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THE CHRISTIANITY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION
SHORT TITLE

REVELATION CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE, WITH
SALUTATIONS OF THE LETTERS, REV. 2-3

RELATIONS BETWEEN THE AUTHOR'S SELF-DESIGNA-
TIONS AND THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE LETTERS

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of St. Louis Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of the New Testament
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

Reald Justus Otto

June 1958

72157

Approved by: Harold H. Brown
Director

Victor A. ...

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CHAPTER I

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

It was "on the Lord's day" that John, on the tiny island of Patmos, heard behind him a great voice as of a trumpet saying, "I am Alpha and Omega." There were other great Lord's days in the history of God's dealings with men. There was that first day of the world's first week when God said, "Let there be light." Eternity stepped into time with the promise of the woman's Seed, and after the long centuries had passed He came, walking the lonesome valley to the hill beyond to announce to mankind, "It is finished!" But was it? For the answer we go to another Lord's day very early in the morning the first day of the week when, by the empty sepulcher, God removed the question mark and affixed His exclamation point. But news becomes news when heard, the Gospel must be preached. It was another Lord's day "when the day of Pentecost was fully come," and the Gospel for the day was this, "We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God."

It is fitting, therefore, that it should again be the Lord's day when God gave to the Church His final word and the letters to John's beloved in Ephesus and the saints in

the neighboring cities. When the fifteen-foot papyrus rolls, one copy to a church, reached the seven congregations, it would be on the Lord's day that the faithful sat listening as the lector read what the Spirit saith to the churches. To all this might be added almost nineteen centuries of Lord's days on which the letters have been read since then, and will be read.

The listening ability of people varies. Some, such as the exegete, the dogmatician, and the homiletician, have listened closely and often. However, even the less erudite, for whom the vials, beasts, and trumpets in the remainder of the Apocalypse remain an enigma shrouded in a mystery, have found chapters two and three of interest and value.

The historical background of the congregations has been explored thoroughly, the threats to the life of the individual congregations have been investigated repeatedly, and applications to congregational life until time shall be no more have been drawn competently. Attention has also been given to the self-designations or salutations with which the Author introduces His approbation, censure, warning, and comfort.

However, to my knowledge, not many have interested themselves in attempting to determine why the ascended Lord

used a particular self-designation for a specific church. Why is it "He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand" that writes to Ephesus, "the First and the Last" who addresses Smyrna, and "the Son of God" who has a message for the Christians at Thyatira? Are there any clues in the geographical, historical, and religious backgrounds of the congregations which might enable us to follow, albeit falteringly, the mental footprints of the Author?

This study does not attempt to add to the material on the history of the congregations or to the analyses of their graces and defects, zeal and lukewarmness. Rather, a portion of what has been written was restudied from the standpoint of the relationship between the self-designations and the contents of the letters against the backdrop of the Christology of the Apocalypse.

The biologist and the physicist must begin with certain assumptions. To claim otherwise reveals ignorance and vanity. The theologian, too, must begin somewhere. This study assumes that the Bible is the Word of God, that an inspiration without words is unthinkable, that the seven letters are from Christ Himself, and that He has a reason for every word, including the words about Himself. Our purpose is to determine, if possible, just why He used

these words.

Scriptural references throughout this study are given in the words of the King James version.

The Apocalypse looks back to the Old Testament and forward to the Rapture. True-life, it has roots extending throughout the Old Testament and a support that reaches deep into the Pauline and prophetic. Over half of the Old Testament allusions are from the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. What is absorbed through the roots flows upwards and is expressed into a thing of beauty and utility for the Church now, with the deep branches extending toward that which is to come.

It would not be one of the Apocalypse's forty-five pages is without the black print which indicates Old Testament associations, and the margins are crowded with references. Swete's cites Verses and Herz's list showing that of the Apocalypse's 464 verses, 278 contain Old Testament references. Swete prints in parallel columns over twelve pages of Apocalypse references and their Old Testament background.

¹Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1934), cxi.

CHAPTER II

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHAPTER ONE

The Apocalypse looks back to the Old Testament and forward to the Parousia. Tree-like, it has roots extending throughout the Old Testament and a taproot that reaches deep into the Psalms and prophets. Over half of the Old Testament allusions are from the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. What is absorbed through the roots flows upwards and is converted into a thing of beauty and utility for the Church now, with the top branches extending toward that which is to come.

In Nestle not one of the Apocalypse's forty-five pages is without the black print which indicates Old Testament associations, and the margins are crammed with references. Swete¹ cites Westcott and Hort's list showing that of the Apocalypse's 404 verses, 278 contain Old Testament references. Swete prints in parallel columns over twelve pages of Apocalypse references and their Old Testament background.

¹Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), cxl.

The author of the Apocalypse is steeped in the Old Testament. As a rich background of Bach in a gifted composer will show up again and again in his own composition, sometimes in definite note patterns, then in a phrase of counterpoint, and again in the general flavor of a passage, so in the score of the Apocalypse, there are some specific Old Testament quotations and there are descriptions which take us back to certain books but without direct quotation. Finally, time and again, John blends a new harmony from notes of various Old Testament origins. Frequently he groups rather than quotes. Or we might use the picture of a chain with interlocking links of the Old Testament, the verba Christi, allusions to Christ's teachings and epistle references and phraseology.

The portrait of the Lord in chapter one, painted with Old Testament pigments and in hues with Old Testament tones, looks down on the throne room of the entire Apocalypse. Christ, the Alpha and Omega, is the beginning and end also of the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse is "The revelation of Jesus Christ," (1:1) from God, to Christ, to the Church, through the angel and John. A year before his death Luther emphasized the centrality of Christ, describing the contents of the Apocalypse thus: "Christus sei bei

und mit uns, wenn's gleich aufs aergste geht."²

In general, the Christ of the Apocalypse is the Christ of the Old and New Testaments--plus. As in the general structure of the Apocalypse there is a basic fact which spirals up and out, so its Christology is an expansion of the Christ in the rest of Scripture. The Old and New Testaments give us Christ as the Son of God, now exalted in His human nature on God's throne. But it remains for the Apocalypse, unveiling Him fully, to show us the "Tremendous Christ"³ and the boundless power of the exalted Lord.

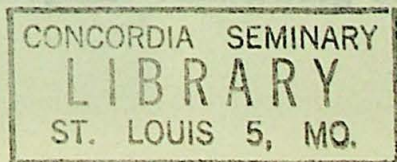
Nowhere else in the New Testament are the personal activities of Jesus Christ present in His Church, the glories of His heavenly life, or the possibilities of His future manifestation so magnificently set forth.⁴

At once, in the greeting (1:4-6) we are introduced to a description of Christ that is fuller than that of the earlier church which confessed its faith in a Jesus who died, arose, and was exalted. Here, in Messianic terms adapted from Ps. 89 and Is. 55, He is "the faithful wit-

²Martin Luther, Vorrede auf die Offenbarung St. Johannis, edited by John George Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1885), XIV, col. 139.

³R. C. H. Lenski, Interpretation of St. John's Revelation (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 21.

⁴Swete, op. cit., clxiv.



ness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth" who makes us a kingdom, priests unto God.

Christ the witness appears elsewhere in the Apocalypse. The whole book is "the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). John is on Patmos because of "the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:9). Christ is "the faithful and true witness" (3:14). When the last words are being spoken, it is "He which testifieth" (22:20) that witnesses to His early return, "Behold, I come quickly."

This testimony goes back to His earthly ministry. The very purpose of His birth and the goal of His coming, as He told Pilate, was that He might "bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37). In a matter of a few hours His witness in word would become a testimony in blood--and a hint of martyrdom to the Church. But now, in the Apocalypse, His witness steps out of the "incognito of lowliness"⁵ and is revealed as a truly totalitarian claim.

He who witnessed by His death is "the first begotten of the dead" (cf. Ps. 89:27; 1 Cor. 15:20; Col. 1:18) and is become "the prince of the kings of the earth." His resur-

⁵Hanns Lilje, The Last Book of the Bible, translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 45.

rection, the seal of His promise, "ye shall live also," carried with it also a lordship over all (Rom. 14:9). He is "King of kings and Lord of lords," (Rev. 19:16) as well as "My king upon My holy hill of Zion" (Ps. 2:6).

To this triple title of Christ (Rev. 1:5) the Apocalypse itself corresponds in a three-fold manner as a testimony of God, a revelation of the risen Christ, and a prediction of the final denouement.

But there is more. Our King who loves and frees⁶ and is Himself enthroned, has enthroned us and made us a kingdom, priests. The song of praise which says, "Thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood" continues, "and hast made us unto our God kings and priests" (Rev. 5:9). The abstract "priesthood" of 1 Pet. 2:9 becomes concrete here, and members of the Church, individually priests, are portrayed as a kingdom in corporate life. John reaches back to Ex. 19:6 for his protest against the claims of the Caesar cult. As Israel, freed from Egyptian slavery, acquired a national life under God, so the redeemed Church lives under a new theocracy.

The final words of the Introit project the picture to

⁶"Freed" seems to be the better reading, though "washed" with reference to sin, is more common in the N.T.

its conclusion. Christ is the coming One. At the close of the book three times He says, "I come quickly." The Old Testament picture (Dan. 7:13; Mal. 3:2) of Christ coming to judge is employed by John the Baptist who speaks of the one "that cometh after me" whose purging fan of judgment is in His hand. All shall see Him, also they who pierced Him-- those on Good Friday as well as those of the same mind who since have pierced Him anew. Once before (John 19:37), in recording the lance-thrust on Calvary, John had referred to Zech. 12:10, but now he adds the seeing and the fearful wailing.

To all this Christ affixes His signature⁷ in verse eight. He is the Alpha and Omega, "the beginning and the end," (21:6) "the first and the last" (22:13). Against all temporal claims of authority, His is the all-inclusive sovereignty, eternal, and infinite. He is the Lord God, the all-ruler,⁸ the Is, the Was, and the Coming, in whom the Church, viewing time as transparent, sees the present in the light of the past and the future.

⁷Commentators differ on whether v. 8 refers to the Father or Christ.

⁸Used often in the LXX, nine times in the Apocalypse, once in the remainder of the N.T.

John, in lonely exile, now has his first vision of the risen and glorified Christ. The commentaries are replete with interpretations of the details, and no extensive repetition of the material is necessary here. The details, of course, have their place in aiding us to see the total picture. But here, as throughout the Apocalypse, it is easy to lose the sweeping vista of the forest in our concern for the individual trees.

Like Ezekiel, John hears before he sees. What he hears sets the tone for the grand vision of Christ in His royal majesty, "Christus Imperator."⁹ He is the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, but what a change! Swete says,

He is still like unto a son of man, but the weaknesses and limitation of His humanity have finally passed away. He was dead, but now He is alive for evermore. He was slain as a victim, but only the splendid results of His sacrifice remain. The Woman's Son has been caught up unto God, and unto His Throne; He sits and reigns with His Father.¹⁰

The congregations whom He addresses live in a heathen world with its moral laxness and, above all, the deification of its emperors. Lilje calls attention to an early inscription, written at Priene in Asia Minor, A.D. 9, which titles

⁹Lilje, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰Swete, op. cit., clx.

Emperor Augustus "the Saviour of the world, the Saviour and Benefactor of all men, the invincible Son of God." This political religion was a very real pressure on the Asian congregations. The Lord seen by John and through John's eyes by the churches is the majestic Sovereign in full polemical force against this imperial worship. "Like the solemn descriptions of Godhead in the Hebrew prophets, it is an answer to the inanities of heathenism. . . ." ¹¹

Thus John hears. At Sinai God's people heard "the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud," a voice which "sounded long and waxed louder and louder" (Ex. 19:16 and 19). The readers of the Gospels understood the trumpet's significance, for the disciples of Jesus, seated on Olivet during Holy Week, were carried forward by the Savior to the end of days when He will "send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet" (Matt. 24:31). The epistle readers (1 Thess. 4:16) knew that the dead in Christ would rise first at the "trump of God." The exalted Lord repeats the trumpet theme and thereby gives the eschatological Leitmotif for the entire Apocalypse.

Having heard, John turns to see--first the setting,

¹¹Swete, op. cit., clx.

then the Sovereign. The setting is one of majestic simplicity "in the midst of the seven candlesticks" (1:13). The dual significance of this would not be lost on the Asians. The tabernacle had its ornate candelabrum made according to God's detailed specifications (Ex. 25:31ff.). The temple furniture included ten individual golden lampstands which stood "before the oracle" (1 Kings 7:49). In Zechariah's vision (Zech. 4:2) the one lampstand with seven lamps reappears. But for John's readers there was a more contemporary import, the imperial religion. Inscriptions indicate that Hitler, Stalin, and other twentieth century dictators were not the first power-mad rulers to set their portraits between great lights for the adoration of the multitudes. Faced by the claims of the emperor-god, the churches should know their Lord as the light of the world and the "Light of Light, very God of very God." With all their imperfections, they should remember that they are precious gold to Him. Shining with His light, they stand in the secret place of the most High.

The vision of the Lord matches the stern solemnity of the setting. The attributes are not those of tenderness and mercy, but of power and majesty, designed to instill awe and fear of judgment. He is "like unto the son of

man," still human, but transfigured. Daniel had seen Him coming "with the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13f.) to receive at the hand of the Ancient of days "dominion and glory, and a kingdom." Later in the Apocalypse (14:14) the one like unto the son of man appears crowned, on a cloud, with a sickle poised and ready to heed the angelic plea, "Thrust in thy sickle and reap, for the time is come for thee to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." The eschatology of the first vision is obvious.

Commentators differ on the extent of connection between the Lord's long, high-girded robe and the priestly and high-priestly robes of the Old Testament. Swete strikes a balance when he states that the robe "is thus seen to denote dignity or high office, usually but not necessarily the office of High Priest."¹²

The white hair of the Ancient of days in Daniel (7:9) is here transferred to Christ. Any interpretation involving age and infirmity would clash with the context. Holiness in the righteous Judge suits much better. The flaming and omniscient eyes with their penetrating intelligence befit Him who "in righteousness . . . doth judge and make war,"

¹²Ibid., 15.

(Rev. 19:12) as, mounted on a white horse, He leads His white-robed army into battle.

The feet are of an unidentified metal or alloy. Strong and stable, they blaze and glow as though fired in a furnace, ready to turn to ashes those upon whom He treads.

The wrathful omnipotence of His feet is matched by the Ruler's voice. The persistent and overwhelming power of "many waters" would be understood by churches situated in lands bordering the Mediterranean and especially by John as he wrote on Patmos with the Aegean breakers sounding in his ears.

The Lord holds the seven stars, the angels of the churches, in His right hand. To the Jews the stars were in the hands of God who asked Job (Job 38:31) whether he could bind the Pleiades or loose Orion. In Isaiah (40:10ff.) the Lord God who is coming to rule with a strong arm, who will feed His flock like a shepherd, is He who "meted out heaven with the span." In the Apocalypse, at the opening of the sixth seal, the stars shake loose like figs in a high wind (6:13). These stars, the churches' angels, and therefore also the churches,¹³ are supported by the Lord. They re-

¹³"Angels" as pastors is appealing, but the word is

spond to His will and purpose. They are under the protective and authoritative power of His rule.

The factors in the bold picture of the sword issuing from Christ's mouth were known to both Old Testament and New Testament believers. The Stem of Jesse will "smite the earth with the rod of His mouth" (Is. 11:4) and the mouth of the Servant of the Lord is "like a sharp sword" (Is. 49:2). The Christians at Ephesus, as they listened to the reading of the Apocalypse, would recall the earlier word which they had received from Paul, exhorting them to a full spiritual armament which would include the "sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." In the Apocalypse it is said of the mounted and militant Christ--"His name is called the Word of God"--who leads His armies to battle, that "out of His mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it He should smite the nations" (19:15). The sword proceeds from Christ's mouth, continually it goes forth on its mission. The Word which comforts and saves the Church, terrorizes and slays His enemies. Within the framework of the picture of Christ given here, the sword's emphasis is on judgment

never so used in the N.T. "But in this symbolical book the angel of a Church may be simply an expression for its prevailing spirit, and thus be identified with the Church itself." Ibid., p. 22.

and destruction.

The picture is completed by the Lord's face, or perhaps more generally, by His entire appearance, blazing like the sun at its zenith, blinding with its intense light. John surely must have thought of the prior glimpse of glory which he and his brother and Peter had on the mount of transfiguration, a hint of that glory now fully revealed as the Easter promise is fulfilled.

Here, then, is a picture of pure sovereignty; the royal robe, the whiteness of a sin-hating holiness, the eyes of a wise King who knows both His subjects and His enemies, feet searing where they walk, a voice like booming breakers, the sword with its biting double-edge constantly judging, and the whole blazing with blinding glory. He, the Lord of all, will purge His churches and destroy His foes.

No wonder that John, who once lay on Jesus' breast (John 13:25), now "fell at His feet as dead" (Rev. 2:17). The post-Easter recognition at the Galilean lake, "It is the Lord," is again sure and swift, but the friendly and familiar joy is now a paralyzing awe.

There follows one of the amazing paradoxes found often in the Apocalypse, such as the mounted Christ leading His armies into battle--armies "clothed in fine linen, white and clean" (19:14). The voice "as of many waters" which should

overwhelm with its power, restores with comforting quietness, "Fear not." The omnipotent touch which we would expect to kill, revives and strengthens. It is the same right hand that holds the seven stars.

CHAPTER III

INDIVIDUAL CHRISTOLOGICAL SELF-DESIGNATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE CONTENTS OF THE LETTERS

There can be no doubt that the seven letters, as well as the entire Apocalypse, were written for Christians of the first century, for the believers of John's day.

Commentators differ as to the main purpose of the Book of Revelation. Some, with eyes for the great comfort passages, believe that the entirety has as its goal the comfort of the Church in its struggle against evil pressing from every side. Lilje feels that the immediate aim of the Apocalypse is "the consolation of the church at the outset of a period of danger and suffering."¹ Others see it through the lens of warning. The Church is to remember that any attempt at compromise is fatal, for all history has a satanic background, and survival, amid all crises of history, is tied to the Lamb. Still others see a dual aim, "the answer of the Spirit to the fears and perils"² of the Church.

¹Hanns Lilje, The Last Book of the Bible, translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 31.

²Henry Barclay Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), ccxviii.

But whatever variations of emphasis there may be as to the purpose of the Apocalypse, there is general agreement that the Lord addressed Himself first to contemporary conditions. The entire book repeatedly presupposes them. Incidentally, if all interpreters remembered the first century setting of the Apocalypse, we would be spared efforts to identify Napoleon, the Balkan Wars, Kaiser Wilhelm, Hitler, and F. D. Roosevelt. For the Christian seller of purple in Thyatira these would indeed profit little.

As the entire book, so the seven letters were contemporary. These were seven definite congregations. One feared it could do nothing because it could not do everything. Another, rich on the hill, confused having a good janitor with justification, and a smooth-running church office with the office of the keys. Real congregations they were. The same everyday pressures which appear in Paul's letters to congregations appear here also.

But to have a valid claim on our attention, these letters and the descriptions the Author gives of Himself must be meant for the Church of all centuries as well as for the churches of the first. I believe they were. The letters were to be in book form (Rev. 1:11). All who hear and read and keep (Rev. 1:3) are called blessed. Every one with the

hearing ear is urged to listen.

If these are not for the Church and representative of the Church, then why were just these particular seven chosen? There were many other congregations just as important in Asia and there were cities larger than some of those selected. Yet these letters are addressed to "the seven churches." Or is it because they were connected by the Roman post-road? The order in which the congregations are listed is geographical, but so important a decision as the selection of the seven would not be made solely on the basis of convenience for the mailman. However, I see some point in the fact that the seven cities bound together the influential west-central area of the province and would serve as points of communication with seven districts. Placed in these centers, the Apocalypse certainly would spread throughout the province. Another suggested reason for the choice of the seven is that possibly these were the congregations in which John had done mission work. Granted that John is the secretary who took the dictation, the correspondence is from the Lord to the churches. The area of John's work would not be the sole determining factor.

Above other considerations, it seems to me that the

congregations were selected to give us a complete picture of congregational life, to point out the perils that always endanger our life in Christ, to delineate the qualities which always make a congregation a good one in the Lord's eyes, and to outline the tribulations which are always trying to wear down those who want to win through. It is well to note that many expressions used in the letters reappear later in the Apocalypse in clear connections with the Church universal. Further, the self-designations used in the first and last letters are sufficiently general to suggest that, in addition to their own particular places in the series, they are the first and last members of a group to be regarded as a whole. Also, since the individual salutations are a part of the description of Christ in chapter one, it seems likely that the contents of the letters, like the salutations, are parts of a whole. Finally, there is some merit in the suggestion that seven is the number of completeness. Three, the number of God, plus four, the number of the earth, equal the union of God with men, the Church.

Ephesus

Asia Minor was the most cultured of the empire's provinces and, as the heir of Greece, the intellectual center

of the empire. It had much that made it distinguished, and Ephesus was its crown. In spending several years at Ephesus Paul had selected the cultural and intellectual capital of his day. Following Jerusalem's fall in 70 A.D., Ephesus became the geographical center of the primitive church. Described by inscriptions found at Ayasuluk, the Turkish town located on the site of Ephesus, as the first and greatest metropolis of Asia, Ephesus was a free city, the seat of proconsular government (Acts 19:38), and politically active through its council, senate, and the general assembly. Commercially, the east and west met at Ephesus. Foreign trade was carried on with Greece, Egypt, and Spain. From the Euphrates, the great road reached the sea at Ephesus. Cultural and intellectual interests abounded. Perhaps Ephesus was the scene of Justin's dialog with Trypho. The study of sculpture and architecture was pursued with zeal. Extensive ruins of a theater seating 25,000 testify to an interest in drama.

But for a city that would chant for two solid hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," (Acts 19:28) religion was the paramount power. Diana's temple was a wonder of the ancient world. Dating back to a pre-Hellenic goddess of fertility, she held the city in the strong grip of a long tradition and touched the lives of the citizens at every point.

Her priestly college voted on the admission of new citizens, the month of the spring equinox was named after her, an annual festival was held in her honor, and her temple had a veritable army of officials. Parallel to the worship of Artemis, in whose temple precinct a statue of Augustus had been erected, was the emperor worship. Ephesian coin inscriptions indicate the city's pride in this dual religious loyalty.

But what of the congregation at Ephesus? Paul stopped there, but only briefly, on his second missionary trip. On his third tour he spent about three years there (Acts 20:31) and worked so effectively that it could be said "that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." Homeward bound, Paul stopped at Miletus for a few last words with the elders of the church. The work was carried on by Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, and Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3). According to second century traditions, Timothy was followed by John. When Paul wrote to the Ephesians the news from there had been good (Eph. 1:15ff.), no special problems seem to have arisen, and Paul writes for general edification.

But now, some thirty to forty years later, a generation had arisen which knew not Paul, and things were different. To be sure, the congregation still retained some fine vir-

tues. It was a hard-working church--"labor" is "almost a technical term for Christian work."³ As for endurance, they had it. Their conscience was tender and their judgment was vigorously orthodox. Bearing Christ's name, and bearing up under attacks because of it, they could not bear evil men. Pseudo-apostles and Nicolaitans alike were properly evaluated, resisted, and rejected. Ephesus hated what Christ hated. All this is high praise.

But the greatest of these is charity--and this was missing. The spontaneous self-giving, both the mood and the resultant conduct, had been lost. The love-light which once had graced the spiritual eyes of Ephesus had gone out. One wonders why. Possibly the orthodoxy which preserved also hardened. Perhaps the x-ray which killed the malignancy of heresy also sterilized the body of Christ. At any rate, the remedy is clear and imperative: Remember! Repent! Do! If these imperatives are carried out, Ephesus may yet live and overcome and see Paradise regained and eat of the tree of life.⁴

In addressing this church, her Lord says that these are

³Ibid., p. 25.

⁴Recent excavations at Gibeon in Palestine by Dr. James B. Pritchard recovered a seal showing worshippers before a tree of life. Cf. The Saturday Evening Post, Feb. 8, 1958.

the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. These features are a strengthened form of the description in Rev. 1:13 and 16. He who "had" the seven stars in His right hand, now "holds" them, He who was "in the midst of the seven candlesticks" now "walketh in the midst" of them. "Hold" I take in the sense of retain (Rev. 2:13,25; 3:11) rather than restrain (Rev. 7:1). He holds and patrols the Church; she belongs to Him. The promise holds, "I am with you." Both the strength and the vigilance of Christ, the King, provide security for His queenly bride.

Thus the Lord describes Himself to the saints at Ephesus. What was there about the city, its position in the province and empire, and the congregation, with its strength and weakness, that caused the Lord to use this salutation? Ephesus, of course, needed the Lord's firm grasp and watchful safeguarding. Every church does. But this is the first letter and its superscription is a fitting introduction to them all. The self-designation looks beyond Ephesus as well as at it. She was the mother church of Asia. As the city represented the province, so the congregation represented the seven, and they, in turn, the Church. He who speaks to Ephesus also speaks to the Church

universal. There should be no doubt, therefore, as to who He was, His right to speak, and His claim to be heard. The seven churches and the Church are to take comfort in His presence and power.

But there is warning, too, for He brooks no challenge. His is the supreme authority; He is the commander-in-chief. We call them "the seven letters," and so they are. But they are not breezy notes of heavenly chit-chat as to how things are going in the celestial realms. They are solemn judgments by the Lord of the Church, by Him with the all-seeing eye and the perfect photographic memory. The bell tolls, "I know thy works," and the Church, knowing that He knows, will respond, "Lord, Thou knowest all things." Thus, in writing to Ephesus, the Lord uses a salutation which portrays His relationship to all the churches.

The city of Ephesus, too, helps explain the letter's salutation. The church, while not of the city, was in it. And Ephesus was a place of power. There was its political prestige as a free city and the seat of proconsular government. The Romans ranked it with Pergamos as the alterum lumen Asiae, and Augustus visited it a number of times. There was religious power here and pride in being known as the warden of the world-famous temple of Artemis. And

there was power, too, in the political-religious emperor worship.

Against this background, the Lord of the Church marks out the battle line. Earthly power is confronted by heavenly power. Did the political religion have as its royal symbols seven stars and candlesticks? The heavenly Emperor has seven stars whom He lovingly holds and zealously guards. Christ states His claim to supreme authority in the face of the world power. The church at Ephesus, the seven churches, and the Church should see clearly at the outset that the might of Rome and Artemis and the emperor are faced by the almightiness of Christ, that power is superseded by omnipotence, and that the Church's King is King of the kings and Lord of all lords.

The salutation used in addressing Ephesus also would have personal value for John. As the pastor of that church for some twenty-five years, the parish would hold a privileged place in his heart. Now he was separated from them. Every pastor knows the feeling, fringed with homesickness, even on a joyous and long-awaited vacation, that comes over one on Sunday morning as 10:30 approaches--"Well, I guess they are about ready to ring the bell." We can well imagine how John must have felt on that Lord's day, idled in exile by his volcanic prison, ten miles long and six miles wide,

and separated by force from his dearly beloved. As his eyes went out over the sixty miles of Mediterranean blue which lay between him and his parish, he would remember the words, "I ascend unto My Father and Your Father" (John 20:17). But where was He now? About sixty-five years before Christ, the faithful witness, had professed His good profession before Pilate, "Thou sayest that I am a King." But where was the royal authority now? To validate the commission which sent them to the four corners of the earth He had said, "All power is given unto Me" (Matt. 28:18). It had been a long time since John heard those words. Were they still true? In the face of disquieting questions, it must have set John's heart aglow again to hear the Lord say, "These things saith He that holdeth the seven stars in His right hand."

Smyrna

Smyrna, about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, carried on a rivalry with that city and with Pergamos and had many similar claims to fame. An early Greek colony, Smyrna was destroyed by the Lydians around 600 B.C. Alexander the Great's plans for rebuilding the city on a new site were carried out by Antigonus and Lysiachus between 316 and 281 B.C. Smyrna was a "metropolis" and also the center

of a conventus. Already in 26 A.D., ahead of Ephesus, it was privileged to erect a temple in honor of Tiberius, his mother Livia, and the Roman senate, and thus received the imperial title "temple warden." The beautiful location of the city at the head of a long and well-protected gulf with a good harbor was also of commercial value. Smyrna carried on an export trade second only to that of Ephesus. The road which tapped the fertile valley of the Hermus River had Smyrna as its terminal point. The rich and prosperous city was well laid out and possessed numerous fine public buildings whose circular location on the rounded top of the hill Pagos apparently led to the phrase "the crown of Smyrna." The religious life, unlike that of Ephesus, was not devoted to a special cult. But there was no lack of temples dedicated to the Sipylene Cebele, the local Zeus, and other deities.

Concerning the congregation at Smyrna our information is meager. The Apocalypse provides Scripture's only direct reference. We have nothing beyond the possibility that Paul visited Smyrna when he "passed through the upper coasts" (Acts 19:1) on his way to Ephesus and the general statement (Acts 19:10) concerning the evangelizing of Asia as a result of Paul's long stay there.

So what is to be known of the church at Smyrna must be derived from the letter itself. Two things are notable. First, for this church the Lord has not one word of censure. Secondly--and this is important for our evaluation of the salutation of the letter--the congregation was suffering under pressure and persecution from a number of sources. The Lord states that He knows their tribulation and poverty. These two words say it all, and the two are connected. Many of the apostolic churches seem to have been of modest circumstances. The Macedonian churches gave out of "deep poverty" (2 Cor. 8:2). Possibly in some cases this was due simply to the fact that the converts came from the poorer classes. But the situation is heightened in Smyrna, for the city itself was unusually well-to-do and one would expect the Christians to share at least to some extent in the general prosperity. Here we have a city of above-average affluence, but a church of such deep poverty that it is specifically recognized by the Lord. This apparently stemmed, to some extent, from persecutions by the Jewish element in the city. The vehemence of the opposition was such that the Lord characterizes the Jews as the "synagogue of Satan." The picture is not hard to see. A large number of Jews had settled in this district after the fall of Je-

In arriving and interpreting the persecution of Christians.

rusalem and apparently occupied an influential position. The Christians had already experienced blasphemy. Judging from their poverty, this was followed by boycotts and possibly even by pillaging at the hands of roaming mobs.⁵

But the cup of their suffering is not full, there is worse to come. Satan, the ruler of the synagogue, would throw some of them into prison, where tortures and scourgings were the order of the day. They should also be prepared for martyrdom. To remain faithful to that which had been entrusted to them would, at least in some cases, lead to death itself. Polycarp, John's friend and pupil, would die there February 23, 155, and those who said they were Jews but were not, would be in on the kill.

But there was comfort in the midst of all this. The Smyrnian Christians were to remember that theirs was a rich and enriching poverty. For them, as for the Christians at Corinth, across the Aegean, Christ had become poor so that they might be rich (2 Cor. 8:9). They had the "gold tried in the fire" (Rev. 3:18). Rich in Christ, they were rich toward God and rich in good works. Further, the tribulation time, "ten days," would have an end. And if they did

⁵Cf. Martyrium Polycarpi, XIII, 1 for Jewish influence in arousing and furthering the persecution of Christians.

not know when that would be, the Lord did, and that would suffice.

Finally, if for some the road would end in death, that was the glory road, so they were not to fear. They would be able to stand the first death knowing that they could not be touched by the second, "the lake which burneth with fire." They often had seen the joy of the winners in the famous Smyrnian games as these received the crown, plaited of olive, myrtle, oak, or other materials, all of which eventually faded. The Christians were to remember that theirs would be the unsurpassed joy that accompanies the crown consisting of life with a capital "L"--Life.

For this church the Lord identifies Himself as "the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive"--titles taken from 1:17f. "First and last" has a parallel in 1:8, "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending." He is both the creator and the consummator. He stands at both ends of everything--revelation, history, and the Kingdom plan. In the second title there is a change from 1:18. The "I am living" strengthens to "I became alive." The apostles, "I was dead and became alive," take us to the historical facts of Calvary and Easter.

The connection between the titles used by Christ and

the conditions at Smyrna is not difficult to see. There are strong parallels between the life of Christ and that of the Smyrna church. The congregation has taken up its cross to follow Him. The shadow of His cross lies across the church. To copy out the words is to mark off the distance of their Via Dolorosa--"tribulation . . . poverty . . . blasphemy . . . suffer . . . the devil . . . tried . . . tribulation . . . unto death. . . ." They will be steadied on this road if they remember whose footsteps they follow. He became poor and had not where to lay His head. He, too, experienced the hatred of the Jews. After the fall of Jerusalem, many Jews went into Asia Minor. Now, sixty-five years after Good Friday, Jesus could say, "As the Jews persecute you, so their fathers persecuted Me." It is possible that the blood of the Smyrnian Christians was being shed by the sons of some who had shouted, "His blood be on us and on our children." Yes, He had died. And the Smyrna church should know that some of their members would die by the violent hatred of persecution. But He became alive. Let them fix their attention on His resurrection. His resurrection was the firstfruit, theirs will be part of the Church's total harvest.

This is guaranteed to them by Him who is "the first

John's Epistle (Columbus, Ohio: The Warburg Press, 1943), p. 72.

and the last." He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Their Lord is God, the author and finisher. He is from everlasting to everlasting, and everything that lies between the everlastings is under His control and must serve His purposes--also the "ten days" of the Smyrna church. Christ had the first word. Let them not fear, the last word will be His also. Steffan well asks, "Who would not cling to him in the end, to whom the end belongs?"⁶

Pergamos

Continuing north from Smyrna on the imperial post-road, a trip of about fifty-five miles brings one to Pergamos--forty miles north along the Aegean coast and fifteen miles up the Caicus River valley. Situated on a rocky hill, the city dominated one of the richest river valleys of Mysia. Proud of its history as the capital of the Attalian kingdom (241-133 B.C.), it had been left to the Romans by the last king of the dynasty, and enjoyed their favor as the seat of the proconsul even though Ephesus became his official residence in 6 B.C. The amazing Hellenistic splendor of the city has been established by archeological

⁶As cited by R. C. H. Lenski, Interpretation of St. John's Revelation (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 73.

work carried on at the city during the past eighty years.

Economically, the busy metropolis provided ample marketing outlets for the products of the fertile plains. Great skill in the preparation of parchment from animal skins for writing purposes was given recognition in the material's name, Membrana Pergamena (German: Pergament). Eumenes, the second Attalian king (197 B.C.), founded the celebrated library which ultimately, with its 200,000 vellum scrolls, was second only to that of Alexandria. Marc Antony, having promised the library to Cleopatra, had it removed to Egypt and added to the Alexandrian library.

But in the field of religion lay the city's chief and international renown. Countless statues and altars testified to the rampant idolatry which drew pilgrims from all Asia. Four main deities presided over the city, Zeus Soter, Dionysus, Athena Nicephorus, and Asclepius Soter. The latter two are frequently mentioned together on coins found in the area. The temple of Athena dominated the summit of the acropolis that rose 1,000 feet above the plain. On its slope, a short distance away, and in view of the marketplace, was the great white marble altar of Zeus with its famous frieze of the gods warring against the giants with their human bodies and serpent tails. Erected about 180 B.C.

by the Attalid king, Eumenes II, it commemorated his father's victory over the Gauls. Religion and medicine met in the cult of Asclepius, the god of healing. The ill and infirm came from afar to receive treatment at the school of medicine which was attached to the temple, and to bathe in the healing waters of the spring which made Pergamos a sort of first century Lourdes. Galen, the famous physician, was born at Pergamos and studied there.

Special mention should be made of the city's connection with the worship of the emperors. The temple dedicated in 29 B.C. to "the divine Augustus and the Goddess Roma" was the first one erected for imperial cult usage in Asia. The cult was further strengthened by a second temple built by Trajan and a third in honor of Severus. Inscriptions from the reigns of Hadrian and Trajan support the city's prime place in emperor worship. The local priest of Zeus was also called the priest of the divine Augustus. To sum up, Pergamos was "a sort of union of a pagan cathedral city, a university town, and a royal residence. . . ."⁷

The Apocalypse letter contains the only Scripture

⁷Charles Randall Barnes, The People's Bible Encyclopedia (Chicago: The People's Publication Society, 1924), p. 845.

reference to the church at Pergamos, for whom the Lord has both praise and censure.

The Lord does not underestimate the difficult situation of this congregation, located in a city where Christians were said to be in danger every day of the year. He who knows the works of Ephesus and persevering endurance and poverty of Smyrna, knows every square block and every idol throne of Pergamos. He knows that the church lives in an earthly hell, "where Satan's seat is . . . where Satan dwelleth" (2:13). The paganism of Pergamos must have reached some unusual depths of degredation to cause Christ to label it as He did. For the church it meant special difficulty and danger. In the New Testament "seat" is the throne of a judge (Matt. 19:28), or of a king (Luke 1:32), or of the apostles who are to reign with Christ (Matt. 19:28), or of God (Heb. 12:2), or of Christ (Matt. 5:34; 19:28; 25:31; Heb. 1:8). It "is always the seat of office or chair of state. . . ." ⁸ In the sense of the throne of God or Christ the word is used forty-five times in the Apocalypse. At Pergamos, then, Satan was king and held court. He lived there in settled residence.

⁸Swete, op. cit., p. 34.

The Lord has some words of approbation for this church. Much to its credit was its firm and continuing grip on the name of Christ. Even in the sharp outburst of persecution which resulted in the death of Antipas the congregation remained true. The Christians must have trembled, but their faithfulness, like that of faithful Antipas, ruled out any denial of their faith in Christ. The witness⁹ of Antipas remained true to the end. Their allegiance to Christ would allow them to do no less. The glorious fact of the church's solid front, with ranks unbroken by the onslaught, is acknowledged by the Lord of the Church with joy.

But the church that was holding the line against paganism from the outside was losing within as a result of the infiltration tactics of the enemy. The faith which held against the threat of emperor worship was faltering before heresy. This battle area (cf. 2:16) was just as critical for the war's outcome as the action against the pagan cultism. The congregation which held Christ's name (2:13) had some who were holding the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (2:14f.). The Nicolaitans, whose activities were

⁹Swete doubts that the word had acquired the technical sense of "martyr" by the end of the first century. Ibid., p. 36.

being resisted in Ephesus, apparently were first-century "Balaamites." Balaam (Num. 31:16) had suggested to king Balak that Israel could be broken down through seduction by the women of Moab. The Nicolaitans were his first-century Asian counterpart. Engaging in crass idol worship and fornication was sometimes defended as evidence of strength and maturity in the Christian who was not affected by what was done in the flesh. Another theory held that the flesh is best subdued when given full rein. It is possible that the Nicolaitans disclaimed any immoral object and upheld membership in the pagan clubs and participation in the public festivals as an opportunity to act as a leaven. Furthermore, to stand aloof from pagan social activities would incur suspicion and opposition and might lead to the suppression of the church. Why not go along with the community in a reasonable compromise with society's established customs?

Whatever may have been the theories, the results were clear. The inroads of Balaam's spirit had resulted in idolatrous compromises and the doctrine justifying them. For a church in the world there is always the danger that the world will get into the church. Tact becomes laxity and charity degenerates into conformity. Using the world's customs, we are in danger of adopting its ethics. It is

but a short step--and the Pergamos church experienced this-- from using the world's mechanics to accepting its standards of morality. The line of demarcation, if not erased, was badly blurred.

The Lord has severe rebuke both for the party that upholds the false doctrine and practice and for the congregation which, failing to maintain church discipline, tolerated them. The alternatives are clear, "Repent, or else. . . ." Would they overcome within as they were victorious without? Then the hidden manna, the white and dazzling stone, and the new name awaited them. Commentaries' long pages of theories on this triple reward are not important for our study, but certainly the adjectives are as important as the nouns. Obvious to the naked eye is the fact that Satan is enthroned at Pergamos, but the hidden is also true--God still sits in the heavens. The devotees of Asclepius and the healing springs were concerned with the visible life of the body. The Christians have a greater life, although it is hid with Christ in God. Our citizenship in heaven, which we already hold, is not yet fully realized. He who is "the bread from heaven," "the bread of God," and "the bread of life," is a better bread than the desert manna (John 6:31ff.). Because we walk by faith and not by sight,

He is the "hidden manna" whom we shall enjoy to the full when we see Him as He is. The delicacies of the gluttonous idol feasts (Rev. 2:14) were in full view, but they are not worthy to be compared to the banquet, visible only to the eyes of faith, which will be served when "many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). Similarly, the gray of our present imperfections will be replaced by the dazzling white of perfect holiness. And as for the new name, this is one of many new things which the Lord has for His Church--a new man, new covenant, new commandment, new Jerusalem, new creation, new way, a new heaven and a new earth. Centuries before the nativity, God had promised, "Behold I will do a new thing" (Is. 43:19). Paul gave present assurance to the Corinthians that for the man in Christ, "behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). In the closing verse of the Lord's last word to the Church, as John sees "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven," Christ on the throne signals the fulfilment of newness, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:2,5).

The Lord greets this congregation as "He which hath the sharp sword with two edges" (2:12). John had seen it

going out from Christ's mouth (1:16). In a later scene, the sword going forth from the mouth of the Son of God is His weapon for smiting the nations (19:13,15). The Asian Christians would know of an earlier letter to one of their congregations in which "the sword of the Spirit" was identified as "the word of God" (Eph. 6:17). And for some Hebrew Christians "the word of God" had been pictured as "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12), discerning clearly and dividing sharply.

Christ's self-designation states in the strongest way that at Pergamos the battle line must be reestablished. Fraternizing with the enemy in no-man's land must cease. For this is war, not a fellowship gathering. Christ divides. He "came not to send peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:33). And if a Christian's foes are often those of his own household, much more is this true of his fellow citizens in a pagan city. Christ's reproof is sharp and the warning is stern. The Pergamos congregation must recognize anew the divisive character of Him who said, "He that is not with Me is against Me" (Matt. 12:30). Paul had stressed the dividing and clarifying function of the Word for the Corinthian Christians, pointing out--with five sharp questions--the dangers in being unequally yoked together with unbelievers

(2 Cor. 6:14ff.).

In that outward conflict in which Antipas was a casualty the Pergamos church fought well and victoriously. This deeper and continuing conflict is more subtle and more deadly. It is a real battle, for here "faith was opposed by faith, doctrine by doctrine, spirit by spirit, in an irreconcilable conflict."¹⁰ Satan, firmly entrenched at Pergamos, will not leave. The church must not leave. The conflict is inescapable.

True, the whole congregation had not yet made common cause with the enemy, for the Lord says, "I will fight against them," (2:16) not against "you." However, the danger is there. The Lord wants them all to know that He who uses the sword to "smite the nations" (19:15) will wield its destructive force against the unrepentant in Pergamos. Of another sword the Lord had told Peter that it belonged in the sheath. There is no scabbard for the sword of the Word. The Christians at Pergamos must use it, or it will be used against them.

¹⁰Lilje, op. cit., p. 81.

Thyatira

Thyatira, about forty miles southeast of Pergamos, was in the province of Lydia near the borders of Mysia, on the Lycus River. It lay at the north end of the valley between Mount Tmolus and the southern ridge of Temnus. Founded by Macedonian Greeks, Thyatira was one of the many Macedonian colonies established in Asia Minor following the destruction of the Persian empire by Alexander the Great. Since 190 B.C. the city belonged to the Romans and was included in the Roman province of Asia.

Thyatira apparently was not held in high repute and was known merely as the town between Pergamos and Sardis. But whatever Thyatira lacked in culture it made up in business as a center of trade with a busy industrial life. Dominated by the trade-guilds of merchants, traders, and craftsmen, it was a "union town." Among its many "unions" were the guilds of the bakers, potters, brass workers, clothiers, tanners, and leather cutters. Most numerous, it seems, were the workers in wool and the dyers, for woolen goods were a Lydian specialty. A certain Menippus of Thyatira had an inscription dedicated in his honor by the guild of purple dyers at Thessalonica. The purple dye, extracted

from shellfish, was an expensive commodity. To be clothed in purple and fine linen put one in the mink coat class.

The religious life of the community centered in temples in or near the city devoted to a Tyrimmaean Apollo who was worshipped as a sun god, an Artemis bearing the surname Boritene, and eastern sibyl known as Sambathe. There is no evidence that Thyatira had a temple dedicated to the emperors.

All that we know of the Christian congregation at Thyatira is in the Apocalypse letter. On Paul's second tour, the converts at Philippi included Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth (Acts 16:14). The church's origin may lie in the mission work of Lydia when she returned from Philippi. Perhaps Paul reached Thyatira, or it might have been visited by a missionary involved in the general evangelization of Asia in connection with Paul's lengthy stay at Ephesus.

Though our knowledge of the community and the congregation is meager, the Apocalypse letter has certain distinguishing features. It has the strongest Messianic self-designation, it is the longest of the seven, and it lists the church's virtues in greater detail than the other letters. The more the Lord must rebuke, the more detailed is His praise.

In commending the congregation the Lord begins, as to Ephesus, "I know thy works. . . ." The whole range of their conduct, whatever may be termed "works"--Christ has knowledge thereof. In a characteristically Johannine manner, the honor roll of Christian virtues begins with love, followed by faith, service, and endurance. These four, mentioned together with the objects of their activity elsewhere in the New Testament, are given here in an absolute sense, without reference to the persons toward whom the virtues are directed or the situations in which they demonstrated their life. The Lord knew in what manner love, which had lost its zest at Ephesus (2:4), was showing continued vigor at Thyatira. First in the catalog of fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), love was first also here. The ascended Lord knew the sweep of the Thyatirans' faith--one of the three great virtues in Paul's triad (1 Cor. 13:13). As the members, a small island of Christianity in a pagan sea, were concerned with each other's needs and went about doing good, the Lord knew the extent of their service and the noble reach of resemblance it bore to the perfect service of the "ministering spirits" (Heb. 1:14). Finally, Christ also knew how well they answered the appeal for persevering endurance as they held out against paganism and

bore up under whatever affliction came their way because of it.

Looking over their works once more, the Lord adds the crowning word of praise. The concept of growth, urged so often upon Christians in Scripture, was a reality in Thyatira. Absent was the willingness of many parishes to remain at the same level of sanctification year after year. At Thyatira the Christians had learned to walk Godpleasingly, and abounded more and more. The Lord acknowledges, concerning their works, that "the last be more than the first" (2:19).

All the more astounding, after such commendation, is the description of the congregation's badly infected spiritual condition. Matters are worse than at Pergamos where the congregation "had" some that were attracted by the Nicolaitans and their idolatrous and immoral practices. Here the congregation tolerates, and the numerical support of the aberration seems greater. Most serious of all, while at Pergamos the defection was toward an evil on the outside, at Thyatira the false doctrine has gained a foothold within the church. Jezebel and her coterie are firmly ensconced in the parish. This congregation is not merely breathing polluted air, nor is it a matter of a cyst on the

outside of the chest cage. Cancer has spread through a good deal of its lung tissue.

The reference to Jezebel indicates that the Asian Gentiles must have been quite familiar with the Septuagint. Paul, in rebuttal to the Judaizers in the Galatian churches, does not hesitate to base an argument on a detailed reference to Abraham (Gal. 3 and 4). The church at Pergamos was expected to understand what was meant by "the doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14). The Thyatirans, it seems, knew the history of Jezebel, who introduced into Israel the worship of Baal and Astarte and the associated harlotries and sorceries (2 Kings 9:22), and would understand the Lord's "Jezebel" label for the woman¹¹ who was promulgating the evil of which Ahab's wife was a striking representative. The eating of idolatrous meat, in violation of the Apostolic Council resolutions, and the immorality connected with the feasts, urged by the Nicolaitans at Pergamos, were fostered at Thyatira by the self-styled prophetess and her party within the sanctity of the church and under its toleration. Perhaps these were early Gnostics, whose ethical system, aimed at overcoming flesh, led both to a strict asceticism

¹¹"Jezebel" certainly seems symbolical. Some commentators also take "woman" symbolically for a group.

and an extreme libertinism. The love for occult lore, magical watchwords, and secret names, led them into "the depths of Satan," (2:24) for there is a mystery of iniquity as well as a mystery of godliness. But whatever the party name, both actual and spiritual fornication were involved.

It is not difficult to find a possible motive for the compromise with paganism at Thyatira. The outstanding feature of the city was the trade guild organization. The Christian craftsmen would belong to these "unions," but membership posed the problem of the occasional common meal with its sacrificial character and the licentious revelry which often was associated with it. To stay away from the guild activities would lead to embarrassing questions, suspicion, and the charge of being anti-social. To remain outside the guild would make it difficult, if not impossible, to get employment. The Christian craftsmen, torn between the difficult alternatives in a city where "business" was queen, would be tempted to succumb to compromise.

In the face of the conditions at Thyatira the Lord shows almost unbelievable patience in giving "space to repent" (2:21). Even at this late date He preaches with the silent sermon of time, together with the spoken Word. But time is running out, and "except they repent" (2:22) the

patient Christ will become the judging Christ and, for the woman and her followers, will replace the bed of adultery with a bed of tribulation. This judgment--itself a final call to repentance--shall be evidence for all the churches that the outer works, together with the whole inner life and its thinking, feeling, and volition, are under the constant surveillance of the Church's Lord.

Now, for the first time in the apocalyptic visions, we meet "the rest" (the "remnant") as distinguished from the church's body of professing members. Though "the rest" (2:24) need not be a minority (cf. 9:20), yet the sudden appearance of the phrase seems to indicate a shift in numerical balance.

The time may come when "come out from among them, and be ye separate" (2 Cor. 6:17) will apply, but for the present they are to remain where they are, assured that the Lord will put upon them "none other burden" (2:24). Assailed from without by the pagan climate and the threat against their daily bread if they, as guild-members, reject the guild feasts, and torn by false doctrine and practice within, they certainly need the renewed promise that the judging Lord is full of mercy towards His own. Under the circumstances, they have their hands full to "hold fast

till I come" (2:25). Let them continue to foster those noble works, "charity, and service, and faith and thy patience," (2:19) which had formed the basis of the Lord's commendation.

These were their works--"I know thy works" (2:19). They are also the Lord's works--"My works" (2:26). Let "the rest" keep these "unto the end" (2:26). It will be worth it, whatever the cost. If the trial is great, so is the consolation. To keep is to conquer. The reward of grace ("I will give" 2:26,28) is based on Psalm 2. The authority over nations there given to Yaweh's Son He here promises to share with those who are co-heirs with Him. What He has received of His Father (2:27) He gives to them.

The authority is further described--using the LXX of Ps. 2:9--as shepherding with an iron rod and shattering them as ceramic vessels. The shepherd who leads his flock to green pastures and still waters, destroys the enemies of the sheep. The picture of shattered vessels would be meaningful to the potters of Thyatira.

When is this promise fulfilled? Some "power over the nations" (2:26) may lie in the here and now. The Church, by its missionary service in the world, certainly is a factor in the shaping of national character and life. But

this authority is often less than obvious--witness the conditions at Thyatira. The real fulfillment lies in the Parousia. The promise "I will make thee ruler over many things" (Matt 25:21) looks to the future. Paul, urging the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:2) not to go to court against each other before heathen judges, based his appeal on the future when he asked, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" The Thyatirans' neighbors at Philadelphia are comforted by the promise which looks ahead to the time when they will share Christ's throne (3:21).

The promise of authority is completed by the pledge of the morning star (2:28). The authority of Christ, the morning star (22:16), has already been described in terms of Psalm 2. Venus, the morning star, symbolized power and dominion in her association with the imperial cult. Both concepts would be intelligible to the Thyatirans. However, from the Christian point of view, the promise that a conqueror will share in Christ's activities (2:26f.), would reach its zenith in the assurance that he, in conquering, would also possess the Conqueror.

This is Thyatira. The Lord greets her as "the Son of God, who hath His eyes like unto a flame of fire, and His feet are like fine brass" (2:18). While the words "Father"

and "My Father" (1:6; 2:27; 3:5,21) imply the sonship, the term "the Son of God" is used only here in the Apocalypse. The eyes like fire and feet like glowing metal are taken from 1:14-15.

What is the point and purpose of this triple self-designation for the church at Thyatira? The three elements include authority, penetrating evaluation, and judgment--one following the other in stern procession. During Christ's earthly ministry there were glimpses of His authority. "He taught them as one having authority" (Matt. 7:29). He asserted to the scribes His "power on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6). When the Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples were breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain, Jesus' reply included the authoritative words, "For the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath day" (Matt. 12:8). When asked by the chief priests and elders for His credentials, He replied with the silencing question on the baptism of John (Matt. 21:23ff.). Likewise when Pilate cited his authority to crucify or to free, he was told, somewhat enigmatically, that any authority he had against Jesus was given him by God (John 19:11).

But now humiliation has been replaced by exaltation. The Messianic authority spoken of in Psalm 2 is now fully

revealed. "Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ" (Rev. 12:10). The "all power (exousia) is given unto Me" (Matt. 28:18) of the risen Lord is unveiled as infinite in the exalted Christ.

On the basis of this authority as the Son of God, and by virtue of the power lodged therein, His flaming eyes penetrate and evaluate. Valid conclusions lead to righteous judgments, portrayed by the blazing and searing feet. Thyatira needs to know all this. The false prophetess had taken over in the church. She in her high arrogance, those in the congregation who had bowed to her authority by following her lead, and the few faithful ones who feared to say anything--all should know that this church belongs to the Son of God and is under His authority. The Thyatirans are to be children of God, not children of the prophetess. Christ, not the prophetess, decides what is proper doctrine and practice.

He who looked upon Peter with reproving and recalling love, now looks on Thyatira with perfect knowledge and flaming insight. His grasp of all factors is perfect; His evaluation is errorless. In fiery omniscience He strips away the sham and deception of that which poses as the depth of God but is in reality the depth of Satan. The claim to

knowledge by the Gnostics is disqualified by Him who really knows. Thyatira, and all the churches as well, should remember that Christ is the heart-searcher (2:23). His patience (2:21) should not be mistaken for indifference or impotence.

The look is followed by the act; the flaming eye by the blazing stride; insight by judgment, just and final. "Behold, I will cast . . . and I will kill . . ." (2:22f.). These are hard words. Let him with the hearing ear hear and "hold fast till I come" (2:25).

Sardis

Sardis was about thirty miles south and a little east of Thyatira. On another route, Sardis was about fifty miles east of Smyrna. Situated at the foot of Mount Tmolus, on the east bank of the Pactolus River, a few miles from where it joins the Hermus, Sardis lay in a long and beautiful valley and commanded the great valley of the Hermus.

Sardis had a checkered history going back to the days when it was prominent as the capital of the powerful Lydian empire in the seventh century B.C. Falling to the Persians in 546 B.C. when Cyrus the Great defeated the wealthy and famed Lydian king, Croesus, it became the seat of a satrap.

When the Greeks burned the city in 499 B.C., they brought on the invasions of Greece by Darius and Xerxes. During the conquests of Alexander the Great, the city surrendered to him in 334 B.C. Antiochus took Sardis about a century later (214 B.C.), but lost it after approximately two decades to the Romans, in 190 B.C. Struck by a severe earthquake in 17 A.D., the city was rapidly rebuilt with the aid of Tiberius.

Industrially, Sardis shared with nearby Thyatira a reputation for its woolen goods and dyeing industry. With roads converging from Thyatira, Smyrna, Laodicea, and the Lycus, Sardis claimed a good deal of the trade of central Asia.

Noted for their luxury and licentiousness, the Sardi-ans had as their patron goddess the mother-goddess Cybele. Two columns of her magnificent temple still remain--sheep today graze among the ruins. Other deities honored there were the Lydian Zeus, Dionysus, Athena, and the local heroes Tmolus and Hermus. The temple of Artemis was built in the fourth century B.C. to replace an older structure, and the temple of Zeus is said to have stood above the foundations of Croesus's palace. The acropolis, located on a spur of the Tmolus range, towered almost 1,000 feet above

the city.

Very little is known of the origin or history of the Christian church in Sardis. Near the temple of Artemis are ruins of a church erected prior to the fourth century A.D. Among the early bishops at Sardis was the earliest interpreter of the Apocalypse, Bishop Melito.

By the Lord's evaluation, Sardis was dead while she lived. From the city's halcyon days as the capital of Lydia and the home of Croesus, it had gone downhill--and so had the church. With her strength ebbing and her piety waning, there was left to her only the name of Christian. The outward had been substituted for the inward. The structure of good works which God expects to be done (3:2), remained incomplete, and presented the same dismal picture as the unfinished projects, still to be seen in Florida, which were begun in the "roaring twenties" and abandoned when the economic bubble burst. The works of Sardis remained potential rather than actual. The light was almost out, and the salt had lost its savor. The vitality of spiritual life at Sardis was so far gone that evidently even the heathen saw nothing to arouse their opposition. Perhaps the church had a good name in town as nice agreeable people who were willing to live and let live. Earlier the Lord had warned,

"Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you" (Luke 6:26).

Amid the almost unqualified censure which characterized the letter to Sardis, the only ray of hope lies in the paradox of dead-alive. To all appearances the fire was out, but there were a few sparks which again could be fanned into flame. However, there was no time to lose. "Thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (3:3). The spiritual eyes, setting in coma, must snap wide open with alertness (3:2). Several times in its history the acropolis at Sardis had fallen into enemy hands through lack of vigilance. A greater doom threatened the church. All manifestations of church life were at the point of death. Everything needed the supporting strength¹² of new life. This strengthening and establishing, for which Paul prayed and with which so much of his ministry was concerned (Acts 18:23; Romans 1:11; 16:25; 1 Thess. 3:2; etc.), was a prime need at Sardis.

How is all this to be accomplished? The "therefore," (3:3) resuming and coordinating as often in John's Gospel, introduces the cure. The first step at Sardis, as at Ephe-

¹²Sterison is "a technical word in primitive pastoralia." Swete, op. cit., p. 49.

sus (2:5), is "Remember!" Cyprian's frequent quotation of Rev. 2:5 in urging repentance on those who lapsed in the Decian persecution has a background of Scripture's remembrance theology. Zacharias sang of God's remembrance of His promise of mercy and "His holy covenant" (Luke 1:72). God's people are constantly urged to a responsive remembrance. Israel was not to forget that God's mighty hand had delivered them from Egypt. "And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 5:15). The Lord's lovingkindnesses, mercies and goodness are to be objects of memory (Is. 63:7). Christ's look caused Peter to remember-- and weep (Matt. 26:75). The sudden destruction which overtook Noah's world and Sodom will come upon many on the last day. Jesus attached the warning, "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32). God's call, then, is to remember His mercy and judgment. The certainty of them both is to produce the fruits of an obedient and faithful Christian life. For Sardis recovery will begin with memory. She is sent back to her first days, she is to remember what she had received and heard. The Gospel had been entrusted to Sardis and she has a continuing responsibility for it.

The faith is a trust, everyone who has it has received it. In the Lord's parables, the Gospel pound entrusted to

each servant was "delivered" (Luke 19:13) to him, and the service talents were "received" (Matt. 25:20ff.). Paul, rebuking Corinthian pride, reminds them that what they had, they had received from another (1 Cor. 4:7). The great Gospel truths--with special accent on the resurrection--which they had received from him, he also had received (1 Cor. 15:1,3). The Lord had written to Thyatira that the Messianic authority in which the conquering Christian shares, Christ Himself had received from the Father (2:27). Sardis, too, had received. There was a point of time (aorist) when she had heard the Gospel for the first time. Let memory recapture that day for her. Sick unto death, she is on the critical list. The first ingredient in the Divine Physician's prescription is "Remember!"

But it must be a certain kind of memory. This is not the confused memory of senility which remembers the past but is out of contact with the present. This is not the maudlin memory of escapism by which a church, fallen on evil days, lives enchantedly in the memories of a happier era. Nor is this the objective memory of an icy historicity. This is the memory of a present and personalized involvement in what has happened in the past--"I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for

me" (Gal. 2:20). Thus paying attention ("hold fast" 3:3) to their past, the Sardians will couple memory and repentance. Realizing the neglect which lies between the past and the present, they will turn from it.

Returning to the word with which He began His directive (3:2), the Lord repeats the need for an alert watchfulness (3:3), a word frequently on the Savior's lips in His last days with the Twelve (Mark 13:33,34,35,37; Matt. 24:42; 25:13; 26:41). Without it, at Sardis there will be none of the needed strengthening, remembering, keeping, and repenting so necessary because of Christ's return--this, too, has a Synoptic flavor--at an unknown hour.

But even Sardis had a few individuals who had not succumbed to the deadly stagnation. Neither the spiritual death damp which blanketed the congregation nor the accompanying moral torpor had reached them. Having "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14), they kept them unstained and undefiled, "hating even the garment spotted by the flesh" (Jude 23).

For these worthy ones the Lord has a triple promise. Walking unbesmirched in Sardis, they shall walk with Him who walks among the candlesticks. Theirs shall be the perfect purity of those in white robes before the Lamb (7:9).

Conquering, they shall be clothed in eternal victory. Sad-
dened now by their earthly surroundings, they shall one day
be robed in heavenly gladness. Secondly, having maintained
their spiritual life in the midst of death, they shall be
enrolled forever in the book of life. The civic register
at Sardis listed the names of the living citizens. God's
book, too, is a "book of the living" (Ps. 69:28) and con-
tains the names of the righteous, written not in the perish-
ing wax of that day, but with the indelible ink of God.
Finally, in a reminiscence of a promise made during His
earthly ministry that He would confess before His Father
and the angels of God (Matt. 10:32; Luke 12:8) those who
confess Him before men, Christ pledges to the faithful that
the enrollment in the book of life is not a mere paper
technicality, an honor roll gathering dust in some forgot-
ten corner of a storage cabinet. The conquering one will
be acknowledged as such--"I will confess his name before My
Father, and before His angels" (3:5).

In addressing the church at Sardis, the Lord designated
Himself as "He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the
seven stars" (3:1). At the beginning of the Apocalypse,
John's greeting to the seven churches from the Triune God
included grace and peace "from the seven Spirits which are

before His throne" (1:4). In the vision of the throne John saw "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God" (4:5). In the vision of the seven-sealed book John saw the living Lamb, bearing marks of slaughter, "having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth" (5:6). Christ's "eyes were as a flame of fire" (1:14). He possesses full power and full vision.

The churches are seven. Bearing the number of completeness, they are representative of the Church. Qualitatively, the Holy Spirit is also seven. Wherever the Church is, there is the Spirit in the fullness of His operations and influences, with His sanctifying fire (4:5). Christ, the Lamb, alone able to open the sealed book, has eyes of insight to penetrate into the mysteries of God (5:6). This penetration is for the benefit of the Church, therefore Christ sends His "eyes" into all the earth. His work in the world is done through the Spirit. In the upper room Christ had told the apostles that their witness of Him-- "and ye also shall bear witness" (John 15:27)--would flow from the Spirit's testimony. "The Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, He shall testify of Me" (John 15:26). Christ promises to send the Comforter, "whom

I will send unto you from the Father" (John 15:26). The Spirit's testimony concerning Christ reaches into the hearts of men and makes witnesses of them. The Spirit's tool and the Church's trust is the Word of reconciliation. Thus the Lord, who sends the Spirit through whose testimony men are made witnesses, rightfully claims these men as His own. He has "the seven stars" (3:3). The "holdeth" (2:1) becomes "hath" possibly because of the preceding "seven Spirits of God." However, some commentators distinguish between the "holdeth" of protection and the "hath" of possession.

This self-designation has relevance for the church at Sardis, which is practically dead in all but name. Her works are largely potential and all areas of church life are at the point of death, in desperate need of strengthening. As the life of the Spirit diminished at Sardis, so Sardis itself failed. The church must realize the cause of her condition, for diagnosis precedes the cure. At present the prognosis is negative and the writing of Sardis's epitaph is not far off. Congregational resolutions and committee reports are not sufficient. Sardis must wake up, strengthen, remember, and repent. These are Spirit-worked, for it is the Spirit that gives life. Sardis needs the Spirit, and Christ says that He has that Spirit. This is

warning to those who would rely on palliatives. For those sincerely concerned, this is assurance of a restored and renewed life through the Spirit.

Philadelphia

Founded as an outpost for the spread of Greek culture into Phrygia, Philadelphia dates back to Attalus II Philadelphus (159-138 B.C.), whose surname was given him in recognition of loyalty to his brother, Eumenes. The site of the city, about twenty-five miles east of Sardis, was on the lower slopes of Tmolus in a river valley (probably ancient Cogamus) tributary to that of the Hermus River. Located on the imperial post road which came from Rome by way of Troas, Pergamos, and Sardis, and on the direct route to the east from the port city of Smyrna, Philadelphia was the gateway to the highlands and plateau of central Asia Minor. It remained a Roman city until 1392 A.D., when it fell to the Turks.

Philadelphia experienced both the bane and the blessing of its location on the edge of a volcanic area. Called a city full of earthquakes by Strabo, it was seriously damaged by the earthquake of 17 A.D. Together with Sardis, it received assistance from Tiberius and recognized that aid

by adopting, at least for a time, the new name of Neocaesarea. Because of frequent earth tremors, many citizens lived in the open country adjoining the city. However, the fertile volcanic soil was the basis for the area's thriving grape-growing industry. Quite naturally, the chief pagan cult was devoted to Dionysus, god of vegetation, and especially of the vine.

Resembling Smyrna, Philadelphia was under no criticism from the Lord and experienced its greatest opposition at the hands of the Jews. As in the case of Smyrna, the letter is to strengthen hearts whose courage is an established fact, and to confirm the faithfulness of those whose loyalty is of long standing. Christ's letter to Philadelphia breathes Old Testament air and is marked by majesty, mercy, and pastoral tenderness.

The familiar "I know thy works"--missing only in the letters to Smyrna and Pergamos--heads the body of the letter. That phrase, measured and stern as a prelude to censure at Sardis, is the smile of the Lord's benediction over Philadelphia. He knew that the church had "little strength" (3:8)--perhaps both numerically and socially. Yet, it had kept Christ's Word and had not denied His name. This was the Lord's doing. Only thus can one explain the paradox of

strength where there is no strength, a stout-hearted keeping of Christ's Word where one would expect feeble knees, a firm refusal to deny His name where outward circumstances would predict but little resistance.

To "keep the Lord's Word" is brief in words but wide in range. The lax living, participation in the licentious idol feasts, heresies, and deadness which marked some of the churches are not in evidence at Philadelphia. A person's love for Christ, so He had said earlier, means that he "will keep My words" (John 14:23).

His Word the Lord also calls "the Word of My patience" (Rev. 3:10). Here is a reminiscence of Isaiah's suffering Servant whose patient endurance runs throughout the redemptive fabric. Peter wrote that "the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (2 Peter 3:15). Christians are called upon to reflect Christ's patient endurance as they run the race that is set before them (Heb. 12:1). In the Apocalypse the Christians echo their Lord's endurance--"Here is the patience and the faith of the saints" (13:10; 14:12). The Gospel, the good news of redemption through Christ's endurance which calls for endurance and supplies it to those that are Christ's, was kept by the Philadelphians. There was a preserving in teaching and preaching, and an

observing of it in daily living. The commendation continues, "and hast not denied My name" (3:8) by word nor by silence. This is the other side of the coin. To keep and confess, to hold and share, these go hand in glove as marks of faithfulness.

Just what occasions there were for letting go the Word and denying the name is not stated, nor need it be. Every Christian and every church is provided daily with Satanic opportunities. From the context, Philadelphia's pressure came mostly from the Jews, apt pupils of their demonic rabbi in the "synagogue of Satan" (3:9). Paul had previously described for the Romans what it means to be a genuine Jew (Rom. 2:28f.). The Christians at Philadelphia, as at Smyrna (2:9), must have been subject to blasphemy at the hands of spurious Jews who lacked the guilelessness of true Israelites. It is also possible that there were temptations from pagan sources to deny Christ's name--sprinkling the incense and saying "Lord Caesar."

But whatever the sources of pressure, the church had remained faithful. This loyalty was an achievement. But it was also the seed for a harvest beyond imagination. The fruit is three-fold. First, some of the pseudo-Jews--this would be almost unbelievable to the Philadelphians--will

prostrate themselves before the congregation. That Gentiles would come to Israel had been prophecied through Isaiah. Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Sabeans will say, "Surely God is in thee," (Is. 45:14) kings and queens will "bow down to thee," (Is. 49:23) and those that afflicted and despised Israel will "bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet" (Is. 60:14). But at Philadelphia members of the synagogue will bow before the Israel of God; those who had scorned the small-powered congregation will repent and join its fellowship; they that mocked the followers of "the hanged one" will acknowledge Him as their Lord and Christ. They will come--overcome by the Word. They are the Lord's gift (3:9) to the Philadelphia church. The Lord wants them also to know His love, a love which goes to the indefinite past (aorist), a love voiced centuries before to Israel (Is. 43:4), the love of the great heart of God in four words--"I have loved thee."

The second promise concerns the hour of trial which is coming. The final conflict, prior to the Parousia, will be preceded by many trials; the particular crisis is typical of many, in the view of the future held by the apostolic age and by Christ, who spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world in the same breath. The im-

perial persecution had begun when John wrote. There will be an intensification and expansion of the present distress. When it comes, they who have been faithful to the Word of Christ's endurance will, in the strength of it, also endure. Rooted in Christ, they will not be uprooted by "the hour." And if the hour is coming, let them remember that He, too, is coming. In the perennial crisis of trials they have the perpetual assurance of His coming. Endurance is needed only for the Advent season, and that will not be long. The promise, "Behold, I come quickly," (3:11) is underlined three times in the final chapter (22:7,12,20) so that the Church may be in a constant state of expectancy.

The promise, as always, involves a responsibility. Humanly speaking, there is the possibility of falling from grace. There must be no false sense of security. The Gospel, the product of Christ's endurance, is to be held with firmness. The competition for the crown is keen. Their neighbors to the east had started well--"Ye did run well" (Gal. 5:7)--but fell back. This must not happen at Philadelphia. "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain" (1 Cor. 9:24). They had shown patience thus far. Let them finish "with patience the race that is set before

us" (Heb. 12:1).

The final promise of Christ--addressed to the individual members, as at the end of each letter--is a pledge that the conqueror will be "a pillar in the temple of My God" (3:12). John knows (21:22) that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem, but he uses the picture to portray the security, permanence, and privileged communion which they will enjoy in the presence of God. The church would understand. The priest in the imperial cult, upon completion of his term of office, would set up his statue in the temple court, hoping to achieve prolonged communion with the power of the god. But the earthquake-conscious Philadelphians knew that these pillars moved and fell and that devotees of the pagan gods sometimes fled in fear. The conquerors in Christ are assured that theirs will be the enduring stability of a pillar in the eternal temple of God. For those who often left the city as it tottered under the force of earth tremors, it would be good to know that they "shall go no more out" (3:12). Christ "went forth" from the Father so that those in Christ need never again go forth. Theirs is a permanent place in God's hall of fame.

The pagan temple pillars often had three inscriptions--the priest's name, his father's name, and his own birthplace.

Upon the heavenly pillar there will be a triple inscription, "the name of My God," "the name of the city of My God," and "My new name" (3:12). To know the name of a deity meant to share in his power, to call upon him successfully, and to enjoy his security and protection. The conqueror shall not only know the name of the living God; it will be imprinted on him. Perhaps there is an allusion to the Old Testament (Num. 6:27) and the priestly blessing by which the name of God was "put on" every Israelite. In the New Testament Paul writes that those who are Christ's epistles are "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Cor. 3:3).

The second name is that of the new Jerusalem (cf. 21:2). At the writing of the Apocalypse the old Jerusalem already lay in the dust of two decades. The new Jerusalem is to be truly new, not a rebuilt city, not recent in origin, but "new" with the quality of endless youth, undiminished in power, unfading in joy. Christians already bear the name of the city of God. "Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26). It is true now that "our conversation [i.e., the city in which we hold citizenship] is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). Still to come, however, is the full proclamation of this inalienable

citizenship, the final confirmation of the privileged membership in the society of the redeemed, and the complete realization of the joy already possessed "because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

The final portion of the inscription is "My new name" (3:12), a name which only Christ Himself knows (19:12). Now we know in part, also with reference to our knowledge of Christ, His person and work. To the conqueror is promised the newness of a fuller understanding of Him whose name he already bears, a deeper perception of the mystery of the God-man, a heightened appreciation of Christ's redemption, and a full fellowship with Him.

This, then is the new name promised to the Christian. His first name is that of God, his heavenly Father. The middle name is "new Jerusalem," his goal and destination. His surname is the new name of Jesus, through whose redemptive work all this is his.

Four times the Lord uses the expression, "My God"-- "the temple of My God," "the name of My God," "the name of the city of My God," "from My God" (3:12). What is God's belongs to him who conquers.

Christ's salutation to the church at Philadelphia designates the letter as coming from Him "that is holy . . .

that is true . . . that hath the key of David" (3:7). Christ is the holy One, He is characterized by the absolute sanctity of God, whose divine title (Hab. 3:3; Is. 40:25) He applies to Himself. This is Messianic. He who was the accursed One hanging on a tree (Gal. 3:13), is the very essence of holiness and the source of our holiness. During His earthly ministry, following the defection of many disciples, the Lord accepted Peter's Messianic description, "the holy One of God."¹³

Christ, absolute holiness, is also characterized by absolute truth (cf. 3:14; 19:11). The emphasis is on His reality and genuineness. He is all that He claims to be in contrast to approximations and imitations. Paul placed in contrast the service of "the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9) and the service of idols. When Christ's deity was challenged, He replied, "He that sent Me is true, whom ye know not. But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He hath sent Me" (John 7:28f.).

The Old Testament tone of the Messianic description continues, "He that hath the key of David" (3:7). The expression certainly comes from Isaiah 22:22 (cf. 2 Kings

¹³Nestle's text, John 6:69.

18:18ff.) and the prediction of Eliakim's succession to the office of governor of the palace under Hezekiah. The key symbolizes the authority of his office. Eliakim is the antitype of Christ, who is "a son over His own house, whose house are we" (Heb. 3:6). The "key of David" I take to be both Messianic and eschatological. This is the key of the Messianic kingdom and the door to the new Jerusalem. Christ, the holy One and the true One, exercises His kingly office and administers the affairs of His kingdom.

The picture of the open door was familiar to the apostolic age. God "opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). Paul stayed at Ephesus until Pentecost because "a great door" (1 Cor. 16:9) of mission opportunity was opened to him. A door for Christ's Gospel was opened at Troas (2 Cor. 2:12). Paul asked the Colossians to pray for an open "door of utterance" (Col. 4:3).

But here both contexts (Is. 22 and Rev. 3) underscore the idea of power and dominion. Christ is God, with the titles of God; He is David's greater Son, the Messiah. The Philadelphians, to be sure, had open doors of mission work. God opens such doors according to the measure of our entering. The geographical location of the city, the faithfulness of the church, and the "hour of temptation" provided

their own opportunities for Christian witness. But this is derivative from the royal authority of the holy One of God who has the key to the kingdom and provides access to God. Primarily, the opened door is the door to the kingdom, the eschatological promise of assured salvation.

Christ's triple self-designation, with its Old Testament background, as the holy One, the true One, and He who has the key of David, has two points of reference to the faithful church at Philadelphia--their small strength and the Jewish opposition. The Jews claimed God, the holy One, as their Father. Over against their taunts and for the comfort of the Christians, the Lord asserts His claim to full deity. God is the holy One, and so is Christ. With pride the Jews pointed to their organization--but it was the unholy synagogue of Satan. The church of the Christians had a humble exterior, but the Lord they worship is the holy One and they are members of His majestic kingdom.

For the congregation of "little strength" that often heard the charge of "imposter," it would be reassuring to hear the Lord say that He is the true and genuine One. It is the Jews, with their claim to being the true Israel, who are liars. Christ is the real One. Because He is true, also true are the grand promises He gives the church--

strength for "the hour," the conversion of the Jews, and the hope of heaven. All efforts to cut the Christians from Christ's reign will be futile.

Christ, the Messiah, has the key of David. At Philadelphia it was a constant Jewish claim that they were the sons of Abraham and the descendants of David. The Christians are to know the illegitimacy of that claim. Christ holds the key, the kingdom is His. Even the delegated authority given to the apostles leaves the supreme power of opening and shutting in His own hands. He has the authority, and He is in charge. Even the enemies have their place in His plan. The Christians with their little potency shall remember that Christ's omnipotence is at work.

For the benefit of the young man who could not see the protective horses and chariots of fire, Elisha prayed, "Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17). For the Philadelphians Christ open their eyes of faith to the keeping power that comes with knowing that "they that be with us are more than they that be with them" (2 Kings 7:16).

Paul supplied a list (Romans 8:35) of things that might conceivably separate Christ's from Christ. To that list the Philadelphians can add two items--their own small strength and the power of the enemies. But when they go on to say,

"I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers," (Romans 8:38) they shall pause to add, "nor the smallness of our own power, nor the greatness of the adversary's strength," "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Laodicea

Known successively as Diospolis and Rhoas, Laodicea was enlarged and improved by Antiochus II Theos (264-246 B.C.) and renamed in honor of his wife Laodice. Situated about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia, Laodicea was built on a series of low hills in the Lycus valley, two miles south of the river and nine miles east of the juncture with the Meander. The city was backed to the south by the snow-capped range of the Cadmus; to the north, across the river, lay Hierapolis. The three cities, Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae formed a triangle with sides of approximately five miles. Politically, Laodicea was the capital of jurisdictio Cibyratica, one of the most important jurisdictions which formed the divisions of the Asian province under Roman administration.

Economically, Laodicea's distinguishing mark was wealth.

The Lycus valley was fertile and the city was a trade center. Highways came to it from Philadelphia and Ephesus to the west, Dorylaeum in the far north, and Attalia, the Pamphylian port city on the Mediterranean, to the south. As a sort of Wall Street, Laodicea enjoyed a brisk banking business. Cicero cashed his treasury bills there during his Cilician proconsulship and recommended its banks. A black, fine-textured wool from a breed of sheep peculiar to the area brought in a good deal of revenue by way of the carpet and cloth industries. The physicians of a medical school prepared an eye salve, "Phrygian powder," which was known throughout the empire. Hot medicinal springs at nearby Hierapolis made the area famous as a spa. The banking, medical, and weaving activities of Laodicea all form points of reference in the Apocalypse letter. An indication of the opulence of the city lies in the fact that it did not request the customary imperial subsidy when severely damaged in the earthquakes of 60-61 A.D.

One reads very little about religion at Laodicea--the Phrygian god, Men, had a temple there--probably because the city was too engrossed with the goddess "Cash," whose coins might well have been inscribed, "In her we trust." Wealth was the distinguishing mark of the city; conformity and its

twin, mediocrity, were the problem of the church.

The early existence of the Christian church at Laodicea may have been due to the large number of Jews in the city. It is interesting to note that Phrygian Jews were in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Paul's letter to the Colossians casts some light on the Laodicean church, which may have been founded by Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12f.). Though, at the time of writing, Paul apparently had not visited the churches in the Lycus valley, he expressed a personal and prayerful solicitude for them (Col. 2:1). Greetings at the close of his letter include the words, "Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house" (Col. 4:15). Paul also urged the congregations at Colossae and Laodicea to exchange letters. There is a tradition that Paul, during his later ministry, wrote his first letter to Timothy from Laodicea.

The last of the seven churches is the weakest--there is not a word of commendation from the Lord--and, at the same time, it receives the strongest promise together with the Lord's touching appeal in which He portrays Himself as still knocking at the door of their hearts.

The Laodicean church was neither frigid nor boiling ("boiled") hot. The "fervent in spirit" was missing--both

the burning zeal of Apollos (Acts 18:25) and the spiritual glow which Paul urged on the Romans (12:11). There is no energetic warmth in their religious life, no hot zeal against the paganism of their surroundings. They had lost the power to make moral and spiritual distinctions. The hot springs of Hierapolis, whose waters had become lukewarm by the time they flowed into the Lycus directly across the river from Laodicea, served as a fitting illustration of the church's spiritual condition. Christ prefers the frigid indifference of those as yet unthawed by the Gospel to those who once were heated by it but now have cooled to a nauseating tepidity whose only possible use is as an emetic. If the fire had not been lighted at all it would be better than the present smoking, ash-choked embers. "They were literally citizens of nowhere, for they had lost that land of the spirit, in which the home of the soul is to be found."¹⁴ Their flag was in bad shape, and they had no country over which to wave it. Christianity at Laodicea had degenerated to a formal observance.

Still worse than the Laodiceans' tepidness was their willingness to stay that way. Pride of wealth in the com-

¹⁴George Buttrick, The Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), XII, 396.

munity had become a smug self-satisfaction in the church. Moreover, their complacency had bred self-deception. But the Lord knows (3:15) even if they do not, and He speaks in words of iron and irony, as Paul did to the Corinthians, "Now ye are full, now ye are rich" (1 Cor. 4:8). The Laodiceans had gotten rich and felt that wealth was their due. They were self-made men. Thus the church brags--in its ignorance. Refugees from Communist countries say, "We have lost everything, except God." The Laodiceans should have said, "We have everything, except Christ"--but did not. They thought they needed nothing, when, in their wretched and pitiable condition, they needed everything. The true wealth amid material poverty at Smyrna (2:9) is reversed at Laodicea, where spiritual poverty existed in the midst of material plenty. With fat accounts at the bank, they were bankrupt. They had the terrible blindness of those that will not see. Spiritually paralyzed, their nerves carried no message of cold, even though they were naked. At Laodicea the seen was preferred to the unseen, the temporal had outlawed the eternal. They thought they possessed the best of two worlds, but they had sacrificed everything to one.

To prod them awake, the Lord has some stinging advice. They frequently sought the counsel of bankers and money

changers. He counsels that they buy--of Him and "without money," (Is. 55:1)--the genuine and dross-free gold of true faith. In the non-canonical sayings of Jesus, the Agrapha, Jesus counsels Christians to be "experienced money changers" who accept no counterfeits. The Laodiceans, wise in banking and avid for possessions, were to be "rich in faith" (James 2:5). A faith tried in the fire, a faith "rich in good works," (1 Tim. 6:18) will be "unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:7).

The Laodiceans were proud of their carpet industry and the woolen goods woven from fine black wool which was a specialty of the area. But not all the products of the Laodicean looms will cover the nakedness of their tepidness nor the shame of their sham devotion to the Lord. They have plenty of black wool, but they need the white robe of Christ's righteousness; they need to "put on Christ," (Gal. 3:27) and display a life in Him unspotted by the world.

They scan the apothecary shops for the best in Phrygian powder, but they are looking out of blind eyes. They need the illumination of the Holy Spirit who can convince (John 16:8) them of their blindness and restore their spiritual vision. Let them seek Christ's gifts--the gold, the white raiment, the eye salve--no matter what the cost in self-

esteem or personal ease. Their price tags need to be re-studied. The things the Laodiceans now count gain they must learn to count as loss for Christ.

The Lord's words are sharp, but they come from a friend who has a genuine affection for them. In view of their condition, acquiescence would be a disservice. He has not grown silent, and for that they should rejoice. He rebukes and chastens, with word and deed he confronts them with sin in order to call them to repentance. At Ephesus (2:5) and Sardis (3:5) the call had been for remembrance and repentance. Here it is "be zealous therefore, and repent" (3:19). At Laodicea the simple Gospel had been lost under a suave mediocrity; the ruggedness of the cross had disappeared under the polish of society; and the love for the Lord had waned as the love for finery had waxed gross. The Laodiceans need the zest of dzestos (3:15).

This appeal is based on the tender pastoral portrait of Christ at the door. This seems to me a picture of the urgency of Christ's Gospel call rather than of the Parousia. He who received sinners and ate with them wants the Laodiceans to enjoy free and full fellowship with Him. Earlier, Christ had answered a question concerning his self-manifestation to the apostles with the same picture (John 14:23). He contin-

ually reveals Himself as the calling One. His sheep hear His voice.

He who hears and opens will conquer and will share the glory and power of Christ's throne. "I have overcome the world," (John 16:33) was the comfort of Maundy Thursday evening. "I also overcame" (Rev. 3:21) looks back on the historical fact of His victory, complete, and abiding in its effects. Thyatira, too, had received the promise of sharing in Christ's Messianic rule which He had received from His Father (2:27). God's throne is Christ's throne, and what is Christ's belongs also to them who are His. Long before, David had put it this way, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool" (Ps. 110:1).

In addressing the Laodiceans, Christ designates Himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God" (3:14). The lofty title of God, "the God of truth," (Is. 65:16) Christ applies to Himself. During His ministry, "verily, verily" was often the prelude to His solemn pronouncements. He is the personal Amen, the assurance of the truth, the validity of His testimony.

The Apocalypse was given through John who bare record "of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). The trinitarian

salutation included grace and peace "from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness" (1:5). He who was born to "bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37) flatly stated, "My record is true" (John 8:14). To the church at Philadelphia He wrote as "He that is holy, He that is true" (3:7). He is the genuine One whose testimony never falls short of the truth. He that sits upon the throne dictates words that "are true and faithful" (21:5).

The Laodiceans, who were greeted by Paul (Col. 4:15) and were to exchange letters with the Colossians, might recall the description of Christ as "the firstborn of every creature . . . who is the beginning . . . that in all things He might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:15,18). This preexistent Christ, who had made peace through the blood of His cross, wants neither the Colossians nor the Laodiceans to be "moved away from the hope of the Gospel" (Col. 1:23). Christ is not first of the creatures, but "the uncreated principle of creation, from which it took its origin."¹⁵

What value would there be for the lukewarm church in knowing that the letter came from "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God"

¹⁵Swete, op. cit., p. 59.

(3:14)? Christ's concern is to induce repentance in a smugly contented church. He selects names designed to rouse the Laodiceans from their lethargy and to awaken them to an understanding of their peril. Over against the sham, neither-nor religion of the Laodiceans, Christ is the Amen. You know where He stands. He confronts their weakness with His certainty. His authoritative title has a built-in antithesis to their vacillation. In the compromising church there is an increasing lack of principle. In contrast thereto, Christ is the one real standard.

Some years ago the negro cult leader, "Father Divine," enjoyed hearing his followers sing their theme song, "He's got the world in a jug and the stopper's in his hand." The words would be different at Laodicea but the idea that they were captains of their destiny was the same. Christ would have them know otherwise. He is the Lord of creation, not a part of it. "He is not so much the beginning of creation as the beginner of it."¹⁶ The vaunted superiority claimed by Laodicea must fall before the preeminence of Him who is the beginning of the beginning, "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6; 22:13). Laodicea's gold, eye-salve,

¹⁶Herbert Wernecke, The Book of Revelation Speaks to Us (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), p. 64.

and wool are but a small portion of the total creation which is subject to Him with whom it all began.

The scene of the first three chapters of the Apocalypse is one of great activity, God and men are at work. The portrait of Christ covers a large canvas. In majestic pigments He appears as the authoritative Lord of the churches and the Church, the Son of God, the first and the last, the Amen, the beginning of the creation of God. In redemptive hues He is pictured as the Messiah who came to die and rise and live forever so that He might establish David's eternal kingdom to which He Himself holds the key. In bright colors of activity, He is portrayed as providing life for the Church through His gift-laden Spirit, purging that life with the double-edged sword of His Word, evaluating everything with omniscient eyes of fire, and destroying His enemies under flaming feet.

All this has as its goal that men might be conquerors and enjoy His full and eternal fellowship. Forever protected against the second death, they will be clothed in white and sustained by the hidden manna and the tree of life. Having as their permanent possession the white stone and the new name, they will be enrolled indelibly in the book of life and proclaimed by Christ before God and the holy

angels. As permanent pillars in the temple of God who bear the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem, and the new name of Christ, they will be further honored by a share in Christ's throne and in His power over the nations.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

This study began with the assumption "that the Bible is the Word of God, that an inspiration without words is unthinkable, that the seven letters are from Christ Himself, and that He has a reason for every word, including the words about Himself." When we then ask whether there is a connection between the self-designations of Christ and the letters to the churches, the answer must, ideally at least, be a foregone conclusion. If we believe that God had a reason for using the singular "Seed" and that He had a reason for Paul's reference to it, then there is no idle word in the Word. We can only imagine the marvelous unity that must certainly exist in that which we now only see darkly, as in a glass.

The Bible, a product of God's printshop, comes from flawless type and is a perfect typographical product. The reading lamp is beyond compare and provides glorious illumination. The problem lies with us. We hold the Book at a wrong angle and the light, designed to illuminate, glares. And so our reading limps, we mispronounce words, we miss entire lines.

Therefore, the relationship between Christ's self-designations and the contents of the letters, as presented in these pages, must of necessity be an earth-bound and distorted echo of the perfect harmony that exists when He who writes fully knows both Himself and His Church to whom He writes.

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