and **blaspheming**.

and in Corinth:

Acts 18:5 And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. 6 And when they opposed themselves, and **blasphemed**, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.

**of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.**—Paul’s distinction in Romans clarifies what is going on here:

Rom 2:28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

This condemnation was certainly true of most ethnic Jews. But in the diaspora, many of those “which say they are Jews” would in fact be proselytes, converts from paganism, who would be even more zealous to defend their adopted faith.<sup>27</sup>

The book of Acts is full of examples of Jewish opposition to the Christians. In addition to the references in Acts 13 and 18 above, consider 9:23; 13:50; 14:2, 19; 17:5; 18:12; 21:27.

This opposition would shortly come to a head. The leader of the church in Smyrna early in the second century was Polycarp, a student of John. He was martyred by the Romans in AD 155. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, an early record of his death, records that even on the Sabbath day the Jews of Smyrna gathered wood to burn him.

**10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer:**—This exhortation is a chiasmic summary of the rest of the verse (Table 6, chart). First he describes the coming sufferings, and then amplifies the exhortation to “fear not.”


Fear none		Be Faithful Crown of Life
of those things which thou shalt suffer		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devil</li> <li>• Prison</li> <li>• Testing</li> <li>• Tribulation</li> </ul>

Table 6: The Chiasm of 2:10

25 S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. 2d edition. London: Murray, 1928. (Available on Kindle)

26 Trench, Rackham; others (including Beckwith, Swete, Bruce, and Robertson) understand the word more generally of abusive speech against believers, perhaps calumnious accusations to the authorities. Such false accusation is certainly in view in v. 10, with the shift from “Satan” to “devil.”

27 Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, Eli; Shir, Pinchas. *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*.

**behold, the devil**—The first feature of the coming suffering is its *agent*, the one behind it. Note the shift from (the synagogue of) “Satan” (v. 10). Satan is the Hebrew name, meaning “accuser,” a role that we see in Job 1. By translating the name into Greek, the Lord makes its underlying meaning transparent to the Greek recipients of the Revelation. The believers can expect to be accused to the human authorities because of their faith. When this happens, they must recognize that the real accuser, who motivates human persecutors, is the devil.

**shall cast some of you into prison**,—As a result of Satan’s accusation mediated through false Jews, some of them will be imprisoned.

**that ye may be tried** **πειράζειν G3985**;—The verb chosen anticipates the failure of the one tested.<sup>28</sup> This is Satan’s objective in bringing suffering on us.

Note the shift in focus from “them that say they are Jews” to “the devil.” As the martyrdom of Polycarp shows, the false Jews led the way in persecuting the believers. Yet the Lord says that the one casting them into prison is the devil. This emphasis on the ultimate agent of persecution is a critical insight, and fills out an earlier command by our Lord (chart):

Matt. 5:44 But I say unto you, **Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;**  
45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

In Matthew, the Lord motivates us to love our enemies by reminding us who we are: the children of the gracious heavenly Father. Rev 2:10 reminds us who our enemies are. Their opposition is not personal. They are under the control of the devil, and our objective should be to win them from his dominion to our Lord’s kingdom (Acts 26:18; Col 1:13). When we are in persecution, we can maintain a right attitude by recognizing that the conflict is not between our human persecutors and ourselves. In Matthew, we learn that the persecution is really not against us, but against the Lord, and in Revelation, we learn that its ultimate source is not our human enemies, but Satan. Compare the Lord’s words to Saul on the road to Damascus,

Act 9:4 And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why **persecutest thou me?** 5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am **Jesus whom thou persecutest:**

**and ye shall have tribulation ten days**:—The testing has a fixed duration. The reference is probably not to the actual duration of Roman persecution, but an allusion to the experience of Daniel and his friends (chart):

Dan 1:11 Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 **Prove** **πειράζω G3985** thy servants, I beseech thee, **ten days**; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. 13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king’s meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. 14 So he consented to them in this matter, and **proved** **πειράζω** them **ten days**. 15 And at the end of **ten days** their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat.

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28 ... while *πειράζειν* may be used, but exceptionally, of God, *δοκιμάζειν* could not be used of Satan, seeing that he never proves that he may approve, nor tests that he may accept. Trench, R. C. (1880). In *Synonyms of the New Testament* (9th ed., improved., §lxxiv, p. 281). Macmillan and Co.

**be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.**—This promise brings us back to the start of the exhortation: “fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer.” We avoid fear, not by avoiding suffering, but by keeping our eye on the reward, following our Lord’s example:

Heb 12:2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

This encouragement combines two details from Smyrna’s history with the Lord’s introduction of himself.

- The city, as suggested by its name “myrrh,” rose from the dead. The Lord of resurrection promises to raise from the dead believers that suffer martyrdom for him.
- The reward of life is compared to a crown, recalling the city’s representation as crowned by its fortifications.

Earthly kings expected a wreath of honor when they visited a city. Here the coming king promises to honor his faithful followers.

**11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;**—Here is the standard exhortation at the end of each letter to meditate carefully on what has been written.

**He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.**—In keeping with the theme of resurrection. “Second death” appears in the Bible only here and 20:14; 21:8 (of the lake of fire), but appears in the targums and Rabbinic literature in reference to the punishment of the wicked after physical death—either failure to be raised from the dead, or some future suffering.

Thus the big lesson that the Lord urges through the letter to Smyrna is the promise of resurrection in the face of mortal opposition. Throughout history, many believers have been borne witness to the Lord with their lives. The city of myrrh reminds us of the Lord’s promise of life to those who are faithful unto death.

## 2:12-17, Pergamos

**12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write;**—Pergamos and Ephesus vied with each other for the position of the principal city of the province of Asia, the local center of Roman rule. Pergamos was selected to host the first imperial cult in Asia, under Augustus, a privilege that was renewed by Trajan in 113/114, making it the first city in Asia to be selected twice for this honor. In addition to the emperor, it had temples to Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius; the acropolis (Fig, chart) was dominated with religious structures, one of which, the great altar, is now visible at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin (Figure 7, chart).



Figure 7: Acropolis of Pergamon (top, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320860001/figure/fig1/AS:631662295662650@1527611435974/Pergamon-Zeus-Altar-and-Acropolis-Reconstruction-Drawing\\_W640.jpg](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320860001/figure/fig1/AS:631662295662650@1527611435974/Pergamon-Zeus-Altar-and-Acropolis-Reconstruction-Drawing_W640.jpg)) and great altar (bottom, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamon\\_Museum\\_Berlin\\_hm.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamon_Museum_Berlin_hm.jpg)).

The serpent was a common symbol in Pergamos (Figure 8, chart). Dionysus, the god of wine, had a temple on the acropolis, and the city is known for its cistophorus coin, showing his sacred box with a serpent. The Asclepion, temple to the god of healing, was below the acropolis, and renowned as a center of medicine. Forty years after John wrote, the renowned physician Galen was born there. The symbol of Asclepius was a serpent on a pole.



John uses the serpent as a symbol of Satan:

Rev 20:2 And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, (cf. 12:9)

We will see that this letter in particular draws on the symbolism.



**These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges;**—In each letter, the Lord identifies himself with a phrase from chapter 1. There, we read,

Rev 1:16 out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword.

Figure 8: Serpent coins of Pergamos (top, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_2002-0101-1449](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_2002-0101-1449); bottom, Ramsay p. 258), and row of Asclepius (<https://doi.org/10.4103%2F0975-7406.155794>)

This title is particularly appropriate for the center of Roman rule. The Roman procurator held *ius gladii*, “the power of the sword,” the authority to put someone to death (compare the words of the Jews before Pilate in John 18:31, “It is not lawful for us to put any man to death,” chart). But even in Pergamos, the center of Roman rule in Asia, the ultimate power is held by the Lord Jesus.

**13 I know thy works,**—To each church, he emphasizes the importance of our works as an indicator of our spiritual state.

**and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat [throne θρόνος G2362] is:**—Like the sword, the reference to a throne reflects the city’s close relation with Rome. A recurring theme throughout the Revelation is the role of Rome in opposing the church, and it would be natural to identify the emperor as the personification of Satan, and the imperial temple as his throne.

The parallel of the next two phrases with 3:8 (Philadelphia, Table 7) helps us to understand their meaning.

**and thou holdest fast my name,**—cf. 3:8 (Philadelphia), “has not denied my name.” They have not denied their identity as Christians.

**and hast not denied my faith,**—In 3:8, “has kept my word.” The parallel with 3:8 suggests that “faith” here has the sense of a body of teaching. They hold fast to the teachings of the Lord Jesus. Recall

Pergamos, 2:13	Philadelphia, 3:8
thou holdest fast <b>my name</b>	thou ... hast not denied <b>my name</b>
thou ... hast not denied <b>my faith</b>	thou ... hast kept <b>my word</b>

Table 7: Parallels between Pergamos and Philadelphia

Mat 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you

**even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.**—The church has already experienced the cost incurred in maintaining this faithful testimony.

**14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit **fornication**.**—Numbers 22-24 recount the story of Balaam. Israel has gathered on the plains of Moab in preparation for invading Jericho. Balak, king of Moab, is threatened by their presence. He hires Balaam, a Gentile soothsayer from Mesopotamia, to curse Israel. Three times he shows the nation to Balaam, constructing an altar and offering sacrifices each time to persuade God to curse them. Each time Balaam blesses them. A key insight in his blessings is that Israel is under God's blessing:

Num 23:8 How shall I curse, whom God hath not cursed? or how shall I defy, whom the LORD hath not defied?

Num 23:21 He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath he seen perverseness in Israel: the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them.

Num 24:9 Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee.

Balak is not happy with Balaam's performance.

Num 24:10 And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he smote his hands together: and Balak said unto Balaam, I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times.

Finally, after issuing a final prophecy about the Star that will arise out of Jacob to destroy Israel's enemies, Balaam departs.

But this is not the end of the story. Israel continues its conquest, and we're told that they also kill Balaam:

Num 31:8 And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; namely, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword.

Why would they slay him if he had blessed them?

The answer lies in what happened after he left (chart).

Num 25:1 And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. 2 And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. 3 And Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.

Balaam could not curse the righteous nation, which was under God's blessing. But when they turned away from God to idolatry and fornication, God himself brought judgment on them. After reporting the death of Balaam in 31:8, Moses goes on to explain,

Num 31:16 Behold, these [women of Midian] caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD.

Num 25:1-2 highlights two sins: whoredom (fornication), and idolatry. These are commonly associated throughout the NT,<sup>29</sup> and are mentioned here in Pergamos and in the letter to Thyatira (2:20). Significantly, they were two of the practices specifically forbidden to Gentile converts at the conference in Jerusalem in Acts 15, deciding the degree to which Gentile believers needed to follow the Jewish law. James suggested, and the company agreed,

Act 15:19 that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: 20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of **idols**, and from **fornication**, and from things strangled, and from blood. (cf. v. 29; 21:25)

We have seen that Dionysus, the god of wine, was prominent at Pergamos, honored in a special coin. He was a god of fertility as well as of wine, and his feasts were marked by drunken orgies. True believers, heeding the warnings of the apostles against drunkenness and fornication, would be excluded from these celebrations, and ostracized by their peers.

“Them that hold the doctrine of Balaam” probably represent a common teaching at this period, known as gnosticism. The term derives from a Greek word meaning “knowledge,” and emphasizes salvation through learning and believing mystical truths apart from physical actions. Gen 1:31 teaches that the physical world was created “very good,” and will one day be restored to its original purity, but the gnostics taught that the flesh is flawed and evil, of no concern to the supreme god, and only our mental knowledge of spiritual truth matters. They distinguished Jesus the man from Christ the spirit. John probably has their error in mind when he warns,

1Jn 4:3 And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God:

If the physical world doesn't matter, some gnostics concluded that our physical behavior is of no consequence, allowing them to participate without hesitation in idolatrous and impure feasts.<sup>30</sup> These people would draw encouragement from Paul's emphasis that we are saved by grace through faith and apart from works. Paul, who endorsed the decision in Acts 15, would condemn this attitude:

1Cor. 5:11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a **fornicator**, or covetous, or an **idolater**, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. ... 6:9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither **fornicators**, nor **idolaters**, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

**15 So hast thou also Οὕτως ἔχεις καὶ σὺ them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate likewise ομοίως.**—The first word of this verse, and the last (in the majority text), emphasize the similarity of the Nicolaitans with those who “hold the doctrine of Balaam.” Probably, this is another name for the same group. “Nicolaitans” would be the name by which the group was known, perhaps after a leader named Nicolas. This name can be interpreted in Greek as “I conquer the people,” and a common etymology of Balaam in Hebrew is “the one who swallows בלע the people עַם.” So one might paraphrase,

You enthusiastically follow the teaching of Nicolas, who encourages you to participate in the parties hosted by your friends without scruple. Remember that he is encouraging you in the

29 Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; 1 Cor. 5:10–11; 6:9; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; Rev. 2:14, 20; 21:8; 22:15

30 Paradoxically, another branch of gnosticism reasoned from the evil nature of the physical world to conclude that we ought to suppress the flesh in asceticism.

same sins for which God's wrath came upon Israel in the plains of Moab. In fact, the very name of your teacher should be a warning to you. Israel's sin in the days of Moses was the result of Balaam, who sought to "destroy the people," and that's what Nicolas will do to you if you persist in his error.

**16 Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them**—Note the interchange of "thee" (the church as a whole) and "them" (the false teachers). The church as a whole ("thee") is responsible for what God will do to those in its midst who sin ("them"). We see this dynamic in Corinth, where the church as a whole is exhorted to "discern the body" and warn those who are out of line, lest they fall under God's judgment:

1Co 11:29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

**with the sword of my mouth.**—The image of the sword is particularly appropriate here, for Numbers records that the sword killed Balaam:

Num 31:8 Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword. (Josh 13:22)

**17 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;**—Again, those who hear must make an effort to understand.

**To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna,**—

Exod 16:33 And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a pot, and put an omer full of manna therein, and **lay it up before the LORD**, to be kept for your generations. 34 As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron laid it up before the Testimony, to be kept.

Heb 9:4 Which had the golden censer, and **the ark of the covenant** overlaid round about with gold, **wherein was the golden pot that had manna**, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant;

Rev 11:19 And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple **the ark of his testament**: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.

**and will give him a white stone,**—This verse about the white stone ψῆφος G5586 (better "pebble") is one of the most puzzling we have encountered so far. Hemer tabulates seven distinct interpretations that have been suggested. Various commentaries favor different options, but with no clear leverage to help us choose among them.

One of the meanings, probably the most common in secular literature,<sup>31</sup> is the noun "vote." It was customary in deciding a question for each elector to cast a pebble into an urn. A white pebble meant "yes," and a black one, "no."<sup>32</sup> This is the only sense in which the word appears elsewhere in the NT, when Paul says

31 Hemer's speculation (p. 97) is reinforced by a glance at the entry in LSJ, in which the instances listed for their sense 5 ("pebble used in voting") far outnumber the other citations (35 lines in Perseus; the next most common, with 12 lines, is "pebble used for reckoning, counter," a closely related meaning.

32 Hemer gives references. LSJ note two cases where the noun is governed by δίδωμι: "ψῆφον δοῦναι περί τινος" IG22.222.24, cf. D.21.188; the second does not specify the recipient. App.BC1.12 uses ἀναδίδωμι of distributing the pebbles to the electors.

Act 26:10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, **I gave my voice [my pebble]** against them.

This meaning suggests a court scene: the Lord Jesus is promising to vote for the acquittal of the overcomer, as in the vision of the angel of the Lord and Joshua the High Priest in Zechariah 3. The difficulty is that in the case of voting, the pebble is not given to the person whose fate is being decided, but rather cast into an urn to be counted.

A solution may lie in a more nuanced understanding of the pronoun “him.” The form of this word in Greek is the dative, often translated “to,” and it is a perfectly natural way to say that the stone is given to the overcomer. However, the Greek dative can also be used to identify a person with reference to whom an action is taken.<sup>33</sup> A clear example of this usage is:

Luke 18:31 Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets **concerning** the Son of man shall be accomplished.

The words translated “concerning the Son of man” are simply “Son of man” in the dative. We could also translate “written by the prophets to the Son of man,” as though he were the recipient. But in fact they were writing to their contemporaries, *about* or *with reference to* the Son of man.

So here I suggest that the Lord is promising, “I will cast a vote for acquittal with reference to the one who overcomes,” consistent with his role elsewhere in Scripture as the one to whom all judgment has been committed (John 5). The rest of the verse goes on to reinforce this.

**and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.**— The unknowable name elsewhere (19:12) is the Lord Jesus. On the reading I am proposing, he is signing his ballot for acquittal of the overcomer, using a name that no one can forge.<sup>34</sup>

The forensic nature of the promise is particularly appropriate to a city where Roman authority was centered, including the authority of capital punishment. The authorities in Pergamos may persecute the believers. In the case of Antipas, they cast their black pebbles to condemn him to death. But the Lord holds the deciding vote in the final decision of eternal life and death.

## 2:18-29, Thyatira

This is the longest of the letters (Figure 4), and the central one of the seven. It is the only one beside Ephesus with two praise sections surrounding the criticism, and marks the move of the exhortation to hear to the end of the letter.

Two historical features of Thyatira help illustrate the letter.

1. It was a border city between regions often controlled by rival powers. Seleucus, one of the successors of Alexander the Great, constructed and garrisoned it about 300 BC to protect his northern border against his rival Lysimachus. It lies on the main route between the Caicos valley to the north (dominated by Pergamos) and the Hermus to the south (Figure 9, chart)
2. It was a center of industry. “More trade-guilds are known in Thyatira than in any other Asian city,” including “wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-

33 Varies called the dative of reference (Wallace), ethical (Thayer in entry on δίδωμι), or advantage (commodi) (Goodwin and Gulick).

34 Compare modern private key encryption methods.



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workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths” (Ramsay 324). The economy of the city, and the economic well-being of the believers, would depend on their relation to these guilds.

There is only one other reference to Thyatira in the NT: Paul in Philippi meets a merchant from Thyatira, probably a representative of the guild of cloth dyers,<sup>35</sup> marketing their wares in Greece:

Act 16:14 And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.

This representative is a woman, and not just a slave, but someone with a household to which she could invite the apostles. Lydia shows the openness of Thyatiran society to women in influential positions, which will be reflected in the criticism the Lord offers of the church.

**18 And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God,—** This is the only instance of this title in the Revelation.<sup>36</sup> The scarcity of the title in the Revelation is remarkable, since John’s epistles and gospel account for nearly half of the instances of this title in the NT. In 1 John (where the title is densest), the point is that “Jesus Christ is come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2, 3), that the man Jesus is the divine Son. The title thus emphasizes the incarnation, in direct contradiction to the gnostic claim of the Nicolaitans that our physical life and conduct is irrelevant to our spiritual condition.

**who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass;**—Again, he draws from the characteristics that John perceived in ch. 1 (chart),

Rev 1:14 and his eyes were as a flame of fire; 15 And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace;

These particular features recall the leader of God’s host who appeared in Daniel in Daniel 10:

Dan. 10:4 And in the four and twentieth day of the first month, as I was by the side of the great river, which is Hiddekel; 5 Then I lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a certain man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz: 6 His body also was like the beryl, and his face as the appearance of lightning, **and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in colour to polished brass**, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude.

After speaking with Daniel, he leaves to do battle with the spiritual forces that lie behind earthly kingdoms:

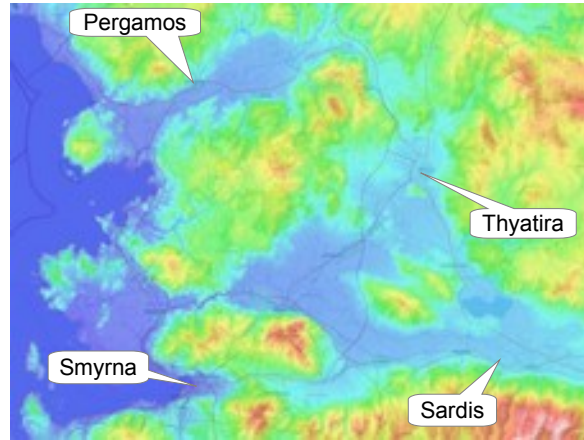


Figure 9: Topographical Context of Thyatira. Brownish peaks are over 3000'. Area shown is about 60x100 miles. <https://en-us.topographic-map.com/maps/or1y/Asia-Minor/>

35 The inscriptions mention this guild more than any of the others: S.K. Thomas, *A Sociological Analysis of Guilds in First-Century Asia Minor as Background for Revelation 2:18-29*. Dissertation at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994, p. 70.

36 Twice he receives the title “son of man”: 1:13; 14:14.

Dan 10:20 and now will I return to fight with the prince of Persia: and when I am gone forth, lo, the prince of Grecia shall come.

Thyatira was a border town, a garrison of soldiers for whichever kingdom controlled it. The Lord appears in his character of captain of the Lord’s host, to remind the church that it is his spiritual garrison, representing his kingdom in spiritual conflict.

**19 I know thy works,**—As in each letter, he begins with a generic statement.

In Greek, we have four nouns followed by a single “thy,” then a final reference to the last works.

**and thy charity, and faith, and service, ~~and faith~~, and patience,**—In the ordering followed by the majority of the mss, the first two are spiritual virtues, while the next two are their practical manifestations. Charity (love) leads to service, while faith leads to patience.<sup>37</sup> Their lives show the reality of their faith.

**and thy works, the last more than the first.**—In other words, the evidences of their love and faith are growing over time. Contrast the sad condition of Ephesus. It also had labored (doing service) and shown patience, but instead of growing over time, the underlying spiritual virtues had declined: “thou hast left thy first love” (2:4).

Thyatira is thus strong where Ephesus is weak. But it is weak where Ephesus is strong (Table 8). Ephesus “could not bear them which are evil” (2:2), but Thyatira is overly patient with a false teacher in the church.

	Tangible Love	Doctrinal Discernment
Thyatira	19 thy love ... the last more than the first	20 thou sufferest ... to teach
Ephesus	4 thou hast left thy first love	2 thou canst not bear them which are evil

*Table 8: Complementary Strengths of Thyatira and Ephesus*

The nature of the false teaching is the same as in Pergamos (2:14): toleration for fornication and idolatry (contrary to the decision of the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15). In Pergamos, the Lord illustrated this false teaching by comparing it with a notorious character from the OT, Balaam, suggested partly by the alignment of his name with the local champion of the error, Nicolas. In Thyatira, the champion of this same teaching is a woman (reflecting the society’s openness to women in responsible positions, as we have seen with Lydia). So now the Lord illustrates the error by recalling another OT character, a woman.

**20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess,**—This is probably not the personal name of the Thyatiran prophetess, any more than the false teacher in Pergamos was called Balaam. As in Pergamos, the Lord wants his hearers to recall the OT history and note the frightening parallels in their own situation (chart).

1 Kings 16:30 And Ahab the son of Omri [king of Israel] ... 31 ... took to wife **Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians**, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. 32 And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.

Just as Thyatira was a border town, the northern kingdom had potentially unfriendly neighbors—Sidon and Syria. A diplomatic link to one of these neighbors may have been politically very prudent, but it had sad consequences. 1 Kings records Jezebel’s wicked influence:

<sup>37</sup> The reordering of the nouns in the TR may reflect a scribal commentary on this relation.

- She slew the legitimate prophets of the Lord, except for those whom Obadiah was able to hide (1 Ki 18:4, 13)
- She sought to slay Elijah after his confrontation with her prophets on Mt Carmel (1 Ki 19:2)
- She conspired to have Nabal murdered so that Ahab could confiscate his vineyard (1 Ki 21)

The historian holds her accountable for the exceeding wickedness of the reign of Ahab:

1Ki 21:25 But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD, **whom Jezebel his wife stirred up.**

In 2 Kings 9, the Lord raised up Jehu, an officer in Ahab's bodyguard, to wipe out the family of Ahab. He begins with Jehoram, son of Ahab and current king of Israel. Just before slaying him, Jehu declares,

2Ki 9:22 And it came to pass, when Joram saw Jehu, that he said, Is it peace, Jehu? And he answered, What peace, so long as **the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel and her witchcrafts** are so many?

Now the Lord compares a prominent woman in the church at Thyatira to this wicked queen **to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols.**—In 2 Ki 9:22, Jehu characterizes Jezebel as active in “whoredoms and witchcrafts.” As we have seen in our study of Judges, the cult of Baal was a fertility religion, including temple prostitutes in its rituals, and leading its adherents into demonic activity. Jezebel led the nation into fornication and idolatry, and now the woman of Thyatira does the same.

We saw in Judges 17-19 how subtle the allure of Baalism could be. Micah and his mother thought that they could honor the God of Israel with a pagan image and association with a fertility goddess. They wanted to live at peace with the Canaanite society around them, and aligning their worship with the Canaanite cult seemed a reasonable way to do this.

Jezebel's motives may have been the same. She was the daughter of the king of Sidon, the next kingdom north of Israel. Respecting Sidon's religion would help Ahab maintain an ally in his perennial struggle with Syria.

From what we know of the practices of the ancient guilds, the teaching of the Thyatiran Jezebel may have been along the same lines. “We want good relations with our neighbors,” she would argue. “Our active participation in the guilds is an important part of maintaining our contact with them. And after all, we are justified by faith, not by works. What harm can there be in participating in the monthly banquets of the guilds, even if they involve making sacrifices to idols and even if they usually degenerate into hanky-panky?”

Like the mother of Micah and the wife of Ahab before her, she is missing an essential point. The first responsibility of the Israelites toward the Canaanites was not to compromise with them, but to wipe them out. The first responsibility of Israel toward the Sidonians was not to compromise with them, but to offer them the terms of Deuteronomy 20, to submit to the law of God or be destroyed. The first responsibility of the church in a pagan world is not to compromise for the sake of a peaceful life, but to call them to repent of their sin and receive the Lord Jesus.

**21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.**—The Lord was much more merciful with this woman than Jehu was with Jezebel. She apparently has been confronted with her error, no doubt following the process that the Lord prescribes:

Matt 18:15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

**22 Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with death;—** The references to “her children” and “them that commit adultery with her” apparently refer to a party within the church that has been attracted to her teaching. The Lord threatens to bring sickness, suffering, and death upon them, as he had earlier done in Corinth:

1 Cor 11:30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.

**and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts:—**The “reins” are the kidneys. The expression is common in the Psalms (7:9; 26:2) and Jeremiah (11:20; 20:12). This instance, with the following clause, probably recalls (chart)

Jer. 17:10 I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

The warning is a very sober one. In modern parlance, we think of the head as the center of the intellect, where we know, believe, and plan, while we ascribe our feelings to the heart. The Hebrews shifted everything down about twelve inches. For them, the heart was where one thought and planned:

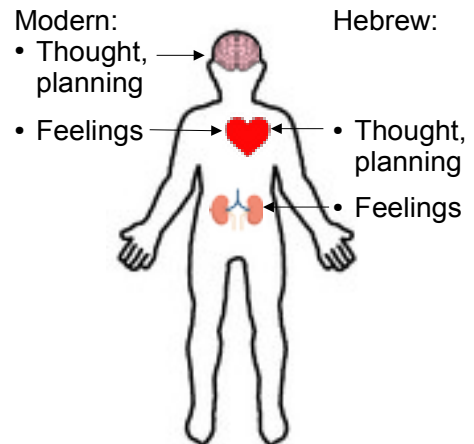
Ec 1:13 And I gave my **heart** to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven:

Prov 16:9 A man’s **heart** deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps.

Isa 65:17 For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into **mind [heart]**.

In fact, 12 times the KJV translates the Hebrew word “heart” as “mind.”<sup>38</sup> So when the Lord says he searches our hearts, he is saying that he knows what we believe and what we plan. He knows our minds. In the context of these churches, the Lord approves the “heart” (mind) of Ephesus, the champions of orthodoxy, and criticizes the heart of Thyatira.

Today, we ascribe feelings to the heart. The heart for the Hebrew could experience emotion as well as thought,<sup>39</sup> but the main center of feeling was the kidneys or reins.



*Figure 10: The Anatomy of Psychology.* [http://www.clipartbest.com/clipart-LiK5Ay7RThttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart\\_symbol#/media/File:Heart\\_coraz%C3%B3n.svg](http://www.clipartbest.com/clipart-LiK5Ay7RThttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heart_symbol#/media/File:Heart_coraz%C3%B3n.svg)  
<https://freesvg.org/1553749314>  
[href="https://www.flaticon.com/free-icons/kidney"](https://www.flaticon.com/free-icons/kidney) title="kidney icons">Kidney icons created by Freepik – Flaticon</a>

38 Num 16:28, Num 24:13, 1Sa 9:20, Neh 4:6, Psa 31:12, Isa 46:8, Isa 65:17, Jer 3:16, Jer 19:5, Jer 32:35, Lam 3:21 (2x)

## First Vision, Seven Churches

Psa 73:21 Thus my heart was grieved, and **I was pricked in my reins**.

Pr 23:16 Yea, **my reins shall rejoice**, when thy lips speak right things.

The Lord knows not only our thoughts, but also our feelings. On this dimension, Thyatira, whose loving works are growing over time, receives the Lord's approval, while Ephesus is condemned for its fading love.

The Lord examines both our hearts and our kidneys—both what we think about him, and how we feel toward him. It is important to believe right doctrines and make godly plans in our hearts. But it is even more important to cultivate the right emotional response toward him.<sup>40</sup> The Pharisees knew the scriptures in great detail, and would insist that they believed them, but the Lord said of them,

Joh 5:42 But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you.

And the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23) begins and is dominated by feelings rather than rational thought. Failure at the level of the heart, in doctrinal discernment, threatens the church at Thyatira with the excision of Jezebel and her followers. Failure at the level of the reins threatens the entire church of Ephesus with removal of its candlestick.

**and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.**—The Lord continues the reference to Jer 17:10.

Note the shift from “her children” to “you.” The target of the Lord's searching in the previous clause was not specified, but now it is clear that it goes beyond the wicked, and includes the righteous as well.

These words of the Lord to a believing church give us pause. We rejoice that our salvation is not of works, but of grace (chart):

2Ti 1:9 Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, **not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace,**

Tit 3:5 **Not by works of righteousness** which we have done, **but according to his mercy** he saved us,

1Pe 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which **according to his abundant mercy** hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Even in the OT, this is the basis of his forgiveness toward us:

Ps 51:1 Have mercy upon me, O God, **according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies** blot out my transgressions.

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39 “Heart” is much more common (854x) than “kidneys” (31x) in the OT. As is often the case with such semantically related words, the more common one is not an antonym of the less common one, but rather describes a more general semantic category of which the less frequent one is a specialization.

40 This point is the emphasis of Jonathan Edwards' classic work, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 1746. He argues persuasively that the affections (feelings) are the engine by which the Spirit drives all valid spiritual thought and action.

## First Vision, Seven Churches

But here the Lord promises to deal with “every one of you,” not just Jezebel and her followers, “according to your works.”<sup>41</sup> The rest of the NT supports this notion that God judges all according to their works. Our Lord teaches this:

Matt. 16:27 For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man **according to his works**.

So does Paul, perhaps with the Lord’s words in mind:

Rom. 2:6 Who will render to every man **according to his deeds**: 7 To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: 8 But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath,

If we take both of these sets of Scriptures at face value, we must conclude that

- we are **saved** according to his mercy and grace, not according to our works,
- but we are **judged** according to the works that our new life produces.

Compare the main message of 1 John. The purpose of the whole epistle is (chart)

1Jn 5:13 These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life,

Here are a few of the indicators that he gives:

1Jn 2:3 And hereby **we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments**. 4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: **hereby know we that we are in him**.

1 Jn 3:4 **We know** that we have passed from death unto life, **because we love** the brethren.

1Jn 3:18 My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but **in deed and in truth**. 19 And **hereby we know** that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him.

1 Jn 4:12 **If we love one another, God dwelleth in us**, and his love is perfected in us. 13 **Hereby know we that we dwell in him**, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.

Note that the works are evidence of our salvation, not the cause of it, and they are attributed to his Spirit (4:12, 13). As the Spirit of God works in the believer, he conforms us more and more to the image of Christ, and we move from being carnal believers to spiritual, “who is judged of no man,” 1 Cor 2:16. This work of the Spirit in true believers is why Paul can write,

1Co 4:5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and **then shall every man have praise of God**.

What incredible, unimaginable grace! God takes us as unworthy sinners, grants us repentance and faith, and receives us on the sole basis of the merit of Christ. Then he gives us his Spirit to conform our lives to the image of his son. The salvation is all of him. The working is all of him. But then, at the end, he looks at what he has produced in us, and praises us for it!

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41 Proverbs 24 makes the important point that while God, who knows the heart, judges according to works (v. 12), we are not to judge others in this way (v. 29).

**24 But unto you I say,<sup>42</sup> and unto the rest in Thyatira,**—The “you” here, continued from the previous verse, is identified with “the rest,” those who have not participated with the “she/them” of 20-21, Jezebel and her followers. Compare the remnant in Sardis (3:4). The recognition of those who have not succumbed to the false teaching returns to the initial praise of 2:19 (Table 3).

**as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak;**—“Know[ing] the depths of Satan” likely refers to the Gnostic practice of deliberate exposure to wicked practices to show spiritual superiority to them.<sup>43</sup>

**I will put upon you none other burden.**—The Lord probably refers to the burden βάρος G922 of Acts 15:28 imposed by the apostles on the Gentile converts (chart), which highlights the two areas of sin that are prominent in the seven churches:<sup>44</sup>

Act 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater **burden** than these necessary things; 29 **That ye abstain from meats offered to idols**, and from blood, and from things strangled, **and from fornication**: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.

**25 But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.**—This verb (κρατέω G2902) is used in these letters with three subjects. The Lord holds fast the seven stars (2:1); the false teachers hold fast their doctrine (2:14, 15); and believers hold fast to what they have (here; 3:11). What they hold is specified in the letter to Pergamos:

Rev. 2:13 and **thou holdest fast my name**, and hast not denied my faith,

That is, they profess the Lord Jesus, even in the face of strong opposition to deny him.

**26 And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end,**—This promise to overcomers, on the central church of the seven, differs from the other six. There, the only requirement was to overcome. Here he explains what it means to overcome: “and keepeth my works unto the end.” The verb here, τηρέω G5083, indicates persistent obedience to his commands. Both “keep” and “hold fast” describe faithfulness. But “hold fast” focuses on our testimony to other people, while “keep” emphasizes our responsibility to the Lord.

**to him will I give power ἐξουσία G1849 over the nations:**—This promise has two points of contact with the introduction:

1. Throughout its history, Thyatira was a border garrison, representing the claim of one nation or another to rule. It is fitting that the promise to overcomers deals with political authority.
2. The Lord identifies himself with the mighty one of Daniel 10, who does war with the nations.

The devil claims to have this authority now, and offered it to Christ, as he now offers it to rulers who serve him (chart, see note).

Luke 4:5 And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6 And the devil said unto him, All this **power** will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. 7 If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.

But the Lord achieved all authority without bowing to Satan, through his obedience to the Father:

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42 See notes for scope of “you” here and in the previous verse.

43 Moffat in EGT; Beckwith; favored (without documentation) by Mounce and Beasley-Murray.

44 βάρος appears only four other times in the NT, besides these two places.

Matt. 28:18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, **All power** is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

And in the coming kingdom, he will distribute it to us, so that we can reign:

Rev. 20:6 Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death **hath no power**, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.

The Lord could resist Satan's temptation because he realized that his Father had already promised him this authority, in Psalm 2:

**27 And he shall rule [shepherd] them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I [ἐγώ emphatic] received of my Father.**—Note the two preceding verses:

Psa. 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. 8 Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. 9 **Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.**

In the same way, these promises to us strengthen us to resist Satan's temptation to seek a sinful shortcut to blessings that God has already laid up for us.

**28 And I will give him the morning star.**—Identified with Christ:

Rev 22:16 I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and **morning star**.

The morning star is a sign of the coming of dawn after the long night:

2 Pet 1:19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:

The Lord promises that in spite of the darkness of their present experience, the dawn is coming.

**29 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.**—The exhortation to pay special attention now moves to the end of the letter.

## 3:1-6, Sardis

**3:1 And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write;**—The city is not named elsewhere in the Bible, though there is good reason to think<sup>45</sup> that it is the Sepharad of Obadiah 20 (chart),

Oba 1:20 And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in **Sepharad**, shall possess the cities of the south.

Aramaic inscriptions as early as 400 BC reflect a Jewish presence, and Josephus records that Antiochus III (about 200 BC) settled 2000 Jewish families in the region. A synagogue excavated there, dating from later than the Revelation,<sup>46</sup> was the largest synagogue in the ancient world.

45 A 4<sup>th</sup> century BC bilingual Aramaic-Lydia inscription gives ספרד as the Aramaic translation of Sardis (Hemer).

46 A. R. Seager advocates 3-4 century AD (American Journal of Archaeology, 76(4):425-435, 1972), but J. Magness suggests 6<sup>th</sup> century based on coins (American Journal of Archaeology, 109(3):443-475, 2005).



## First Vision, Seven Churches

The city had a very strong citadel, sitting atop nearly vertical cliffs on all sides but one, which could be easily guarded (Figure 11). But twice in its history it was in fact captured by a clever climber, when the defenders neglected the cliffs: once by the forces of Cyrus conquering the kind Croesus in 546 BC, and again under Antiochus the Great (215 BC).

This letter contains both praise and criticism, but this time the criticism comes first, and the praise follows, making it the second worst of the seven churches, next to praise-less Laodicea.

**These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars;**—The seven Spirits of God, from Zech 4, represent the omniscient Holy Spirit (1:4). The stars (1:20) are the messengers of the seven churches, the people sent by the churches to visit John, who will carry the Revelation back with them.

Joined together, these two symbols emphasize that the messengers will be supported in their work by the all-knowing Holy Spirit.<sup>47</sup>

**I know thy works,**—As with all the churches, the Lord pays attention to what they do.

**that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.**—Contrast the Lord's description of himself in ch. 1,

Rev 1:18 I became dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore,

Their trajectory is just the opposite, with a reputation for being alive, but in fact being dead. Recall that the church is the body of Christ:

Eph 1:22 the church, 23 Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

If the Lord is characterized as one who dies, but then lives, a group that moves in the other direction has no claim to be a true church.

The reference to their “name” is distinctive in this epistle (cf. vv. 4, 5). The noun “name” appears elsewhere in these letters (notes), but always with reference to the name of the Lord Jesus, not the name of the believer. We'll see the reason for emphasizing the names of the people shortly.

In spite of this negative assessment, the Lord does not immediately abandon them, but gives five commands, first aid for an ailing church (chart).

**2 Be watchful,**—γίνου γρηγορῶν, become watchful. Wake up from your lethargy. Recognize the spiritual foes that you face, the temptations to compromise with the fornication and idolatry promoted by emperor worship and the trade guilds. Remember that your city fell twice because the defenders were careless. If the Sardians had been watchful, neither Cyrus nor Antiochus could have conquered them, so strong was their natural position. Spiritually, in the Lord Jesus, we have a strong fortress (chart):

Psa. 18:2 The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.



Figure 11: Acropolis of Sardis ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Sardis\\_\(547\\_BC\)#/media/File:Sardis\\_acropolis.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Sardis_(547_BC)#/media/File:Sardis_acropolis.jpg))

<sup>47</sup> Trench: “we must see in this combination a hint of the relation between Christ, as the giver of the Holy Spirit, and as the author of a ministry of living men in his Church; this ministry of theirs resting wholly on these gifts, even as the connexion between the two is often brought out in the New Testament. His are the golden urns from which these “stars” must continually draw their light.”

But the history of Sardis should remind them that even the strong citadel of a sovereign God cannot defend those who are careless and do not watch against Satan's attacks. We usually think of exhortations to watchfulness in reference to the unknown time of the Lord's return:

Matt. 24:42 **Watch** therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.

But the history of Sardis, whose lack of watchfulness led twice to enemy victory, suggests that the exhortation here is to being on guard against the devil:

1Pet. 5:8 Be sober, **be vigilant**; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

**and strengthen the things which remain**,—The verdict that they are “dead” is not absolute. There are glimmers of life that need to be encouraged.

**that are ready to die thou wast about to cast out**:—The majority reading seems strange, and it is not surprising that some scribe replaced it with “that are ready to die.” But we can understand it as a warning that the church, and in particular its elders, has not done a good job of caring for the weak sheep. The verse recalls the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah against the shepherds:<sup>48</sup>

Ezek 34:4 The diseased have ye not **strengthened**, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was **driven away**, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them. ... 16 I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was **driven away**, and will bind up that which was broken, and will **strengthen** that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.

Jer. 23:1 Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and **scatter** the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD. 2 Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have **scattered** my flock, and **driven them away**, and have not visited them:

Watchfulness, the first requirement, can lead to a lack of love, as in Ephesus. A legitimate concern for purity can lead to a hostile and intolerant attitude toward weaker believers. Our Lord's instructions on correction in Matt 18:15-17 starts with private exhortation, and only after repeated resistance leads to excommunication. The church needs to look with compassion on its weaker members, to encourage them, rather than immediately rejecting them.

**for I have not found thy works perfect before my God**.—“Perfect” here means “fulfilled,” that is, carried out completely (see notes). They “have a name,” v. 1, but no substance.

Only in Sardis and Laodicea is there no reference to any suffering by the church for the name of Christ.<sup>49</sup> This church was too mediocre for the opponents of the gospel to care.

**3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard**,—The third exhortation recalls the Lord's words to Ephesus (chart),

Rev. 2:5 **Remember** therefore from whence thou art fallen,

Remembering the excitement of our past spiritual life can be a strong incentive to rejuvenate it.

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48 Thus Hengstenberg, with reference to Ezek 34:4, who also notes that the neuter τὰ λοιπὰ reflects the LXX use of neuters for the Hebrew feminine nouns and participles that refer to the sheep. The alignment is even stronger with the reference of the MT to casting out, though the vocabulary in Rev 3:2 does not correspond to the LXX.

49 Trench, Koester, Caird, Mounce, Beale, Plummer, Beckwith

**and hold fast**,—We should not confuse the fourth exhortation with the exhortation to Thyatira (2:25) and Philadelphia (3:11) to hold fast. The verb there, κρατέω G2902, means to hold tightly to something, using force and strength, and is appropriate to our bold and public testimony for Christ (cf. 2:13). The verb here, τηρέω G5083, is used repeatedly of believers “keeping” or “observing” the Lord’s words (1:3; 3:8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 22:7, 9).<sup>50</sup> The focus is on our obedience to the Lord, not our struggle with the world.

We noted that this letter makes no mention of any opposition from unbelievers. The Sardians have compromised so far with the society around them that they are accepted as members of it. V. 4 says, they “have . . . defiled their garments.” The need of a church in this situation is not first of all to focus on bold witness. Rather, it needs to give attention to its obedience to the Lord. This obedience will lead to tension with the society, and then will come the time for external testimony. First, it needs to keep God’s commands.

**and repent**.—The call to repent marks the start of the Christian life:

Mat 4:17 From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Luk 24:47 And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

But it’s also sometimes necessary for those who are already in Christ. Recall how Paul encouraged the Corinthians, after they had responded to his rebukes in his first epistle:

2 Cor 7:9 Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that **ye sorrowed to repentance**: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. 10 For godly sorrow worketh **repentance** to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. 11 For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

Thus he exhorted Ephesus (2:5), and Pergamos (2:16), and the heretics in Thyatira (2:21, 22); thus he will exhort Laodicea (3:19). Every church with criticism is called to repent.

Repentance is the appropriate response when we examine ourselves at the Lord’s table, and find something lacking. As long as we are in sinful bodies, we need constantly to be alert to sin in ourselves and in others, and when we discover it, we need to turn from it in repentance and faith.

**If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief**, — “Watch” takes us back to the first of the five commands, representing the entire set. The risk to the church recalls the history of the city, twice overcome through lack of watchfulness.

**and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee**.—Is this the parousia, or an earlier coming in judgment?

The NT repeatedly warns that “the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night” (1 Thes 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; cf. Matt 24:42-44), emphasizing that his coming is unexpected. But that coming doesn’t depend on whether or not they watch.<sup>51</sup> This seems to be a special intervention during the present age, before his ultimate return. The Lord says something similar to Ephesus (chart):

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50 See note. In Revelation, the other term is used only of how false teachers defend their doctrines: 2:14, 15.

51 Mounce

Rev 2:5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else **I will come unto thee** quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

And Pergamos:

Rev 2:16 Repent; or else **I will come unto thee** quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

When a church's candlestick is removed, or when other forms of judgment fall upon a congregation, we should see that as the Lord's personal intervention. If the local shepherds do not do their job, he will step in.

**4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments;**—As in Thyatira, in spite of the presence of error, there is a remnant of faithful believers. This limited praise prepares us for the two promises to overcomers: “names” anticipates the book of life, and “defiled ... garments” prepares us for the promise of white raiment.

The verb here (μολύνω G3435) appears only two other places in the NT. In one, pollution results from idolatry:

1Cor. 8:7 Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is **defiled**.

In the other, it comes from sexual impurity:

Rev. 14:4 These are they which were not **defiled** with women;

We are reminded of the twin sins of idolatry and fornication that we have seen in other churches, resulting from the temptation to blend into the culture and go along with the celebrations of the imperial cult and the guilds. The general practice of the church is to go along with the culture, in disobedience to the Lord. Only a few have refused to compromise.

**and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.**—The Lord will commemorate their diligence on earth with white garments, a promise he repeats in the next verse.

**5 He that overcometh,**—From the previous verse, it appears that overcoming is refusing to blend into the local culture, leading to defilement, but rather being known as believers. The end of the verse will reinforce this conclusion.

**the same shall be clothed in white raiment;**<sup>52</sup>—The theme of white clothing is common throughout the book (chart). Thus are the elders arrayed in heaven:

Rev 4:4 And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, **clothed in white raiment**; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.

This is the attire of the faithful martyrs:

Rev 6:11 And **white robes** were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

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52 Trench: “This, itself a wedding garment (Mat 22:11-12), but not necessarily identical with “the fine linen, clean and white, the righteousness of saints” (Rev 19:8), is put on at our entrance by baptism into the kingdom of grace; that at our entrance by the resurrection into the kingdom of glory.”

In Revelation 7, such garments mark the great multitude that stand before the throne, and their color is described as resulting from the blood of Christ:

Rev 7:9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with **white robes**, and palms in their hands; ... 13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in **white robes**? and whence came they? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and **made them white in the blood of the Lamb**.

Later, we see the church as the bride of Christ, described in similar terms:

Rev 19:7 for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. 8 And to her was granted that she should be **arrayed in fine linen, clean and white**: for **the fine linen is the righteousness [righteous deeds] of saints**.

And when the Lord returns,

Rev 19:14 ... the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, **clothed in fine linen, white and clean**.

What is the meaning of the white garments? 7:14 suggests that they are white because our sins are forgiven. This forgiveness depends only on what Christ has done (Rom 5:18), not on our conduct. But the word for “righteousness” in 19:8 (δικαίωμα G1345 righteous actions, not δικαιοσύνη G1343 state of righteousness, see note) suggests that our obedient conduct also contributes to our wardrobe. And indeed the two must go together: the imputed righteousness of Christ shows itself as his Spirit produces practical righteousness in our lives.

So in Sardis, those who have been faithful to keep their garments unspotted show that they are indeed entitled to wear the white robes of those who are redeemed.

**and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life**,—This promise is the reason that this epistle emphasizes the name of the believer. Names are especially important if someone is keeping a list.

We have to inquire first into the nature of this book, and then what it means not to be blotted out.

This is the first of six references<sup>53</sup> to this book in Revelation, named elsewhere in the NT only in Philippians [chart]:

Php 4:3 And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in **the book of life**. [Lk 10:20 and Heb 12:23 refer to the book but do not name it.]

Throughout the Bible, we read of a number of books that make up what we might call “God’s Library.”<sup>54</sup> Like any good library, there is a systematic organization to these books. Two kinds of books record established facts, while two contain God’s decrees of what will happen. Viewed from another perspective, two look at the actions of men and the resulting history of the world, while two concentrate on men’s state as living or dead (Table 9). Of these four kinds of book, 1 and 2 are found in both the OT and the NT. 3 is distinctively OT, while 4 is most common in the NT (though there may be a few OT references).

53 Excluding 22:19, where the majority reading is “tree of life”

54 For more details, see <https://www.cyber-chapel.org/GodsLibrary.pdf>.

*Record books* are patterned on the chronicles kept by earthly kings. We have one example of this kind of human record book in Esther:

Est 6:1 On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.

The books of Chronicles in the OT are such books, as are the books that record people's works for judgment at the Great White Throne:

Rev 20:12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and **the books** were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of **those things which were written in the books, according to their works.**

*Books of decrees* concern both the lives of individual people, and the course of empires. A classic example of the decrees of an individual life is David's confession:

Psa 139:16 Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and **in thy book** all ~~my~~ **members** were written, ~~which in continuance~~ the days were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them.

We will shortly see a book of decrees governing the course of world history:

Rev 5:1 And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne **a book** written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.

The *book of the living* is a census book of people who are alive on earth. David mentions it when he prays for God's judgment on his enemies:

Psa 69:27 Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. 28 Let them be blotted out of **the book of the living**, and not be written with the righteous.

Finally, we have the book of life, which lists God's saints. The symmetry of the other three types of books suggests that it lists, not just those who are currently born again, but also those whom God has chosen, and this is confirmed by the time of its writing:

Rev 17:8 ... they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written [do not stand written]<sup>55</sup> in the book of life **from the foundation of the world**

If this is indeed the book of election, it is a great comfort to know that in spite of all the changes in the world, it stands sure. The assurance "I will not blot out" is not saying that some people whom God has chosen could be blotted out, but rather is a figure of speech known as litotes, which emphasizes a truth by negating its opposite (Table 10, chart). For example, Peter uses litotes to emphasize the wickedness of Simon the sorcerer,

Acts 8:21 **thy heart is not right** in the sight of God.

And Paul, in his defense before Agrippa, insists on his obedience:

Acts 26:19 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, **I was not disobedient** unto the heavenly vision:

55 Perfect, "stand written," as also in 13:8. If it were aorist or imperfect, we might understand "from the foundation of the world" as denoting a period during which people are written, but with the perfect, the time reference must indicate that time at which the writing took place: their names have been there since the world was created.

Table 9: Organization of God's Library

	Accomplished Facts (Past)	Decreed Purposes (Future)
People's Actions	1. Record Book (OT, NT)	2. Book of Decrees (OT, NT)
People's States	3. Book of the Living (OT)	4. Book of Life (NT, maybe OT)

First Vision, Seven Churches

Paul does not mean that sometimes he was disobedient. He is emphasizing his constant attitude of obedience.

In the Bread of Life discourse,<sup>56</sup> our Lord promises,

Joh 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me **I will in no wise cast out.**

	Plain Truth	Opposite	Negated Opposite (Litotes)
Acts 8:21 <b>thy heart is not right</b> in the sight of God	thy heart is wicked	thy heart is right	thy heart is not right
Acts 26:19 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, <b>I was not disobedient</b> unto the heavenly vision:	I was obedient	I was disobedient	I was not disobedient
John 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me <b>I will in no wise cast out.</b>	I will welcome	I will cast out	I will in no wise cast out
Rev 3:5 <b>I will not blot out his name</b> out of the book of life	I will preserve his name	I will blot out his name	I will not blot out his name

Table 10: Litotes: Negating the Opposite

The Lord is not discussing those whom he might cast out, but assuring those who come to him that they will be received.

So in Rev 3:5, the Lord is not threatening some with blotting out, but assure overcomers that they are secure. We see the same truth throughout John’s first epistle: we know that we have eternal life because we keep God’s commandments (1 John 2:3); because we overcome.

**but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.**—To confess means to acknowledge. The Lord will acknowledge the overcomer when we enter the heavenly court.

We all know how valuable a personal introduction can be in gaining access to an important person. Recall what Joseph did for his family when they came into Egypt (chart):

Gen 47:1 Then Joseph came and told Pharaoh, and said, My father and my brethren, and their flocks, and their herds, and all that they have, are come out of the land of Canaan; and, behold, they are in the land of Goshen. 2 And he took some of his brethren, even five men, and presented them unto Pharaoh.

Joseph acknowledged them as his family. Because Pharaoh loved and trusted Joseph, he naturally accepted those whom Joseph endorsed.

Gen 47:5 And Pharaoh spake unto Joseph, saying, Thy father and thy brethren are come unto thee: 6 The land of Egypt is before thee; in the best of the land make thy father and brethren to dwell; in the land of Goshen let them dwell: and if thou knowest any men of activity among them, then make them rulers over my cattle.

Joseph’s family would never have received Pharaoh’s favor if Joseph had not confessed them—acknowledged them as his family. Even an Egyptian commoner would not have access to the divine god-king. Foreigners (other than diplomats) would have even less access. But Joseph, Pharaoh’s chief executive officer, had open access to the throne, and with his introduction, Pharaoh welcomes his family.

Similarly, the Lord promises to acknowledge us in the heavenly court, if we overcome.

56 Hendriksen’s commentary on John lists many examples of this figure in John’s gospel.

This promise echoes the Lord’s words in the gospel. As he sends out the Twelve, he promises (Table 11, chart):

Matt. 10:32 Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I **confess** also **before my Father** which is in heaven.

Later, on the way to Jerusalem:

Luke 12:8 Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also **confess before the angels of God**:

Table 11: Whom will the Lord Introduce in Heaven?

	Condition	Promise to Confess	
		Before the Father	Before the angels
Rev 3:5	He that <b>overcometh</b> , ...	I will confess his name <b>before my Father</b> , ...	and <b>before his angels</b> .
Matt. 10:32	Whosoever therefore shall <b>confess me before men</b> ,	him will I confess also <b>before my Father</b> which is in heaven.	
Luke 12:8	Whosoever shall <b>confess me before men</b> ,		him shall the Son of man also <b>confess before the angels of God</b> :

Here, the Lord’s confession results from the saints’ overcoming. In the gospels, it happens because his children confess him before men (Table 11). This parallel suggests that the overcoming expected in Sardis is a clear testimony, even at the risk of social rejection.

**6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.**—As in the other cases, the message to Sardis has profit for all the churches.

### 3:7-13, Philadelphia

**7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write;**—The city was founded in 189 BC by Eumenes II, king of Pergamos, in honor of his younger brother Attalus II, who was called “Philadelphus” because of his love for Eumenes. It is named in the Bible only in Rev 1:11; 3:7. Two features in its history may be reflected in the letter.

1. It was on the edge of a volcanic region, and was frequently subject to earthquakes. The first-century Roman geographer Strabo wrote of it (Geography, 13.4.10, Loeb 6:181): “After the Lydians come the Mysians; and the city Philadelphia, ever subject to earthquakes. Incessantly the walls of the houses are cracked, different parts of the city being thus affected at different times. For this reason but few people live in the city, and most of them spend their lives as farmers in the country, since they have a fertile soil.”
2. After a particularly violent earthquake in AD 17, the emperor Tiberius provided financial aid for rebuilding. In gratitude, the city took the name Neokaisareia (“New Caesarea”) in his honor. Later, during Vespasian’s reign (AD 70-79), it took the name Flavia after the his family name. Adopting such a name required the permission of the Roman Senate, and was a mark of favor from the emperor.

This church and that in Smyrna are the only ones for which the Lord has no criticism. In fact, there are numerous parallels between the two epistles (Table 12, chart).



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Smyrna, 2:8-11	Philadelphia, 3:7-13	Notes
8 ... These things saith the <b>first and the last</b> ,	7 ... These things saith he that is <b>holy, he that is true</b> ,	Titles of deity
which was dead, and is alive;	he that hath the key of David, ...	Resurrection power (1:18 keys of death & hell)
9 I know thy works, and tribulation θλίψις, and <b>poverty</b> , (but thou art <b>rich</b> )	8 I know thy works: ... for that thou hast a <b>little strength</b> , and <b>hast kept my word</b> , and <b>hast not denied my name</b> .	Poverty ~ little strength Rich ~ hast kept, not denied
and I know the <b>blasphemy</b> of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the <b>synagogue of Satan</b> .	9 Behold, I will make them of the <b>synagogue of Satan</b> , which say they are Jews, and are not, but do <b>lie</b> ;	Only references to “synagogue of Satan”
10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be <b>tried πειραζω</b> ; and ye shall have tribulation θλίψις <b>ten days</b> :	10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the <b>hour of temptation πειρασμος</b> , which shall come upon all the world, to <b>try πειραζω</b> them that dwell upon the earth.	Deliverance in testing
be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a <b>crown</b> of life.	11 Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy <b>crown</b> .	Promise of a crown

*Table 12: Parallels between Smyrna and Philadelphia*

In the first five letters, the Lord identifies himself in terms taken from ch. 1. The correspondence with Philadelphia and Laodicea is less clear, but still follows the pattern of the first five letters.

**These things saith he that is holy, he that is true**,—These titles are used jointly of a person only one other time in the Bible, as a title of the δεσπότης “sovereign Lord” (chart):

Rev. 6:10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, **holy and true**, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

Both terms are characteristic of deity in the OT. Holy ἅγιος G40 is the cry of the seraphim around the throne in Isaiah 6, echoed in John’s vision:

Rev 4:8 **Holy, holy, holy**, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.

True ἀληθινός G228 is the concluding title of God in his self-revelation to Moses:<sup>57</sup>

Exod 34:6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and **truth**,

While this title does not appear in ch. 1, characteristics by which John describes the Lord there do include some that belong to Jehovah (Table 13, chart, compare Table 1) that identify the Lord Jesus with Jehovah. So the title “holy and true” does take us back to Revelation 1.

**he that hath the key of David**,—In 1:18, the Lord proclaimed, “I ... have the keys of hell and of death.” Here he again claims a key, describing it as “the key of David.” He is alluding to the history recorded in Isa 22:15-24. The passage criticizes selfish Shebna, whose title, “which is over the house,” identifies him as the main steward of Hezekiah’s household (chart).<sup>58</sup>

57 Beckwith: “holy” is a Messianic title, while “true” ἀληθινός is “genuine, the true Messiah” (or “the genuine Holy One, that is, God”).

58 An inscription marking his tomb may survive: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shebna\\_inscription](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shebna_inscription).

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14	<b>His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow;</b>	Dan. 7:9 I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was <b>white as snow</b> , and the <b>hair</b> of his head like the pure <b>wool</b> :	God
15	<b>and his voice as the sound of many waters.</b>	Ezek. 43:2 And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and <b>his voice was like a noise of many waters</b> :	God
16	And he had in his right hand <b>seven stars</b> :	Amos 5:8 Seek him that maketh the <b>seven stars</b> and Orion, ... The LORD is his name: (Job 9:9; 38:31)	

*Table 13: Divine Characteristics in Revelation 1*

Isa 22:15 Thus saith the Lord GOD of hosts, Go, get thee unto this treasurer, even unto **Shebna**, which is **over the house**, and say, 16 What hast thou here? and whom hast thou here, that thou hast hewed thee out a sepulchre here, as he that heweth him out a sepulchre on high, and that graveth an habitation **for himself** in a rock? 17 Behold, the LORD will carry thee away with a mighty captivity, and will surely cover thee. 18 He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country: there shalt thou die, and there the chariots of thy glory shall be the shame of thy lord's house. 19 And I will drive thee from thy station, and from thy state shall he pull thee down.

Having predicted his coming exile, the Lord replaces him with gracious Eliakim:

Isa 22:20 And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant **Eliakim** the son of Hilkiah: 21 And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be **a father** to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. 22 And **the key of the house of David** will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

By the time Rabshakeh arrives to demand the surrender of Jerusalem, Shebna has been demoted to scribe, and Eliakim has taken his place:

Isa 36:2 And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field. 3 Then came forth unto him **Eliakim**, Hilkiah's son, which was **over the house**, and **Shebna** the scribe, and Joah, Asaph's son, the recorder.

We don't know any more of his history. Perhaps he was taken captive by the Assyrians; perhaps, like Jeroboam before him (1 Ki 11:40) he went into exile in Egypt. The important point is that he was unable to enjoy his beautiful tomb, and "the key of the house of David" passed to Eliakim.

By claiming to have the key of David, the Lord is presenting himself as the chief steward of the kingdom of heaven. He has the keys to every door in the heavenly palace. It would be consistent with this image for him to control access to death and hades, comparable to the steward having the keys to the dungeon. Furthermore, the allusion to the story of Shebna and Eliakim suggests that the Lord has taken the keys from a prior but unworthy custodian, those "which say they are Jews, and are not" (3:9).

**he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth;**<sup>59</sup>—As we noted in discussing 1:18, the language here recalls our Lord's words to Peter and the other disciples (chart):

59 MT is squirrely: "he that openeth and no one shall close it, except the one opening; and no one openeth." Is the final clause to be understood as "no one else can open," implying that no one else can close, either?

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Mat 16:19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matt 18:18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

He determines who shall enter the kingdom of heaven, the household of the king. Those who claim today to hold these keys must remember that ultimately they belong to Christ. Trench:

If at any time there is error in their binding and loosing, if they make sad the heart which He has not made sad, if they speak peace to the heart to which He has not spoken peace, then his judgment shall stand, and not theirs.

**8 I know thy works:**—In every case, the standard of his evaluation is works, not doctrine.

**behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it:**—What is this door, and what does it have to do with their works? Two answers have been suggested (see note).

On the one hand, the Lord has just described himself as holding the key of David, controlling access to the kingdom of God. He has taken it away from the Jewish people. He may be reassuring the Philadelphians that in spite of the opposition of the Jews, they are full members of his household. Luke uses the open door in this sense:

Act 14:27 And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had **opened the door of faith** unto the Gentiles.

On the other, Paul often uses the metaphor of an open door to describe opportunities for ministry:

Col 4:3 Withal praying also for us, that God would **open unto us a door of utterance**, to speak the mystery of Christ, [cf 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12]

In fact, both are true of the Philadelphians. Though Gentiles, has opened the door of faith, to allow them to enter the royal kingdom, while the false Jews are now shut out. But recall that it was the responsibility of the Jews to go to distant cities, tell them of God's kingdom, and invite them to submit to it:

Deu 20:10 When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it.  
11 And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, that all the people that is found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee.

Now that the Philadelphians have entered the door to the kingdom that the Lord has opened to them, they have an open door to bear witness to him to others.

Thus encouraged, they, like Smyrna, can serve the Lord in spite of their weakness in the world's eyes.

**for that thou hast a little strength,**—A better translation would omit the indefinite article: "thou hast little strength." It is parallel to the statement to Smyrna, "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty" (2:9). The church is not influential in the world's eyes.

But the Lord went on to say to Smyrna, "but thou art rich." In the same way, Philadelphia, though physically weak, is spiritually strong.

**and hast kept my word,**—First, they are faithful to God's word. In every age devotion to the word of God is a mark of God's people and a sign of strength.

**and hast not denied my name.**—Second, they are willing to be known as believers, even when that testimony makes them unpopular and leads to social rejection.

**9 Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie;**—As in Smyrna, and throughout the Greek world (see references in discussion of Smyrna), Christians faced opposition from Jews. Some might have been ethnic Jews who like their countrymen in Jerusalem rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Paul writes of them (chart),

Rom 2:28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

In addition, in the diaspora, many of those “which say they are Jews” would in fact be proselytes, converts from paganism, who would be even more zealous to defend their adopted faith.<sup>60</sup>

**behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I (ἐγώ emphatic) have loved thee.**—The Lord here echoes the promise to Jerusalem in Isaiah 60 of the honor she will receive in the coming kingdom. An important feature of that kingdom is that the Gentiles who previously oppressed Israel would now come and submit to them (chart):

Isa 60:14 The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall **come** bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall **bow themselves down** at the soles of **thy feet**; and they shall call thee, **The city of the LORD**, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

But in the promise to the Philadelphians, the roles are reversed. The largely Gentile believers are the ones who have been admitted to the kingdom by the one who holds the key of David, and those who claim to be Jews but are not must one day bow before them, acknowledging them as the true representatives of the heavenly king.

**10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience ὑπομονή G5281,**—The best understanding of this expression (see note) is that they have kept the frequent NT command to be patient, following the example of the Lord’s own patience. Hebrews 12 illustrates both the command and the example (chart). First, the command:

Heb. 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with **patience ὑπομονή G5281** the race that is set before us,

Next, the example (the verb “endure” is the same Greek root as the noun “patience”):

Heb 12:2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him **endured ὑπομένω G5278** the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that **endured ὑπομένω G5278** such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

The concept of Christ as our example in suffering and patience goes back to chapter 1:

Rev. 1:9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ,

All three nouns are said to be “in Christ Jesus”: tribulation now, the kingdom to come, and patience to bridge the gap.

Thus he praises Philadelphia, like Ephesus (2:2, 3) and Thyatira (2:19), for their patience.

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<sup>60</sup> Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, Eli; Shir, Pinchas. *Hebrew Insights from Revelation*.

Next he promises to keep the Philadelphians from a coming “hour of temptation.” Let’s consider first the hour of temptation, and then the promise to keep them.

**the hour of temptation πειρασμός G3986**,—Recall the announcement to Smyrna (2:10) that they would be tested (the related verb πειράζω G3985) for a limited period (10 days). There, the testing was explicitly said to come from the devil, and is so characteristic of him that he is called “the tempter” (Matt 4:3; 1 Thes 3:5). So here, the Lord is warning Philadelphia of a coming short period of intense Satanic opposition.

**which shall come upon all the world οἰκουμένη G3625**,—Satan’s temptations down through history have been focused on specific individuals, but a time is coming when he will attempt to bring all the inhabited world into subjection to himself. This same expression appears later in the book, where Satan’s activity (“deceiving”) is part of his activity of tempting:

Rev. 12:9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which **deceiveth the whole world οἰκουμένη G3625**:

Paul warned Timothy that Satan’s opposition against believers would increase through time:

2Ti 3:12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. 13 But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

Eventually he will seek to bring all the earth into rebellion against God.

**to try πειράζω G3985 them that dwell upon the earth.**—Here is the verb from 2:10 again.

Satan’s focus is on those who “dwell upon the earth.” Throughout the Revelation, this expression often describes those against whom Satan directs his attacks and who yield to him. But the verb can also be used of those who resist successfully, as it was of the believers in Pergamos,<sup>61</sup>

Rev. 2:13 I know thy works, and where thou **dwest**, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

Antipas of Pergamos is the only martyr identified in the seven churches. Persecution had already become intense in Pergamos, but the people were steadfast.

**I (ἐγώ emphatic) also will keep thee from τηρέω G5083 ἐκ.**—In the face of this warning, the Lord offers protection. The pronoun is emphatic: “I myself will keep thee.”

Some understand this promise to refer to the rapture of the church, described in 1 Thes 4:15-17, when the Lord comes to raise the faithful dead. He could have made this clear in this verse if he had spoken of “taking” them from the world, rather than “keeping them.” But in his great high priestly prayer in John 17, he uses this same phrase “keep from” in contrast with “take from”:

John 17:15 I pray not that thou shouldest **take them out of αἴρω ἐκ** the world, but that thou shouldest **keep them from τηρέω G5083 ἐκ** the evil.

The strong parallel with Smyrna (Table 12) encourages us to see this as an assurance of the Lord’s presence and protection through coming trials, rather than exemption from them:

Rev 2:10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be **tried πειράζω G3985**; and ye shall have tribulation θλίψις ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

61 One argument used for a pretribulation interpretation of 3:10 is that this expression is restricted to unbelievers, so the use of the verb for faithful Pergamians is important.

His “keeping” will enable them, like those in Smyrna, to “be ... faithful unto death” if necessary.

**11 Behold, I come quickly:**—The Lord encourages them with his return—not to exempt them from Satan’s attacks, but to reassure them that judgment is coming. This is the same encouragement he offers to the Thessalonians. Like the Philadelphians, they are demonstrating patience in the midst of suffering.

2 Thes 1:4 So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your **patience ὑπομονή G5281** and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: 5 Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer:

And as in Philadelphia, so he encourages the Thessalonians with the expectation of his return:

2 Thes 1:6 Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; 7 And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, 8 In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: 9 Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; 10 When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.

**hold that fast which thou hast,**—He has previously given this exhortation to Thyatira (2:25), and commended Pergamos for “hold[ing] fast my name” (2:13). To the Thessalonians, in a similar condition, Paul wrote,

2Th. 2:15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and **hold the traditions** which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.

So Jude exhorts those to whom he writes,

Jude 3 ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.

**that no man take thy crown.**—In another parallel with Smyrna, he reminds them of their crown. Revelation talks more about crowns than any other book in the NT, containing 8/18 references.<sup>62</sup> No other book has more than two. The crown here is the wreath awarded to the winner in a contest—the one who “overcomes.” He is urging them to keep their eye on the prize at the end of the race (as in Heb 12:1-3), and not to give up in the contest.

**12 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God,**—The promises to the overcomers may reflect Philadelphia’s history. We noted the frequency of earthquakes. The image of a solid pillar suggests victory over earthquakes.

The Lord here develops the common NT image of the church as the temple of God (chart):

Eph. 2:19 Now therefore ye ... 20 ... are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto **an holy temple** in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for **an habitation of God** through the Spirit.

1Pet. 2:5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up **a spiritual house**, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

62 These statistics are for στέφανος G1238, describing the wreath of victory. The royal crown, διάδημα G4735, appears only three times in the NT, all in Revelation: seven crowns on the dragon (12:3), ten on the beast from the sea (13:1), and many on the coming conqueror (19:12)

It was already customary to refer to prominent members of the church as pillars in this living temple. Recall Paul's commendation of James, Peter, and John:

Gal. 2:9 And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be **pillars**, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.

The overcomers will be incorporated into a structure that can never be shaken.

It is interesting to compare this promise with the statement at the end of the book,

Rev 21:22 And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

How could we become pillars in the temple if the Lord himself is the temple? That would only be possible if we could be in some very deep way united with the Lord. But that's just what our Lord asked of the Father in his high priestly prayer:

Joh 17:21 That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be **one in us**.<sup>63</sup>

We are already described as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). By overcoming we demonstrate our irrevocable position in him.

**and he shall go no more out:**—The allusion may be to the custom noted by Strabo, that because of the risk of injury from falling buildings, “few people live in the city, and most of them spend their lives as farmers in the country.”

**and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.**—We will later read of people who carry the mark of the beast. God's people will carry his name in their foreheads:

Rev 14:1 I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, **having his Father's name written in their foreheads**.

The overcomer bears not only the Father's name, but also the name of the heavenly city, described in more detail in Revelation 21-22. This marking is a passport, showing that they are citizens of the holy city and allowing them access.

This promise echoes one in Isaiah that when God establishes the new heavens and new earth,

Isa 65:15 the Lord GOD shall ... call his servants by another name.<sup>64</sup>

The anticipations of ch. 19-22 in this promise are important. If we go back and review the previous promises to overcomers, we will find that each of them also anticipates the conclusion of the book (Table 14, chart). Thus each letter begins by reminding the reader of the character of the risen Lord as he is presented in ch. 1, and ends by pointing them toward the promise of the future kingdom. We may take this as a central theme of the Revelation: these two bodies of truth—the person and work of Christ established in the past, and the certainty of his coming victory over evil—are the framework that motivates and directs our lives as a members of his body now.

**13 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.**—Again, the message to this church, while focused on the needs of a particular congregation in the first

63 Suggested by Charles

64 The title the Lord uses in 3:14, “the Amen,” comes from the context of this text.

Table 14: Anticipation of the Culmination in the Promises to Overcomers

Church	Promise to Overcomers	Culmination
Ephesus	2:7 To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the <b>tree of life</b> , which is in the midst of the paradise of God.	22:2 In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the <b>tree of life</b> , ... and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 22:14, 19
Smyrna	2:11 He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the <b>second death</b> .	21:8 the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the <b>second death</b> . 20:6, 14
Pergamos	2:17 I ... will give him a white stone, and in the stone a <b>new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it</b> .	19:12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a <b>name written, that no man knew, but he himself</b> .
Thyatira	2:26 ... to him will I give power over the nations: 27 And <b>he shall rule</b> them ...	20:4 and they lived and <b>reigned with Christ</b> a thousand years. 20:6
	2:27 And he shall rule them <b>with a rod of iron</b> ; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers:	19:15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them <b>with a rod of iron</b> :
	28 And I will give him the <b>morning star</b> .	22:16 I Jesus ... <b>am</b> the root and the offspring of David, and <b>the bright and morning star</b> .
Sardis	3:5 He that overcometh, the same shall be <b>clothed in white raiment</b> ;	19:8 And to her was granted that she should be <b>arrayed</b> in fine linen, clean and <b>white</b> :
	and I will not blot out his name out of the <b>book of life</b> ,	20:15 And whosoever was not found written in the <b>book of life</b> was cast into the lake of fire. 20:12
Philadelphia	3:12 Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the <b>temple</b> of my God,	21:22 for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the <b>temple</b> of it.
	I will write upon him ... the name of the city of my God, which is <b>new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God</b> :	21:2 And I John saw the holy city, <b>new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven</b> ,
	and I will write upon him <b>my new name</b> .	19:12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and <b>he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself</b> .
Laodicea	3:21 To him that overcometh will I grant to <b>sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne</b> .	22:3 And there shall be no more curse: but <b>the throne of God and of the Lamb</b> shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: 22:1

century, is profitable for all seven of the churches, and by extension, applicable to us when we encounter situations comparable to those described in these letters.

### 3:14-22, Laodicea

**14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write;**—The last church to whom the Lord addresses a letter is known to us from Paul’s letter to Colossae (chart):



## First Vision, Seven Churches

Col 4:12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in **Laodicea**, and them in **Hierapolis**. 14 Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you. 15 Salute the brethren which are in **Laodicea**, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. 16 And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from **Laodicea**.

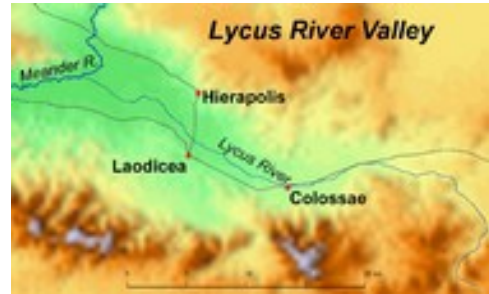


Figure 12: The churches of the Lycus Valley

These three cities—Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis—were within five or ten miles of each other, in the valley of the Lycus river (Figure 12).

Of all the churches, Laodicea is the only one for which the Lord has no praise. It has been ineffective for him. The next verse in Colossians 4 may suggest the problem in Laodicea:

Col 4:17 And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

Another resource for the church in Colossae is the personal note that Paul wrote to Philemon when he returned Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus to him. Philemon was a sponsor of the church in Colossae, and Paul begins that letter with this greeting:

Phm 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, 2 And to our beloved Apphia [P's wife?], and **Archippus** [P's son?] our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

It is very likely that Apphia is the wife of Philemon, and Archippus is his son. Col 4:17 tells us that Archippus has been given an assignment, but needs encouragement in pursuing it. Perhaps he was responsible for caring for the church in Laodicea, and was not diligent in his work.

The city grew up at the junction of three important roads (Figure 13), where the coastal roads from Smyrna and Miletus, joined the road to the eastern provinces. To travel inland from the coast, you had to pass right through the city, in one gate and out another (just as highways before the interstate passed right through towns, like US 12 through Saline, or Breezewood, PA, where Interstate 70 from Washington and Baltimore joins the Pennsylvania Turnpike at Exit 161). This position gave Laodicea great commercial power, and it became a major banking center. After a major earthquake in AD 60, the city proudly refused imperial aid to rebuild, confident in its own resources. But the location had no local source of water. Colossae to the east had pure, cold water, but was nearly 10 miles away. In Hierapolis to the north and in the hills to the south were hot springs, and ancient stone pipes have been found extending to the south, with heavy mineral deposits from years of use supplying water to Laodicea.



Figure 13: Topography of the Seven Churches

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Economically, in addition to its banks, the city hosted a medical school renowned for eye care, and its farmers raised sheep with a glossy black wool that was of great value.

As in the other epistles, the Lord describes himself with themes introduced in Revelation 1 (Table 15, chart). These introductions are an extremely important part of the letters. The title of the book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). This has a double meaning: it is not only what the Lord Jesus revealed to John about “things which must shortly come to pass” (subjective genitive—the Lord does the revealing), but also a revelation to John and the reader of the person and work of the Lord Jesus in these last times (objective genitive—the Lord is what is revealed). The introductions, and the underlying vision of chapter 1, develop this second purpose.

In the case of Laodicea, this title, both in its allusions and its themes, is unusually rich. It is appropriate not only to Laodicea, but to all of the churches, and may be understood as the grand finale, the culmination of the Lord’s introduction of himself to the churches.

The Lord introduces himself with three titles. The center one is a straightforward expansion of a title from chapter 1, which the first and last amplify. So we’ll begin by considering the center title and then consider those on either side (chart). We’ll see that these all draw on several other biblical texts (Figure 14, chart) that will help us understand them.

**the faithful and true witness**,—This phrase expands “faithful witness” 1:5. This verse also leads to the third title “beginning/ruler of creation.”

Church	Intro in Epistle	Revelation 1
Ephesus	2:1 These things saith he that holdeth the <b>seven stars</b> in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the <b>seven golden candlesticks</b> ;	1:13 And in the midst of the <b>seven candlesticks</b> one like unto the Son of man, ... 16 And he had in his right hand <b>seven stars</b> :
Smyrna	2:8 These things saith <b>the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive</b> ;	1:17 Fear not; I am the first and the last: 18 I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore,
Pergamos	2:12 These things saith he which hath the <b>sharp sword with two edges</b> ;	1:16 out of his mouth went a <b>sharp twoedged sword</b> .
Thyatira	2:18 These things saith the Son of God, who hath his <b>eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass</b> ;	1:14 and <b>his eyes were as a flame of fire</b> ; 15 <b>And his feet like unto fine brass</b> , as if they burned in a furnace;
Sardis	3:1 These things saith he that hath <b>the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars</b> ;	1:4 ... Grace be unto you, and peace, ... from the <b>seven Spirits</b> which are before his throne; ... 16 And he had in his right hand <b>seven stars</b> :
Philadelphia	3:7 These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath <b>the key of David</b> , he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth;	1:18 ... behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have <b>the keys of hell and of death</b> .
Laodicea	3:14 These things saith the Amen, <b>the faithful and true witness, the beginning ἀρχή</b> of the creation of God;	1:4 Grace be unto you, and peace, ... 5 ... from Jesus Christ, who is <b>the faithful witness</b> , and the first begotten of the dead, and <b>the prince ἀρχων</b> of the kings of the earth.

*Table 15: Epistle Introductions from Revelation 1*

## First Vision, Seven Churches

This title warns the Laodiceans not to discount the harsh warning that he brings.

Here, as in 1:5, he is a witness, one who attests to something of which he has first-hand experience. The Greek word μάρτυς G3144<sup>65</sup> is usually (29x) simply translated “witness,” but three times it is rendered “martyr,” which describes someone who gives their life rather than denying what they know to be true. Our Lord is a witness in both senses: as he said to Pilate (using the verbal form of this word, μαρτυρέω G3140) (chart),

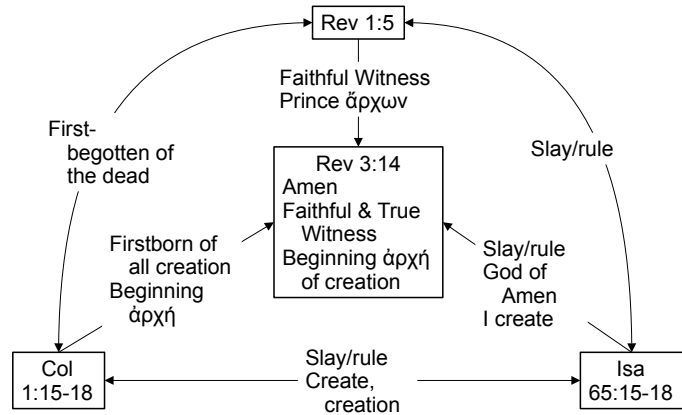


Figure 14: Some Scriptural Connections of 3:14

Joh 18:37 To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should **bear witness μαρτυρέω G3140** unto the truth.

Paul later recalls this faithful testimony in exhorting Timothy:

1Tim. 6:13 I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate **witnessed μαρτυρέω** a good confession;

Note here the *willingness* of our Lord to bear witness, and his *truthfulness*. He would have faced much less opposition if he simply kept his mouth shut, or if he softened the truth to make it more palatable.

Our Lord was able to bear this witness because he was the very “word of God,” with first-hand knowledge of divine truth, as he insisted to Nicodemus,

Joh 3:11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and **testify μαρτυρέω** that we have seen; and ye receive not our **witness μαρτυρία G3141**. 12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? 13 And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven.

He knows the truth about the kingdom of God, because he has personal access to heaven. This is another characteristic of a faithful witness: he must have first-hand knowledge of the facts.

Our Lord is also a witness in the second sense, a martyr like Stephen (Acts 22:20) or Antipas (Rev 2:13) who died rather than deny the truth. If our Lord had been willing to deny that he was the Son of God, the Jewish leaders would not have insisted on his execution. He died rather than denying the truth that he confessed.

As in 1:5, he is a “faithful witness.” His word can be trusted.<sup>66</sup> He will not distort the truth.<sup>67</sup>

He amplifies “faithful” with the additional term “true.”<sup>68</sup> This is not simply repeating the trustworthiness of the content of what he says. The word used here (ἀληθινός G228) means

65 The word family (μάρτυς G3144, μαρτυρία G3141, μαρτυρέω G3140) is a favorite of John, who uses it 82 of its 149 instances in the NT.

66 πιστός G4103. The term can also mean “trusting.” (See discussion in Trench.) As a characteristic of a witness, it is better understood as “trustworthy,” the sense in which it is applied to God (1 John 1:9; 1 Thes 5:24).

67 Beale (New Test. Stud. vol. 42, 1996, pp. 133-152) notes OT roots of the Messiah as witness in Ps 89:35-37 and especially the LXX of Isa 43:10, where it leads to the promise of the new creation (43:18-19).

“genuine, real” as opposed to “truthful” (which would be a distinct word, ἀληθής G227).<sup>69</sup> He is the perfect example of a witness:<sup>70</sup>

- He has *first-hand knowledge* of the information in question;
- He is *willing* to testify to that knowledge;
- He is *truthful*.

This title of the Lord, focused on Laodicea, really reminds all of the churches of the fundamental challenge they were facing. Living in an idolatrous culture, would they boldly bear witness to Christ and his work, or would they hide their faith to advance their businesses and avoid rejection by the society? In this culminating epistle, the Lord characterizes himself as “the faithful and true witness,” and our ultimate objective as believers is to be conformed to his image. He is the ideal witness, who never shirked from proclaiming God’s truth, even when it was uncomfortable. If we are to be like him, we also must be faithful and true witnesses.

1. We must have first-hand experience of what we testify. If you hold back from testifying because Christ has done nothing in your life, perhaps you need to be certain that you are the Lord’s child.

2. We must be willing to share it with others, rather than ashamed of the Lord.

Mat 10:32 Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. 33 But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

3. We must give a truthful account of what we know, not distorting or corrupting it.

**These things saith the Amen**,—“Amen” is a Hebrew word meaning “surely, truly.” Its usage reinforces both of the characteristics we have seen in the second title, “faithful” and “true.”

Most often, it is a response by someone who hears something, to show their agreement with it:

Neh. 8:6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, **Amen, Amen.**

But during his earthly teaching, the Lord Jesus used the word of his own sayings. In these contexts, English versions usually render the word, “Truly” or “Verily.” John records the most uses of the word,<sup>71</sup> and in particular the Lord’s tendency to repeat it:

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said unto him, **Verily, verily (Amen, amen)**, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

He says “amen” to his own words. He authenticates himself, and does not need the agreement of someone else. This sense of the word anticipates his role as the “faithful,” trustworthy witness.

But he is also the true witness, the ideal example of a witness, and that sense is attested in the only other place in the Bible where “amen” appears as a title rather than an affirmation, Isaiah 65. We have already met this passage in our discussion of 3:12, where God gives his people a new name (chart).

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68 This joint term is the Lord’s title at his return, Rev 19:11, and also a title of God in a context of tribulation, 3 Macc 2:10-11.

69 Trench, *Synonyms* viii. Thus also Beckwith.

70 Adapted from Trench’s comment on the verse

71 51 instances out of 106 in the gospels, 3.21/1000 words (Matthew is next with 1.76/1000).

Later in this text, Isaiah calls Jehovah “the God of Amen.” The context makes the sense clear. The Lord is rebuking the nation for going after a host of false gods instead of the Lord.

Is. 65:11 But ye are they that forsake the LORD, that forget my holy mountain, that prepare a table for that troop, and that furnish the drink offering unto that number.

He declares the judgments that will come upon these idolaters, contrasting them with those he calls “my servants.” He anticipates a coming day when he will destroy them in his sovereign power, and disperse the “troop” of false gods:

Isa 65:15 The Lord GOD shall slay thee, and call his servants by another name: 16 That he who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in **the God of truth** אֱלֹהֵי אָמֵן; and he that sweareth in the earth shall swear by **the God of truth** אֱלֹהֵי אָמֵן; because the former troubles are forgotten, and because they are hid from mine eyes. 17 For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. 18 But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

“The God of truth” is literally “the God of Amen.” The context places this God in contrast with the false deities. The LXX, picking up the contrast, renders the expression τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἀληθινόν, “the true (genuine) God,” as opposed to the host of counterfeits in 65:11.

At least in this passage, אָמֵן has the sense of “genuine.” So the Lord Jesus, in calling himself the Amen, claims not only to be truthful (as a faithful witness), but also genuine (as a true witness). In fact, the parallel with Isa 65:16 suggests an even stronger claim: The only person to bear the name of Amen is the almighty God, and our Lord here takes that exalted name to himself.

**the beginning of the creation of God;**—The third title echos several earlier scriptures.<sup>72</sup>

Most immediately, “beginning” ἀρχή G746 is closely related to “prince” ἄρχων G758 in 1:5 (“prince of the kings of the earth”), and can also mean “ruler” (cf. use of the root in Gn 1:26, 28; see note on Christ’s authority). He is the beginning of the creation, but he is also its human ruler, as 1:5 anticipates. Isa 65:15 makes this point, where the God of Amen slays his enemies and exercising the ruler’s prerogative of renaming his subjects, as we saw already in 3:12.<sup>73</sup>

That which he begins and rules is called the creation. The emphasis we have already seen on Isaiah 65 suggests that the focus here is not on the original creation, but on the new creation promised in Isa 65:17, the new heavens and new earth.

The first step in that new creation was the resurrection of our Lord, which 1:5 emphasizes by giving him the title “firstborn of the dead.” That title in turn leads us to yet another text that lies behind 3:14, Col 1:15-18, the only other reference in the Bible to “the firstborn of the dead.” This passage is particularly relevant because Laodicea would have read this epistle.

Colossians 1 is often used by those who would deny the full deity of our Lord to suggest that he is a created being. But a careful consideration of its structure shows that this is not the case. The first verse of this passage summarizes the rest, a summary-exposition pattern common in Paul

72 I follow Beale’s exposition; Burney prefers a derivation from Prov 8:22, JTS 27(106):160-177, 1926. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23950320>.

73 Recall how the Lord renames Abram to Abraham when he enters into covenant in Gen 17, and Jacob to Israel in Gen 32, when Jacob submits to him. After the death of Josiah in 2 Ki 23, Pharaoh Necho renames his son Eliakim to Jehoiakim to show his authority over the land, and Nebuchadnezzar renames Daniel and his friends in Dan 1 to show his authority over them.

(see note). It presents our Lord as both God (the image of the invisible God) and man (the firstborn of every creature, or “all creation,” as AV translates the word in Rev 3:14) (chart).

Col 1:15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

As the visible manifestation of God, he is the one who actually carried out the work of creation (1:16-17), as reported in Gen 1:1, “God created the heavens and the earth.”

*[image of the invisible God:]* 16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: 17 And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

Even before the incarnation, throughout the OT, the Son is the form in which God revealed himself visibly to his creatures, as “the angel of the Lord.” Four times in these two verses Paul insists that he made “all things.” As John would later write in his gospel,

John 1:3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

John is quite clear: if it was created, he created it. So he himself cannot be created.

The confusion has come by trying to interpret “firstborn of every creature” as an introduction to vv. 16-17. But Paul’s repetition of the word “firstborn” in v. 18 shows that this second clause is meant as a summary of v. 18. The reference here is not to the first creation, but to the second, which begins with his resurrection:

*[firstborn of all creation:]* 18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the **beginning**, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

In Col 1:18, Paul calls the Lord “the beginning,” the same title the Lord takes in Rev 3:14. But note that it is associated with his place as “firstborn of the dead.” Our Lord, having become a man, is the first participant (by resurrection) in the new creation promised in Isa 65:17-18.

Isa 65:17 For, behold, I **create** new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. 18 But be ye glad and rejoice for ever in that which I **create**: for, behold, I **create** Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy.

In Colossians, the centerpiece of this new creation is the church. Revelation ends in “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1). Again, the church is central, represented as a city:

Rev 21:9 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee **the bride, the Lamb's wife**. 10 And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me **that great city, the holy Jerusalem**, descending out of heaven from God,

As the faithful and true witness, our Lord attests not only to what is true now, but also to what is coming. Laodicea is proud of its strategic location and the wealth that comes from it. But it has already been dominated by another city, Rome, and a major theme of the Revelation is that Rome itself will one day be defeated by the new Jerusalem, representing the people of God in their eternal state. If the church of the Laodiceans wishes to participate in that glorious future, they must heed what this faithful witness says.

**15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot:**—The allusion is to the distinctive water sources in the Lycus valley: soothing hot medicinal springs at Hierapolis to the north,

refreshing cold spring water at Colossae to the east, but lukewarm water piped into Laodicea, which had no water of its own.

What does the Lord mean by comparing their works to these various water sources? Some suggest that “hot” refers to spiritual fervor, while “cold” is someone with no zeal at all, who is perhaps unsaved. This interpretation is difficult to sustain in light of the Lord’s next words:

**I would thou wert cold or hot.**—This statement implies that both cold and hot are worthwhile and profitable. The hot springs of Hierapolis were famous for their therapeutic value, and in the hot climate of the middle east, the cold, refreshing springs of Colossae would be treasured. The OT presents cold water as something valuable (chart):

Pro 25:25 As **cold waters** to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.

Jer 18:14 Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon which cometh from the rock of the field? or shall the **cold flowing waters** that come from another place be forsaken?

Instead of understanding “cold” as “lacking in spiritual zeal,” it is better to recognize here an allusion to the diversity of gifts among God’s people.

1 Cor 12:4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. 8 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; 9 To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; 10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. 12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

Hot water and cold water are both useful, for different purposes. Different people in the church have different gifts and can do different things.

**16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot,**—But the Laodiceans show no operation of the Spirit in their midst—neither the healing warmth of Hierapolis, nor the refreshing cold of Colossae. They are not exercising their gifts for the edification of the body. They need the exhortation that Paul gave Timothy,

2Ti 1:6 Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands.

Or more immediately relevant to the Lycus valley, recall his exhortation to Archippus, the son of Philemon:

Col 4:17 And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it.

**I will spue thee out of my mouth.**—The threat here is another metaphor for the danger facing Ephesus, there represented as removal of the candlestick. In both cases, the church is at risk of losing its standing with the Lord. If the work of the Spirit stops in a church, if the members no longer do their functions, the formal institution may continue, in the form of rituals and traditions, but over it is written the lament of the tabernacle when the ark was removed—*Ichabod*, the glory is departed.

Each of us should be exercised to understand how God has equipped us to minister to the rest of the body, and to be faithful in fulfilling that ministry.

**17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods,**—Laodicea’s self-satisfaction is expressed with an echo of the proud boast of Ephraim, the northern kingdom of Israel (chart):

Hos. 12:8 And Ephraim said, Yet **I am become rich**, I have found me out substance: in all my labours they shall find none iniquity in me that were sin.

Ephraim was proud of its material success. On the spiritual side of the ledger, it has nothing positive to offer—no signs of the working of God’s Spirit, no ministry to others, just the negative assertion that it hasn’t sinned—at least not too much.

How many believers are content in their prosperity, and view their spirituality in terms of the sins they haven’t committed, rather than the profitable ministry they are performing for the Lord?

**and have need of nothing;**—This self confidence is reflected in its refusal of imperial aid after a devastating earthquake in AD 60. The contemporary Roman historian Tacitus records,

In the same year Laodicea, which had fallen from the illustrious cities of Asia by the earthquake of the earth, recovered **without any remedy from us by its own resources**. (Tacitus, Ann. 14.27.1)

**and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:**—Literally, “the wretched and miserable one: poor, and blind, and naked.” The first two give a general description, while the last three are specifics addressed in v. 18.

In spite of its worldly success, the church is “wretched and miserable”; contrast Smyrna, which was characterized by “tribulation and poverty” in the world’s eyes, but of whom the Lord says, “but thou art rich” (2:9). The Lord’s accounting reckons in a different currency than man’s. As our Lord said after telling of the rich farmer,

Luk 12:21 So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

The specific needs, “poor and blind and naked,” probably reflect three circumstances of Laodicea’s historical situation.

- They were materially rich because of their control of a major crossroads, the Breezewood of Asia Minor.
- Their medical school was famous for eye care, and the regions was renowned for an eye medication.
- Their sheep produced a rare, glossy black wool that was highly valued for clothing.

But these treasures were vulnerable. As our Lord reminds his disciples,

Mat 6:19 Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: 20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal:

Moths could corrupt their black wool, and thieves (or imperial tax collectors from Rome) could steal their gold. The Lord offers them far better treasure.

**18 I counsel thee to buy of me**—Here is a paradox. The Lord has just declared the result of his audit: they are poor. Yet he urges them to buy. The image comes from Isaiah,



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Isa 55:1 Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

The most precious things in the world, those that are so rare, are in fact available for free. They have been paid for by Another, who offers them to all who will ask for them.

The image of a storekeeper who provides a wide range of goods is familiar to anyone who has visited a truck stop (chart). There, one can buy food, clothing, car parts, books, toys—anything that a traveler might need. In earlier times, you would call it a “general store.”

Because of its location at a critical road junction, Laodicea was like a general store, or a modern truck stop, and the Lord adopts this image. He is like a salesman describing his wares, which respond to the three needs (poor, blind, naked) that he has just outlined: gold, clothing, and eye salve. These are clearly metaphors for spiritual goods, and we can suggest from other passages what they represent.

**gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich;**—Laodicea was a banking center, but the physical gold that they so treasure is vulnerable to theft. The Lord offers us something far more permanent. Peter describes our faith as tried in the fire, like gold:

1 Pet 1:7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

We learn here that faith is the true wealth consists of faith. Recall the words of James,

Jas 2:5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the **poor** of this world **rich in faith**, ... ?

The Lord tells us that faith comes from him. It is the gift of God (Eph 2:8-9). But Peter teaches us something more. We are to value, not just gold, but gold tried in the fire, faith tested by tribulation and suffering. We naturally try to avoid circumstances that test our faith, but the Lord teaches us to value these trials when he allows them to come, for they increase the glory that we will bring to our Lord at his return.

**and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear;**—Laodicea profited much from the sale of its unique glossy black wool, but that was vulnerable to moths. The Lord offers to replace it with white garments.

Throughout Revelation, white clothing symbolizes righteousness. As we discussed on 3:5, this righteousness has two facets. First, it reflects the work of our Lord, washing us from our sin. Theologians call this “imputed righteousness.”

Rev 7:13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in **white robes**? and whence came they? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and **made them white in the blood of the Lamb**.

But it also represents the practical righteousness that the Lord enables us to perform, which we might call “imparted righteousness.”

Rev 19:7 for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. 8 And **to her was granted** that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness [righteous deeds] of saints.

The word “righteousness” here (δικαίωμα G1345) means “righteous deeds.” Note the clause “to her was granted.” Though we do these deeds, we are enabled to do them by the Lord Jesus.

**and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.**—Laodicea was a center for eye care, and “Phrygian powders” made in the area were a famous eye medicine. But the best physical eyesight cannot give sight to those who are spiritually blind. David celebrated the best treatment for spiritual vision:

Ps 19:8 the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The word of God is the best cure for weak spiritual insight. Apply it frequently.

**19 As many as I love, I (ἐγὼ emphatic) rebuke ἐλέγχω G1561 and chasten παιδεύω G3811:**

—Lest they be disheartened, he reminds them that his rebuke and instruction are signs of his love. The vocabulary is drawn directly from Proverbs LXX:

Prov. 3:11 My son, despise not the chastening παιδεία of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction ἐλέγχω: 12 For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth παιδεύω; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.

**be zealous therefore,**—The verb indicates a strong, intense interest in something. We have suggested that “hot” and “cold” are metaphorical for diverse spiritual gifts in the body. If this is correct, the verse may echo Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians, using the same verb,

1Cor. 12:31 But **covet** earnestly the best gifts:

Paul wanted the Corinthians to be excited about the abilities that the Spirit gives them to build up the body. In Revelation 3, the Lord similarly wants the Laodiceans to be excited about the work that he has for them.

**and repent.**—If they do become excited about what they can do, they will repent that they have so long neglected their responsibility.

This command is frequent throughout the letters. It is addressed to every church except Smyrna and Philadelphia, the two churches that receive no criticism.

**20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock:**<sup>74</sup>—The verb appears 12x in the Greek Bible. Three of these are in narratives (the men of Gibeah seeking to abuse the Levite in Jdg 19:22; Peter after his release from prison in Acts 12:13, 16). Seven more describe our knocking in seeking blessing from the Lord. In two cases, it is the master of the house who is knocking, seeking access to what is rightly his.

In the Song of Solomon, the husband comes seeking access to his wife:

Son 5:2 I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is **the voice of my beloved that knocketh**, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.

In Luke, the Lord describes a master returning home after a social engagement:

Lk 12:35 Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; 36 And ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their lord, when he will return from the wedding; that **when he cometh and knocketh**, they may open unto him immediately.

In both cases, they deserve to be received, but instead of forcing in, they patiently knock.

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74 See Hemer’s discussion of this verse.

The Lord's rebuke to Laodicea, followed by his gentle invitation in 3:19, constitute his knocking. The church has severe problems, but he will not force them to obey. He comes as the master to his own locked house. Will they receive him? He asks that they repent of their careless attitude and stir up the gifts within them. Will they heed?

**if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.**—Note shift in grammatical person. The appeal is no longer to the church (thou), but to individuals within it (τις, AV “any man”).<sup>75</sup> The fault pervades the entire church, but the response to his correction must be individual.

The result is pictured in terms of table fellowship. The imagery recalls the Lord's table, one of the four elements of the early church's life (along with doctrine, fellowship, and prayer, Acts 2:42). When we gather at the table, is the Lord there with us? Or are we just socializing with each other? To enjoy his presence as a group, each of us must yield to him individually.

**21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I (ἐγώ emphatic) also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.**—The promise reminds us of that to overcomers in Thyatira:

Rev. 2:26 And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: 27 And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.

In both cases, we share in the Lord's coming rule, a theme that will be picked up in ch. 20:

Rev 20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: ... and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

The promise to Thyatira focused on the action of ruling, as described in Psalm 2. Here, we are offered the position of ruling with him. As always, it is conditioned on our overcoming in the daily struggle of the Christian life.

**22 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.**—Once more, we are reminded that all the churches should pay attention to what the Lord says to the others.

## Common Themes in the Seven Letters

As we have seen, the letters share a common structure. The Lord emphasizes certain themes repeatedly. As a Bible study technique, when looking at parallel sections, it helps to capture observations in a table (Table 16, chart). Let's briefly review some of the major ones:

**Tribulation:** the churches live in an environment of persecution, which can reach the point of martyrdom:

Smyrna: Rev 2:10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt **suffer**: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have **tribulation** ten days:

Pergamos: Rev 2:13 Antipas was my faithful **martyr**, who was **slain** among you,

Philadelphia: Rev 3:10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of **temptation**, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

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<sup>75</sup> Thus Osborne, noting consistent use of τις as individualistic elsewhere in Revelation.

## First Vision, Seven Churches

	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamos	Thyatira	Sardis	Philadelphia	Laodicea
Risk of Removal	2:5						3:16
Coming Tribulation		2:10				3:10	
Facing death		2:10	2:13				
Resurrection of Christ		2:8					3:14 < 1:5
Life: tree, crown, book	2:7	2:10, 11			3:5		
Nicolaitans	2:6		2:15				
OT Villains (Balaam, Jezebel)			2:14	2:20			
Idolatry & Fornication			2:14	2:20			
Satan: synagogue, seat, depths		2:9	2:13	2:24		3:9	
Call to repent	2:5		2:16	2:21-22	3:3		3:19
A door						3:8	3:20
Riches and poverty		2:9					3:17
Hold fast (name of Christ)			2:13	2:25		3:11	
Doctrinal faithfulness	2:2		2:13			3:8	
Promise to rule				2:26			3:21
Identification with Christ						3:12	3:21
Crown		2:10				3:11	
Patience	2:2-3			2:19		3:10	

*Table 16: Repeated Themes in the Seven Letters*

**Temptation to Compromise:** To Ephesus and Pergamos he mentions a group known as the Nicolaitans. From their comparison with the OT characters Balaam (in Pergamos) and Jezebel (in Thyatira), they appear to encourage the saints that participation in the idolatry and fornication that pervade the culture is not a serious matter. For example:

Pergamos: Rev 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, **to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.** 15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

**Threat of Removal:** Ephesus faces the risk of losing its candlestick; Laodicea risks being spewed out of the Lord's mouth. Under the Levitical economy, with a physical sanctuary, God's judgment included removing himself from the sanctuary. Today, the sanctuary consists of God's people gathered together, and an individual gathering can lose its status as a true church.

**Satan:** This character is named 55x in the Bible. The most references are in Job (14x), but Revelation is next (7x). He and his servants will play a major role in what follows, but the letters already introduce four aspects of work:

Smyrna: Rev. 2:9 I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are **the synagogue of Satan.** (Also 3:9, Philadelphia)

## First Vision, Seven Churches

Pergamos: Rev. 2:13 I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where **Satan's seat** is:

Thyatira: Rev. 2:24 But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known **the depths of Satan**, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden.

**Repentance:** Every church except Smyrna and Philadelphia is called to repent. As long as we live in these bodies of flesh, we are prone to sin as individuals, and to pollute the spiritual temple that we form when we gather together. We should maintain an attitude of vigilance, examining ourselves and discerning the body, and when the Spirit shows us a problem, we should be quick to obey the Lord's encouragement to repent

We will see many of these themes repeated in the rest of the book.

## Notes

### 1:17 fell on face ... fear not

#### Falling on the face before the Lord:<sup>76</sup>

Lev. 9:24 And there came a **fire** out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and **fell on their faces**.

Judg. 13:20 For it came to pass, when the **flame** went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on it, and **fell on their faces** to the ground.

1Kings 18:38 Then the **fire** of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 And when all the people saw it, **they fell on their faces**: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God.

Eze 1:28 This was the appearance of the likeness of the **glory** of the LORD. And when I saw it, **I fell upon my face**, and I heard a voice of one that spake.

Eze 3:22 And the hand of the LORD was there upon me; and he said unto me, Arise, go forth into the plain, and I will there talk with thee. 23 Then I arose, and went forth into the plain: and, behold, the **glory** of the LORD stood there, as the glory which I saw by the river of Chebar: and **I fell on my face**.

Eze 43:2 And, behold, the **glory** of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice was like a noise of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory. 3 And it was according to the appearance of the vision which I saw, even according to the vision that I saw when I came to destroy the city: and the visions were like the vision that I saw by the river Chebar; and **I fell upon my face**.

Eze 44:4 Then brought he me the way of the north gate before the house: and I looked, and, behold, the **glory** of the LORD filled the house of the LORD: and **I fell upon my face**.

#### Fear Not

Most concentrated in Isaiah, and especially associated with the promise of God's presence:

Is. 35:3 Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. 4 Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, **fear not**: behold, **your God will come** with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you.

Is. 40:9 O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, **be not afraid**; say unto the cities of Judah, **Behold your God!**

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<sup>76</sup> The usual idiom is נפל על פנה, but in Ezek 43 and 44, the preposition is אל. The idiom נפל לפני in general refers to falling down before someone else; possible exceptions are 1 Sam 5:3, 4, where לפני appears twice, but even here we should probably understand the first לפני as referring to the ark of the Lord, like the second: "he fell down before him, even before the ark of the Lord."

Is. 41:10 **Fear thou not; for I am with thee:** be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. . . . 13 For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, **Fear not; I will help thee.** 14 **Fear not,** thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; **I will help thee,** saith the LORD, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

Is. 43:1 But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, **Fear not:** for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. 2 When thou passest through the waters, **I will be with thee;** and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. . . . 5 **Fear not: for I am with thee:** I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west;

Is. 44:2 Thus saith the LORD that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, **which will help thee; Fear not,** O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen.

Is. 54:4 **Fear not;** for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood any more. 5 **For thy Maker is thine husband;** the LORD of hosts is his name; and **thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel;** The God of the whole earth shall he be called.

## The First and the Last (1:17)

The Greek expression ἐγώ (εἶμι) ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος does not occur in the LXX. Focusing on the pairing ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, two possible sources come to mind. A third, which I adopt, assumes that John has in mind an alternative translation of the prophet Isaiah.

First: Sirach, with respect to Wisdom, writes,

Sir. 24:28 The first man knew her not perfectly: no more shall the last find her out.

Is the Lord saying that he spans the entire scope of human history, and unlike others, he does understand wisdom, and indeed embodies her (Prov 8:22-36)? Paul describes the Lord Jesus in terms of the first and the last man:

1Co 15:45 And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

1Co 15:47 The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven.

Compare the parallel between Adam and the Lord in Rom 5:12-21. There is good support for identifying the Lord as the last (man). However, in these texts he is contrasted with the first man, and it would be strange if he now claims to be the first man.

Second: the most common pairing of the two adjectives in the nominative is in 2 Chronicles, to speak of the acts of a king, “first and last”: 1 Chr. 29:29; 2 Chr. 9:29; 12:15; 16:11; 20:34; 25:26; 26:22; 28:26; 35:27. Recall

Pro 8:22 The LORD possessed me in the beginning ראשית אֶרְכָּל of his way, before his works of old.

The Messiah was active in creation (John 1), and will be the final judge. He encompasses all the works of God toward his creation.

While this sentiment is certainly appropriate, it would be nice to have something that suggests the actual Greek terms ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος. Proverbs 8 uses ἀρχή, not πρῶτος, and says nothing of “the last.”

A better solution is to look for Hebrew passages that might suggest this Greek phrase. The dominant source of πρῶτος in MT is ראשון. Out of 186 instances of the Hebrew word, 111 are translated πρῶτος. Similarly, 34/51 instances of אחרון are εσχατος. Here are the tables:

	ראשון	ראש	ראשית	Total
πρῶτος	111	10	3	226
Total	182	627	51	

	אחרון	אחרית	אחר	קצה	ירכה	Total
ἔσχατος	34	34	6	6	7	145
Total	51	61	18	137	30	

Searching MT for pairings of ראשון and אחרון is much more productive, and yields several promising parallels from Isaiah:

Is. 41:4 Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, **the first, and with the last; I am he.** אֲנִי יְהוָה רִאשׁוֹן וְאַתְּ-אַחֲרֵינִים אֲנִי-הוּא; ἔγωθ θεὸς πρῶτος, καὶ εἰς τὰ ἐπερχόμενα ἔγωθ εἰμι.

Is. 44:6 Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; **I am the first, and I am the last;** and beside me there is no God. אֲנִי רִאשׁוֹן וְאֲנִי אַחֲרֹן, Ἐγωθ πρῶτος καὶ ἔγωθ μετὰ ταῦτα,

Is. 48:12 Harken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called; **I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.** אֲנִי-הוּא אֲנִי רִאשׁוֹן אֲנִי אַחֲרֹן; ἔγωθ εἰμι πρῶτος, καὶ ἔγωθ εἰμι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα,

The Lord’s expression in 1:17 is actually a more straightforward translation of these verses in Isaiah than is the LXX, and the MT also suggests the background of ἔγωθ εἰμι in Isaiah’s אֲנִי הוּא, a common trope in the fourth gospel that echoes the Mosaic revelation of God’s name as “I am.”

## 1:19

On the whole triplet, see Beale’s excursus, and van Unnik’s article. Hengstenberg takes the entire triplet to refer to ch. 1-3. But 22:16 makes it clear that the content that John is commanded to write (1:11) to the churches encompasses the entire book.

We should distinguish three broad views of the verse, based on the relation among the three clauses.

### The three clauses are parallel: 1-1-1

This view has two major forms.

van Unnik ( New Test. Stud. 9 (1962-63), pp. 86-94), based on many contemporary parallels, takes the three tenses to mean that the book as a whole describes past, present, and future.



Alternatively, they are understood as an outline of the book (Walvoord, Charles, others): ch. 1 (the things which thou has seen), ch. 2-3 (the things which are now, in the churches), and ch. 4ff (future events). Gill offers a variant of this, in which the future things begin in middle of the epistle to Smyrna. The major problem is that there is much of “what shall happen later” in ch. 2-3, and much of “what is” in 4ff.

Two difficulties with both versions of this view are:

1. The clauses are not parallel. The things past, present, and future are the object of the first clause (“which thou hast seen”), but the subject of the second and third, contrary to the parallels adduced by van Unnik.
2. The first element is not strictly past, but aorist, which is noncommittal as to time. The parallelism with 1:11 suggests it should be understood in a generic sense. In many (most?) of van Unnik’s examples, the past component is perfect. Compare also 1:4, 8; 4:8, which use the imperfect for the past.

### The second element as explaining the first, 2 + 1

This is the approach of Alford. He takes εἰμί to mean “signify” as in v. 20, and would translate, “the things which thou seest, what they mean, and the things that shall happen later.” He supports this by understanding the third element as singular, based on the verb, in contrast to the plural of the first two, but the pronoun is plural in all cases, and the writer is not known for his grammatical precision.

### The second two as epexegetical of the first, 1 + 2

This approach, which respects the syntactical change between the first and second, is favored by Mounce, Beasley-Murray, Moffatt, Pulpit Commentary, and perhaps Morris, among others, and I prefer it.

The first clause is atemporal, and (like 1:11 and 21:5) is a generic command to write the vision. The next two elements alert John that the things that he is seeing concern both the present and the future.

## The Challenges Faced by the Churches

Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no criticism. There is some repetition among the others.

	Ephesus, 2:1-7	Smyrna, 2:8-11	Pergamos, 2:12-17	Thyatira, 2:18-29	Sardis, 3:1-6	Philadelphia, 3:7-13	Laodicea, 3:14-22
Coldness	4				1		15-16
False Teachers	2						
Nicolaitans	6		15				
Fornication			14	20			
Meat to Idols			14	20			
Synagogue of Satan		9				9	
Persecution		10	13				
Satan named		9	13	24			

## Why did Paul pass by Ephesus for Miletus?

The usual explanation is that, due to the silting of the Cayster, the boat could make only a short stop there, and a longer stop at Miletus would better allow for a meeting. Mark Wilson’s careful analysis of the geography<sup>77</sup> shows that the travel distance by sea and land between Ephesus and Miletus is 72 km, or a full two days’ journey, requiring a four-day delay in Miletus. In terms of time required, it would certainly have been faster for Paul to visit Ephesus directly, a 3-4 mile walk from the beach. Other possibilities:

1. Paul’s message to the elders at Ephesus may be an afterthought. He planned to pass by Ephesus because of his haste, but when they arrived at Miletus, he realized that he had to see them. The wording in 20:17 Ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Μιλήτου might be understood adversatively, “But from Miletus.”
2. He feared that his presence in Ephesus might stir up opposition and lead to further delay (Mark Wilson)
3. The boat may have had a scheduled stop in Miletus, allowing for the journey of the messengers.

I have adopted the first explanation in the exposition.

## Vocabulary for “Sword”

	ρόμφαία	μαχαίρα	ξίφος		Total
חרב	376	159	11		413
Total	236	187	16		

## Numismatic evidence for temple of Augustus

Friesen presents a Pergamanian cistophorus of Augustus (Figure 15) as illustrating his temple dedicated to him in Pergamos. However, the inscription on the example of the coin that I have found clearly identifies the temple as the temple of Mars Avenger, which was the centerpiece of the Roman forum

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple\\_of\\_Mars\\_Ultor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Mars_Ultor)). See the Wikipedia article for the significance of the standard in the temple.

It’s not clear what relation this temple had to a construction in Pergamos. Did the Pergamanians identify him with Mars Avenger? Were they celebrating the victories that he commemorated in his temple in the Forum? In any event, it’s not at all clear that this building is to be understood as a temple constructed to Augustus.



Figure 15: Augustus and the temple of Mars Avenger (MART ULTO): [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C\\_G-2214](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_G-2214)

<sup>77</sup> Wilson, M., 2013, ‘The Ephesian elders come to Miletus: An Annaliste reading of Acts 20:15–18a’, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34(1), Art. #744, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v34i1.744>

## Lists of works

After the statement “I know thy works,” we sometimes find a list of virtues. Compare these across the different letters. Only Ephesus, Smyrna, and Thyatira have lists; in the other cases the amplification is in clauses. The only virtue repeated is patience ὑπομονή, in Ephesus and Thyatira.

	Ephesus, 2:2	Smyrna, 2:9	Thyatira, 2:19
Labor	X		
Patience	X		X
Tribulation		X	
Poverty		X	
Charity			X
Service			X
Faith			X
Works			X

## “You” in 2:23, 24

I conclude that the antecedent of “you” in these verses is the same, including the godly believers in Thyatira. The main evidence is the shift from “them” to “you” in v. 23. But some might find the exhortation about judgment according to works in 23 to be awkward in its application to true believers, and seek a disjunction in the οὐμὴν δε of v. 24, indicating a shift from one group of people being addressed to another.

Various declensions of σὺ δε occur 71x in the NT. Most instances do mark a change in the actor or personal subject referred to, but these are regularly accompanied by a change from 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns, or some other clear change in personal reference, as in Matt 16:14-15. Matt. 6:2-3, 5-6, 16-17; 10:29-30; 13:15-16; 15:4-5; 16:14-15; 21:13, 32; 23:7-8; Mark 7:10-11; 8:28-29; 11:17; Luke 2:34-35; 9:19-20, 60; 11:48; 13:28; 16:7, 25; 22:25-26; 24:47-49; John 5:35; 8:14; 14:17, 19; 15:26-27; 16:20; Acts 3:14; 19:15; James 2:5-6; 4:12; 1 Pet. 1:12; 2:8-9; Jude 1:16-17, 19-20; Rom. 8:8-9; 11:17, 20; 14:9-10; 1 Cor. 3:22-23; 4:10; 2 Cor. 8:13; 13:9; Eph. 4:19-20; Phil. 1:28; 2:25; 3:1; 1 Th. 5:3-4; 2 Th. 3:12-13; Heb. 1:11-12; 1 Tim. 6:10-11; 2 Tim. 3:9-10, 13-14; 4:4-5; Titus 1:16-2:1; Philem. 1:11-12

Lk 24:47-48 focuses on the actor: repentance shall be preached, and you are the ones to do it.

But sometimes we have a reference to “you” in the previous verse, and there the contrast is not on the persons involved, but on some other point: Don’t believe the false teachers, but take heed of them, Mark 13:21-23. John baptized (you) with water, but I baptize with the HS, Acts 1:5. Mark 13:21-23; Luke 12:30; 19:46; 22:27-28; John 15:15; Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Cor. 12:26-27; 16:5-6; 1 Th. 3:11-12; Rev. 2:23-24

## Our Lord’s Authority, 2:26

(from correspondence with Alan Lewis, 8/24/22, concerning the event described in Dan 7:12-14)

Dan 7:12 As concerning the rest of the beasts, they had their **dominion** taken away: **yet their lives were prolonged for a season and time**. 13 I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. 14 And there was given him **dominion**, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Note first the distinction in v. 12: their dominion is gone, yet their lives are prolonged. It's not until 7:26-27 that this fourth beast is destroyed.

## First Vision, Seven Churches

Note next the instances of "dominion," which the LXX renders ἐξουσία (Strong G1849). This is the word that the Lord used to describe his status after the resurrection, but before his ascension, in Matt 28:18. Personally, I believe that the exaltation of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 happened sometime between the crucifixion and the resurrection. At that point, "all dominion" (KJV "all power," modern versions "all authority") was transferred to him. Satan had authority over the creation before that time (which is why he was able to offer it to the Lord, Lk 4:6), but lost it at the cross (John 12:31; 16:11). Yet his effects continue "for a season and a time," in keeping with the terms of our Lord's enthronement in Psa 110:1, waiting at the Father's right hand until the time comes for his enemies to be made his footstool (Revelation 19). Thus the exaltation of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 doesn't wait for either the ascension or the parousia; it happened before the Lord spoke to the disciples in Matt 28:18.

This authority is a step toward the full dominion over the creation promised Adam's race in Gen 1:26-28. The key word there is not ἐξουσία, but ἄρχω G757 (Gen 1:26, 28), the word family used of Christ in Rev 1:5 and 3:14. Our Lord's authority is the right to exercise dominion, but that actual dominion is delayed at the Father's pleasure according to Ps 110:1.

### Verbs for "hold"

Both τηρέω and κρατέω are used of "holding" a body of teaching. But τηρέω always refers to the word of God, while κρατέω is only used with reference to false teaching (Balaam, Nicolaitans). The believer pays attention to the Word of God with an aim to following it; the false teacher uses force to defend it.

#### κρατέω

Rev. 2:1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that **holdeth** the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

Rev. 2:13 I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou **holdest** fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.

Rev. 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that **hold** the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

Rev. 2:15 So hast thou also them that **hold** the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

Rev. 2:25 But that which ye have already **hold** fast till I come.

Rev. 3:11 Behold, I come quickly: **hold** that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.

Rev. 7:1 And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, **holding** the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.

Rev. 20:2 And he laid **hold** on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years,

#### τηρέω

Mostly used of what we do with respect to the word of God.

## First Vision, Seven Churches

Rev. 1:3 Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and **keep** those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

Rev. 2:26 And he that overcometh, and **keepeth** my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

Rev. 3:3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and **hold fast**, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.

Rev. 3:8 I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast **kept** my word, and hast not denied my name.

Rev. 3:10 Because thou hast **kept** the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

Rev. 12:17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which **keep** the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Rev. 14:12 Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that **keep** the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.

Rev. 16:15 Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and **keepeth** his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame.

Rev. 22:7 Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that **keepeth** the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

Rev. 22:9 Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which **keep** the sayings of this book: worship God.

### Hebrew Linkages

	שמר	נצר	קזק	נטר	Total
τηρέω	9	7	0	2	37
κρατέω	0	0	53	0	140
φυλάσσω	363	9	0	1	457
Total	469	62	291	9	

### Name $\delta\nu\omicron\mu\alpha$ in Revelation

The noun is concentrated in the letters to the churches (Figure 16): 1x for Ephesus, 2x for pergamos, 4x each for Sardis and Philadelphia. The next peak (ch. 13-14) is choice between the name of the Beast and

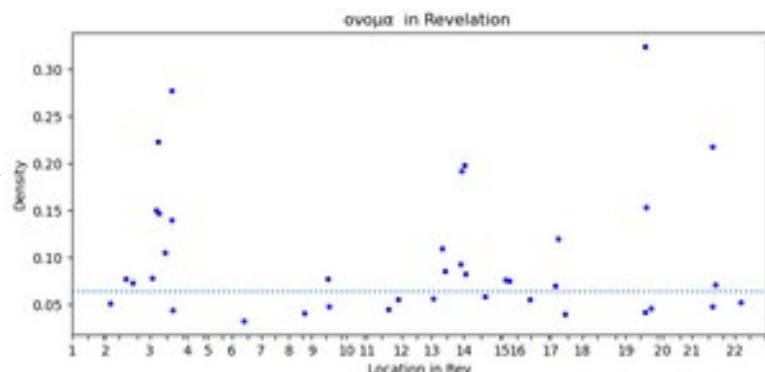


Figure 16: Name  $\delta\nu\omicron\mu\alpha$  G3686 in Revelation

that of the Lord. Ch. 19 emphasizes the Lord's name, and 21 the names of the tribes of Israel and of the apostles.

In the letters to the churches, the name is always that of the Lord Jesus, except in Sardis, where it refers to the believers, anticipating the reference to the book of life in 3:5.

### 3:2 Perfect Works

Why πληρώω rather than τελει\*? Josh Durand suggests that perhaps the statement is to be taken in the sense of Gen 15:16, explaining to Abram that he cannot inherit the land just yet “because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full ἀναπληρώω.” In this case the Lord would be explaining why he is offering the Sardians another chance: because (γὰρ) they have not yet reached the limit of his longsuffering.

While intriguing, this hypothesis is not necessary. πληρώω is less common in a good sense with ἔργον, but it is attested in this sense, and I have not found any instance of the construction with simple πληρώω in a bad sense. Here are the results of queries on Accordance's LXX + GNT text.

#### ἔργον with πληρώω:

Query ‘εργον <a> πληρ\*’

Acts 14:26 And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the **work** which they **fulfilled**.

2Th. 1:11 Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and **fulfil** all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the **work** of faith with power:

#### ἔργον with τελει\*:

Query ‘εργον <a> τελει\*’

Neh. 6:3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, I am doing a great work and I shall not be able to come down, lest the **work** should cease: as soon as I shall have **finished** it, I will come down to you.

Neh. 6:16 And it came to pass, when all our enemies heard of it, that all the nations round about us feared, and great alarm fell upon them, and they knew that it was of our God that this **work** should be **finished**.

John 4:34 Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to **finish** his **work**.

John 5:36 But I have greater witness than that of John: for the **works** which the Father hath given me to **finish**, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.

John 17:4 I have glorified thee on the earth: I have **finished the work** which thou gavest me to do.

James 1:4 But let patience have her **perfect work**, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

## Analysis

1. All the senses are positive.
2. Constructions with *τελει\** are much more common than with *πληρ\**, suggesting that the semantics of the latter are more specialized.
3. One might suggest that *πληρ\** indicates a particular kind of completion, one that achieves an anticipated purpose, rather than simply achieving all the parts of the task, but the distinction would be extremely subtle.

## White Garments and 19:8

Most commentators take *δικαίωμα* to mean “righteous deeds.” The most common meaning is “judgment,” which can be understood as a righteous deed rendered by the judge. The meaning “righteous deeds” is also supported by Rom 5:18 “by the righteous act of one,” that is, the sacrifice of Christ, and Baruch 2:19 “the righteous acts of the fathers.” Morris insists that it refers to the judgment rendered *upon* the saints (objective genitive), removing their acts from consideration.

## Blotting Out of the Book of Life, 3:5

Many commentators equate the book of life with the book of the living, and have both refer to God’s people (sometimes with an emphasis on the visible manifestation rather than the spiritual reality). Jeremy Myers (<https://redeeminggod.com/bible-theology-topics/revelation-35/>) has an interesting twist on this.

When people die, their names are removed from the Book of Life. However, those who have everlasting life in Jesus Christ can never have their names removed from this book.

When a person believes in Jesus, their name, which had been written in “erasable” pencil, is now copied over with the permanent ink of the Blood the Lamb. Once this happens, it can never be removed or erased.

The distinction I advocate reflects the symmetry of the divine library (Table 9) and recognizes the difference between (book of) the living (describing the people) and (book of) life (emphasizing the state).

## The Holy One

Chapters containing both terms:

Deut. 33

3 Yea, he loved the people; all his saints *שְׁדוּקָה* are in thy hand: and they sat down at thy feet; every one shall receive of thy words.

8 ¶ And of Levi he said, Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one *קֹדֶשׁ*, whom thou didst prove at Massah, and with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah;

1Sam. 2:

	קֹדֶשׁ	שְׁדוּקָה		Total
ἅγιος	0	123		792
ὁσιος	26	0		27
Total	34	117		

## First Vision, Seven Churches

2 There is none holy קדוש as the LORD: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God.

9 He will keep the feet of his saints חסיד, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail.

Psa. 16:

3 But to the saints קדוש that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight.

10 For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One חסיד to see corruption.

Psa. 89:

5 ¶ And the heavens shall praise thy wonders, O LORD: thy faithfulness also in the congregation of the saints קדוש.

7 God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints קדוש, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.

18 For the LORD is our defence; and the Holy One קדוש of Israel is our king.

19 ¶ Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one חסיד, and saidst, I have laid help upon one that is mighty; I have exalted one chosen out of the people.

No instances of the plural קדושים in Isaiah. There are 38 instances of the singular; most (25) in the divine title קדוש ישראל. Of the other 13, only two do not refer to the Lord:

Is. 4:3 And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called **holy**, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem:

Is. 58:13 ¶ If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the **holy** of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words:

קדוש is characteristic of Isaiah and there it almost always refers to the Lord, though in other books it is applied to the people of God, most notably in expressions like קדוש ה' Lev. 11:44–45; 20:7; Num. 15:40 and עם קדוש Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9; Hos. 11:12; Dan. 8:24. A human individual can be called קדוש: Elisha, 2 Ki 4:9; Priest Lev 21:7, 8; Num 16:5, 7; Nazirite Num 6:5, 8; remnant Isa 4:3; Aaron Psa 106:16. Dan 8:13 may refer to an angel.

חסיד is characteristic of Psalms (25x), and almost always (except Jr 3:12; Ps 145:17) refers to the Lord's people.

## The Open Door of 3:8

Two questions here.

1. Is this a parenthesis, or part of their works?
  - (a) If it is part of their works,  $\delta\tau\iota$  in the next clause is “for.” I have given you an open door for witness, because you, though faithful, don't have enough strength on your own.
  - (b) If it is a parenthesis, then the  $\delta\tau\iota$  of the next clause is “that,” describing their works (and very parallel to Smyrna).



2. What is the relation of this door to the opening and closing in v. 7? This is correlated with the first question.
  - (a) On the parenthetical view, this describes access to the kingdom of God (Beckwith, Ladd, Gundry, Hengstenberg, Koester, Mounce, Moffatt<sup>78</sup>). Acts 14:27 actually supports this view, though it is usually cited with references for missionary opportunity.
  - (b) If it is part of their works, it is a door of witness (as in Paul, 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3) (Swete, Caird, Ramsay, Alford, Trench, Beale, Patterson).

But the tension may be unnecessary. In the broader context:

- The Lord's claim to the keys suggests that he has taken them from a previous steward who was unfaithful (Shebna in Isa 22)
- The letter later calls out the false Jews, who apparently have been hindering the Christians.
- The citation of Isa 60:14 in 3:9 suggests that the roles of Jews and Gentiles are being reversed. In Isaiah 60, the Gentiles come to bow before the Jews, while in 3:9 the false Jews will bow before the (largely Gentile) church in Philadelphia.
- The Jews had the responsibility for spreading the knowledge of the Lord among the Gentiles (Deuteronomy 20).

So the Lord can be saying here, "I am using my keys to admit you to the kingdom of God [per Beckwith et al.], so that you can do the work that the Jews should have been doing, of spreading the gospel [per Swete et al.]."

### 3:10 τὸν λόγον τῆς ὑπομονῆς μου

Is this "my word concerning patience," or "the general command to be patient concerning me"?

The first might have in mind the Lord's exhortation during the Olivet discourse to exercise patience:

Luke 21:19 In your patience possess ye your souls.

Compare also the verb ὑπομένω in Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13.

But "keep my word" elsewhere in John is τηρεω μου τον λογον, 3:8; cf. 1 John 2:5. When the genitive follows λογος, it indicates the subject of the word: 22:7, 9.

Then what is "the patience of Christ"?

It might be "the patience that Christ enjoins," which would take us back to Lk 21:19.

How about "the patience that Christ exemplifies"? This is the point of Heb 12,

Heb. 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with **patience ὑπομονή G5281** the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him **endured ὑπομένω G5278** the

78 "But in view of a passage written by Ignatius to this very church (ad Philad. 3, where Christ himself is termed θύρα τοῦ πατρὸς, δι' ἧς εἰσέρχονται the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, καὶ ἡ ἐκκλησία) and of Clem. Rom. xlviii. (where the gate of righteousness is described as open in Christ), the phrase is better connected with Christ himself, not with any good opening for Christian activity."

cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider him that **endured ὑπομένω G5278** such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

Or it might be “your patience in waiting for Christ.” This would fit AV’s interpretation of the closest parallel, 2 Thes 3:5,

2Th. 3:5 And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ. εἰς τὴν ὑπομονὴν τοῦ χριστοῦ.

Previous churches in this series (Ephesus, 2:2, 3; Thyatira, 2:19) are praised for their patience.

### **3:10 τηρεω εκ vs. τηρεω απο**

#### **τηρεω απο**

Prov. 7:5 That they [wisdom and understanding] may **keep thee from** the strange woman, from the stranger which flattereth with her words.

James 1:27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to **keep** himself unspotted **from** the world.

Antiq 8:280 refers to keeping God’s law from (since) the beginning.

φυλασσω απο : often in OT.

2Th. 3:3 But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil.

1John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

#### **τηρεω εκ**

John 17:15 I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest **keep** them **from** the evil.

Antiq 5:26 refers to taking spoil from the first conquered city

Antiq 12:184 refers to wisely retaining goods from what he had already acquired

φυλασσω εκ Psa. 140:4 **Keep me**, O LORD, **from** the hands of the wicked; preserve me from the violent man; who have purposed to overthrow my goings.

### **Promises to Overcomers and the Conclusion**

These promises appear 8x: once to each of the churches, and once at the end,

Rev. 21:7 He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

Each promise anticipates some feature of the final chapters (Table 14). This alignment suggests that the overall rhetoric of the book is to encourage the churches in their present struggles (ch. 2-3) by reminding them of the established person and work of Christ (ch. 1, echoed in the introduction to each letter) and holding before them the promise of his future kingdom (ch. 19-22, anticipated in each promise to the overcomers).

## 3:14 Faithful and True Witness

Possible link to Deut 32:4 LXX?

Deut. 32:4 θεός, ἀληθινὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ,  
καὶ πᾶσαι αἱ ὁδοὶ αὐτοῦ κρίσεις·  
θεὸς πιστός, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀδικία·  
δίκαιος καὶ ὅσιος Κύριος.

But this would be curious: ἀληθινός translates אמת, which is usually rendered by ἀμωμός, and πιστός translates נאמא. The πιστ\* word family is attested (used 18x out of 49 instances of the Hebrew), but ἀληθ\* is more common (24x).

## Paul's Use of Summary and Exposition

In discussing Col 1:15-18 in the context of 3:14, I mention Paul's frequent use of a brief summary followed by exposition. Here are some examples. I have seen others proposed by various students, though I do not have them at hand at the moment.

Eph 1:18-19 chiastically outlines the rest of the epistle: his mighty resurrection power toward us (1:20-2:10), his inheritance in the saints (2:11-3:21), and the hope to which he has called us (ch. 4-6). See my detailed article on Ephesians for echoes of this pattern in ch. 6.

Rom 1:16-18 outlines ch. 1-11 (see my detailed notes):

3:9 is a retrospective summary of ch. 1-2, while the three questions in 3:27, 29, 31 outline 4:1-8, 4:9-5:21, and 6:1-8:39, respectively.

	Gentile	Jew
Wrath of God	1:16-32	2:1-29 "Jew"
Righteousness of God	4:1-8:39	9:1-11:36 "Israel"

Col 1:21-23 introduces 1:24-4:17 through unfolding (abc → CBABC):

- 1:21-22 Reconciled (position) → 2:9-15
- 1:23a Continue (practice) → 2:4-8; 2:16-4:1
- 1:23b Preached (Paul's ministry) → 1:24-2:3; 4:2-17

Thus Paul commonly uses a summary-exposition, and we should not be surprised to find it in Col 1:15-18.