

Kevin Guenther  
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## The Seven Letters

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## Ephesus

The city of Ephesus was the greatest commercial center of the Roman Empire. As such, the city attracted people from many different cultural backgrounds, including a large population of Jews. Indeed, some Jews held the unusual privilege of citizenship in the city. The large population of Ephesus gave rise to the otherwise ordinary local cult of Artemis. By the time of the writing of Revelation, the temple of Artemis was considered one of the great wonders of the ancient world, and its cult dominated the life of the city.

Despite the prosperity and power, Ephesus was a doomed city. The commercial life of the city was dependent on its great harbor. However, the harbor was slowly filling with silt and all attempts to clear it were unsuccessful: it was only a matter of time before access to the sea would be cut off, and Ephesus' source of income along with it. The Ephesians compensated for this partially by emphasizing the importance of the temple of Artemis. However, this too caused difficulties. The temple was considered a refuge and was held inviolable even by Roman authorities. As a result, it became home to many criminals, and the close proximity of the temple to the city had a corrupting influence on the city.

Christ was introduced to the Ephesians as "the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). This image is taken directly from opening of the book of Revelation, and emphasizes that Christ is the Lord of all the churches. Next, the church was commended for their perseverance, faithfulness, and testing of false apostles. Having split from the synagogues quite early, the church in Ephesus was known as a strong and stable church. In this multicultural city, it was much more possible for the church to thrive on its own, thus "the very size and influence of the apostolic church in Ephesus may have rendered it less vulnerable to the pressures which afflicted the other churches" (Hemer, 40). However, the rising influence of the imperial cult threatened the church's security and integrity.

Unfortunately the church may have been experiencing internal strife, for they were accused of losing their "first love." Christ's message was a call for this church to return to former greatness. The letter balances this criticism with praise for their hatred of the deeds of the Nicolaitans. This is not the only time this group is mentioned in Revelation, but the exact nature of this group is unknown to us at this time. They may have been Judaizers, libertarians, or people of ill repute, but of these three, it is most likely that the group was libertarian, especially considering how the group is referred to elsewhere in Revelation.

The promise of the "tree of life" was especially appropriate for the Ephesians. The tree in Ephesus was a recognizable symbol and evocative of the cult of Artemis. The cult's original holy place was a tree shrine, and over time the tree became associated with the presence of the goddess and "recurs in varied contexts as an emblem of the city or its goddess" (Hemer, 45). Because of the strong split between the Christians and Jews in Ephesus, it is questionable how readily accessible the Jewish aspects of this symbol were to the Ephesian church. However, the word John used for tree also evokes the image of the cross, which for Christians has special meaning. The placement of the tree within the paradise of God is also significant. In the ancient world, a paradise was a precisely laid out walled garden where the king might walk, or where a deity might dwell (perhaps in a tree). This contrasts well with Revelation's portrayal of the city of God as a precisely laid out, walled paradise, with the tree of life (cross) in the middle of it. "The salvation of the cross was for the repentant sinner, in marked contrast with that of Artemis, which gave the criminal immunity to continue his crimes" (Hemer, 51). When the temple of Artemis' boundaries overlapped even part of the city of Ephesus, criminals gathered there and the city was corrupted, but the paradise of God *is* the city of God, and nothing unclean enters it.

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## **Smyrna**

The city of Smyrna had two features that are specifically relevant to Revelation: its beauty and its suffering. Smyrna's history was notable because the city had been destroyed and restored to life multiple times. Also, to the ancient mind, the linguistic similarity between Smyrna's name and that of myrrh, a spice related to mourning, were significant. Combined with many myths of suffering, death, and resurrection, Smyrna gained the reputation of a suffering but indomitable city. This spirit was often symbolized in the image of the phoenix, as it was reborn out of its own ashes. On the other hand, its beauty, based on the architecture and layout, was legendary, evoking the comparison to a crown. Connected to the crown theme was Smyrna's reputation for faithfulness: the rulers of Smyrna were especially noted for their faithfulness to their allies.

Unlike Ephesus, the church in Smyrna suffered much persecution at the hands of the Jews. This may account for the paucity of Old Testament references in this letter. In fact, the Jews of Smyrna were some of the most hostile towards Christians. (In one remarkable instance, they were even incited to gather firewood on the Sabbath to burn Polycarp.) Undoubtedly, this factor contributed to the poverty of the church of Smyrna. Also as a result of Jewish hostility, Christians often faced execution in the arena. Thus, the imprisonment mentioned in the letter to the Smyrnans likely referred to the period of time while the prisoner awaited execution. In this context, the ten days symbolized a limited period of time.

The message to Smyrna was the shortest of the seven letters of Revelation. Deeply rooted in the city's traditions, this message was very encouraging to the church there. First of all, the title applied to Christ, "the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life" (2:8) was especially meaningful when understood in light of the city's history. It emphasized that Jesus, not Smyrna, was the true sufferer whose example they should follow, and it acknowledged the church's own suffering and poverty. Their suffering and poverty was closely linked to the persecution of the Jews, although their poverty was due to several other factors as well. Christian converts were often found among the poorer classes or reduced themselves to such by their sacrificial giving. Also, "it was difficult for an uncompromising Christian to make a living in a pagan city" (Hemer, 68).

Christ's instruction to the church facing these trials was not to be afraid because of their circumstances. Though they may be thrown into prison and eventually executed in the arena, these things were to be seen as limited. But if they remained "faithful unto death" (2:10), as their city and many of their heroes were renowned for, they would receive the "crown of life." Because faithfulness was strongly linked with the image of a crown in Smyrna, this symbol was especially meaningful to the church there. Besides the physical appearance of the city, the recipients were likely reminded of the crown of honor given for civic faithfulness, or the crown given to the victorious and faithful athlete.

Furthermore, the message promises that they will not be hurt by the "second death" (2:11). This is one of the few Jewish references in this otherwise locally oriented message. The reason may be that John was responding to a Jewish taunt of Christians in Smyrna. Regardless, "the expression was fitting in a city which had undergone successive disasters and refoundations" (Hemer, 76). Christ's promise here was that those who were faithful, though they may die once, will never die again.

## **Pergamum**

The city of Pergamum was one of three rivals for position as Asia's capital city. It was built on an impressive hill, which lent itself well to fortification. "The huge granite-hill of Pergamum rises a thousand feet above the plain of the river Caicus and... dominates an immense expanse of country" (Hemer, 78). As a result, Pergamum had been a mighty military fortress since before the coming of the Romans. However, the main rival, Ephesus, was a strong commercial center. Though it is unclear which city was officially considered the capital, Pergamum was at least recognized as the former capital of the region and the center of the imperial cult.

The imperial cult at Pergamum was especially successful because of its long tradition of ruler-cults. Early in its history, Pergamum's rulers began to use religion strategically as a political tool. They expanded on the shrines of existing cults and established new cults in honor and worship of themselves. Thus, the Roman cult of emperor worship was quite popular in Pergamum, causing the city to become the preeminent center of the imperial cult.

The message to the church in Pergamum encouraged their continued endurance. Christ was introduced as "the One who has the sharp two-edged sword." The sword is later referred to as "the sword of my mouth," which alludes back to the opening image of the Revelation (1:16) and to Isaiah (11:4, 49:2). This image has the connotation of a spoken word of judgment. Christ then praised the church for its endurance while living so close to "Satan's throne" (2:13). However, the wording seems to imply that this was their permanent post while on earth, and thus they had no right to expect removal from it (Hemer 85). The meaning of the throne of Satan is obvious considering the prominence of the imperial cult. However, the church may also have been reminded of the Asklepios cult and the throne-shaped altar of Zeus Soter, both of which designated their deities "saviour" and were associated with the serpent image. Since the serpent was often linked in Christian minds with Satan, these would have been seen as grim parodies of Christ, the true king and saviour. The reference to Antipas is obscure, referring to a person and events about which we know almost nothing. We can infer from the context, though, that he was a martyr of a past time of trial who followed Christ's example, even unto death.

Christ criticized this church for accepting the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. The name "Balaam" alludes to the prophet in the book of Numbers, who was known for causing the people of Israel to sin by tempting them with the women of Moab. This name probably originated as propaganda against a certain group and became part of a common slogan, which the readers would have been expected to understand. The linking of this group with the Nicolaitans tells us that they were similar groups, probably teaching the church that it was acceptable to partake in the religious rituals of their neighbors. Considering that they lived in the religious center of Asia, it would have been very tempting for the church to conform to the practices of their neighbors, but Christ warned the Pergamum church against accepting such teaching. His coming was thus portrayed as bringing judgment.

To the conquerors in Pergamum, Christ promised the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it. Significantly, the hidden manna, the heavenly food of the saints, was promised to those who abstained from idolatrous meat on earth. The white stone could have been connected with the judicial process, where jurors voted "yes" or "no" with white or black stones respectively. It would thus convey "the assurance of Christ's power as true judge to override the false verdict of the human court" (Hemer, 97). Or it may have referred to the multiple ways that a stone inscribed with a name implied recognition and belonging or personal relationship in Pergamum. The new name symbolized a new life and new character.

## Thyatira

The city of Thyatira was quite an unremarkable city. It was located on a flat plain at the bottom of a wide valley near the meeting of easy trade routes. This made it ideal for marketing and manufacturing, and accounts for its most remarkable feature: its trade guilds. In addition to these, however, Thyatira also spawned a variety of other associations or clubs. This localized, and mostly religious, phenomenon was evidently quite persistent. “This city appears to have changed in character least of the seven” (Hemer, 109), and even today, the bazaar is organized according to guilds. Bronze working and the dying of clothes were two of the most significant industries of the city, and can still be found locally. As for its religious life, syncretism in this multicultural town was rampant, uniting people of many different backgrounds. The Jewish population in Thyatira was almost non-existent, and was probably also highly syncretistic.

In the message to Thyatira, Christ was portrayed as having eyes of flame and feet of “burnished bronze” (2:18). The term “burnished bronze” is highly problematic, but one theory seems to suggest that this was a special alloy of copper and zinc produced locally in Thyatira (Hemer 116). The picture of Christ was then contrasted with Apollo Tyrimnaeus, the local patron-god of the bronze-working guild. “In the ‘Son of God’ the church had her true champion, irresistibly arrayed in armour flashing like the refined metal from the furnaces of the city. He was the true patron of their work” (Hemer, 117).

Christ, as their patron, then assessed their deeds and found that their “deeds of late are even greater than at first” (2:19); their only problem was their toleration of “Jezebel” and her teaching. Evidently, the church here faced enormous pressure to conform to the surrounding society, since the guilds were integral to a person’s livelihood. Jezebel, known in 1 Kings for leading the people of God astray into immorality and syncretistic idol-worship, seemed to provide a solution to these problems. It is likely that Jezebel was not the woman’s real name, but a slanderous title applied to the leader of a group similar to the previously mentioned Nicolaitans and followers of Balaam. In fact, “it may have been a shock to hear this popular teacher equated with Jezebel. The church may well have denounced and shunned the grosser forms of syncretized paganism in the city while harbouring teaching which, in John’s view, imperiled those whom it led into the very same evils” (Hemer 123). John even connected Jezebel’s teaching with the “deep things of Satan” (2:24). Whether this was a term she actually used or John’s re-interpretation is not determined. However, it is more plausible that she spoke of the “deep things of God,” since it is hard to believe that an otherwise healthy church would accept such obvious error. Thus, her teaching was probably a localized variety of Nicolaitanism or an early version of gnosticism. Significantly, the order of “immorality” and “eating things sacrificed to idols” (2:20) is the reverse of that in the message to Pergamum. This may imply that the emphasis changed depending on the city: in Pergamum, eating food sacrificed to idols was a bigger problem, while in Thyatira, immorality was more of a concern. Finally, though it seems odd that the punishment of Jezebel’s children was greater than her own, we are reminded of David and Bathsheba, whose children died for their parents’ sin and as an example to God’s people. Thus, the significance is that “all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds” (2:23).

Christ promised two things to the victors at Thyatira: authority to rule the nations and the morning star. The gift of authority constitutes one of the great reversals of the kingdom of God: those who were helpless against the authorities of the world would themselves be given authority over those who presently ruled them. The connection of the scepter with a star seems to come from Num 24:17, but we cannot now be certain what relevance this had to the church at Thyatira.

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## Sardis

The city of Sardis was often associated with impregnable strength. It was built on the top of a hill, 1500 feet high with near vertical slopes, and was considered impossible to defeat. The hill is composed of a type of earth that crumbles extremely easily, and this may have been the cause of Sardis' greatest tragedy. In AD 17, a large portion of the city was destroyed in an earthquake; presumably it fell off the side of the hill. Also, despite the awesome natural defenses, the city was captured by more than one conqueror in its illustrious history. The primary cause was usually not military, but a lack of readiness to defend on the part of the inhabitants, so sure of their own invincibility. Though at one time this city had been a great center of power and commerce, it was now crumbling like the dirt of its foundation, while Ephesus seemed to take its place.

Christ's introduction in this letter is quite similar to that of Ephesus. Christ was described as "He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1), a theme reminiscent of Rev. 2:1, and related to the opening image of Revelation. The image of the "seven Spirits of God" was probably also colored by Zech. 4:10. The meaning seems to have been that Christ, who has all the power of God, was the keeper of the church. Noticing that the church, like the city, was in decay, Christ's power was portrayed as truly able to restore it to life.

Popular folklore around Sardis was abundant with the immortality motif. Thus, Christ's words, "You have a name that is alive, but you are dead" (3:1), contrasted with local ideas. Though the city's religions seemed to offer immortality, they were dead. Though the city claimed invincibility, their lack of readiness was the source of their downfall, and thus their reputation of greatness (their "name that is alive") merely covered the fact of their decline (that they were "dead"). Similarly, "the church had an outward 'form of religion,' but not 'the power thereof' (2 Tim. 3:5)" (Hemer 143). Thus, it was from the brink of death that Christ called the church to "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain!" (3:2); though the church may have passed human inspection, they were incomplete according to God's standards.

Like Ephesus, those at Sardis were urged to return to former greatness, although the emphasis was less on their former glory, and more on vigilance to regain that position. A well-known story of the fall of Sardis and the capture of Croesus involved a lone assassin climbing a steep but undefended side of the hill, thus gaining entry to the city. In similar terms, Christ warned the church to remember the gospel which they first responded to, for "if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" (3:3).

Christ commended the few who had remained faithful in Sardis. Because the message to Sardis does not mention the Nicolaitans, it is suggested that they had successfully resisted this group but had succumbed to the opposite temptation of too closely identifying with the synagogues. To those who had been true witnesses and had not become corrupted, Christ promised "they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy" (3:4). In a city notorious for its frequent captures, the image would have been especially evocative of the entrance into the city of a victorious conqueror, who would wear white. "The few whose garments are undefiled are alone ready for the Lord's coming; they are potentially also those who will then walk in his triumph as victors" (Hemer, 148). The other promise, not to be erased from the book of life, may then be related to the church's association with the synagogue. The Jews may have threatened to erase the names of Christians from the register, thus exposing them to persecution under Domitian, but Christ promised that those who stayed faithful would not be forgotten and that he would confess their names to the Father. Coupled with his power from verse one, this was a meaningful image to the faithful minority.

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## **Philadelphia**

Philadelphia, or “the city of brotherly love” was located near the Catacecaumene, an area of the Roman province with fertile volcanic soil that was particularly well suited for growing vines. It was named after two famous brothers, Eumenes and Attalus. Their loyalty to each other was held up as exemplary throughout the region, for when Attalus, after assuming the throne, discovered that his brother’s death was a false rumor, he readily gave it up again for his brother. Likewise, when tempted by the Romans to usurp his brother’s position, Attalus refused and remained loyal to his brother. Controlling the region’s important crossroads, at one time Philadelphia was probably very influential in Hellenizing the region. Because of successive disasters, it often took on the names of imperial benefactors to honor them. Philadelphia was also well known for its abundant vines. Because of the volcanic soil around Philadelphia, vines were the primary crop. Thus, after recovering from the same earthquake that ruined much of Sardis, Domitian devastated the city when he ordered half of all vines in the provinces to be cut down. This was a particularly unusual measure for Domitian to take, ruining much trust, for even conquering nations rarely destroyed their enemies like this.

The introduction of Christ in the message to Philadelphia is heavily dependant on Old Testament imagery, especially Isaiah 22:22. As usual, though, it also has special significance to the church because of their circumstances. “He who is holy, who is true” (3:7) can also be construed as “who is faithful to his word” (Hemer, 161) and contrasts well with Domitian, who had recently mistreated his subjects with his decree to cut down the vines. “Who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7) speaks of the finality and authority of Christ’s judgment.

The church at Philadelphia was characterized by perseverance and faithfulness, and received no warning from Christ. His words, “I have put before you an open door which no one can shut” (3:8), may have been a reference to the open opportunities for evangelism in the area, and were probably interpreted thus by the church. A more likely understanding is that the Christians there had been excommunicated because of their commitment to Christ: the synagogue doors had been effectively shut to them. But Christ told the church that he holds the true authority to open the door to heaven, and he will open it to them. Verse nine is an ironic reversal of a promise in Isaiah 60:14, where God promised that the Gentiles would bow before the Jews in the eschaton. In this case, however, Christ promised that those who claim to be Jews, but are not, would bow before the true people of God, the Church. Christ then promised that he would protect them from the coming “hour of testing” which would soon come to test the whole world. Again, Christ emphasized that he was coming soon, encouraging them to remain faithful so that they would not lose their “crown” (3:11). Unlike the message to Sardis, Christ’s coming was seen here as comforting. In this athletic city, the crown was probably understood as the athlete’s crown of victory. Like Jesus’ parable in Matt. 25:28 it was implied that if they were not faithful, their crown would be given to someone else, perhaps even another church.

The promise to the victors of Philadelphia was to become pillars in the temple of God, and to have the names of God and his city written on them. The combination of pillars and names was reminiscent of the two pillars that stood before Solomon’s temple, inscribed with personal names. Pillars symbolized strength and stability, which were significant for a city known for its tremors that cracked the walls. They also symbolized permanence in God’s presence, in contrast with the exclusion they faced now by the Jews. “The name of the city of My God” (3:11) was applied in contradistinction to Philadelphia, which took on the names of multiple emperors as gods.

## Laodicea

At the writing of Revelation, Laodicea was an extraordinarily rich city. Its location in the Lycus valley near Hierapolis was convenient for its industry. It was situated on the crossroads of some principle highways, and the Romans kept up such principal roads, so Laodicea became rich at the cost of its neighbors, Colossae and Tripolis. One of its main assets was its unique, black sheep. Also, the minerals in the local water had healing properties (especially in Hierapolis), although they made the water difficult to drink. The water of the city is particularly noteworthy. Originally, the inhabitants probably drank the local water, which was of a bad quality. As the city grew, however, its demand for water increased, so an aqueduct was built to supply water. The water arrived at the city warm which, coupled with its high mineral content, had the effect of inducing vomit. Thus, the inhabitants were required to allow the water to cool in large jugs before drinking it, and even then, the water was not palatable.

Christ was introduced to the Laodiceans as “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14). This statement has strong literary parallels with both the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah 65:16 God was referred to as the “God of Amen,” emphasizing the monotheism of God and thus the worshiper’s duty to remain loyal to him alone (Hemer, 185). In Col. 1:15, Christ was described as “the firstborn of all creation;” this is significant because the letter was written to the same region as Laodicea, and was likely read there. Likely, the strong, probably syncretistic Jewish influence in the region had led to a type of syncretism in which Christ’s uniqueness was undermined (Hemer 186).

The message to the Laodiceans warned them against complacency. The lukewarm water of verses fifteen and sixteen was easily identifiable with the local water problem. The hot water of Hierapolis was famous in the region for its medicinal purposes, especially for the eyes, while the cold water of Colossae was some of the only pure and clean water in the region. Laodicea’s lukewarm water, however, caused vomiting unless cooled. In similar terms, the Laodiceans’ complacency was undrinkable to Christ. The extreme wealth of the inhabitants was likely a cause of their complacency. The Laodiceans were so remarkably wealthy that, when the earthquake of AD 60 destroyed the city, the inhabitants rebuilt the city out of their own pocket. One source of this wealth was the sheep they raised, which had uncharacteristic black wool. The Laodiceans profited from the fashion of glossy black clothing, which they promulgated, and which they could easily supply at a lower cost, since they needed no dye to produce such material. In contrast, the white clothing of Rev. 3:18 represented the heavenly garments of righteousness, which only Christ could provide. Another source of their wealth was their locally produced eye-salve. Christ contrasted their claim to treat physical blindness with their spiritual blindness, which only he could cure. Because of this extreme wealth, Laodicea was a prominent banking center. Thus, Christ recommended that they buy from him pure gold, refined by fire. Just as fire was known to burn off impurities, suffering was seen as producing Christ-like qualities, so Christ called this church to be pure by being willing to suffer.

After Christ’s hard words of reproof, his caring words of concern, which end this letter, may seem out of place. His coming was not presented as a threat, as it was to other floundering churches, but as a gentle request. This difference was rooted in the history of the city, where its opulence made it a frequent stopover for visiting Roman dignitaries. These guests were often forceful and rude, but Christ was gentle and polite. He was willing to share his meal and his throne with those who conquered and invited his visitation, just as God shared his throne with him. A further implication is that the throne that Christ would share was the same throne as God’s.

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