

The Seven Churches of Revelation

John is instructed to write the vision down, sending word to the angels of the seven churches in Asia Minor. As seven is a symbolic number for completeness or wholeness, as it would be easy to see these churches as merely symbolic, especially as the letter identifies itself as prophecy (1:3, 19:10, 22:7,10,18-19). Yet, knowledge of the cities to whom John write shows a very definite connection between the words of the vision and the historical circumstances of the places to which he writes.

For example: In 2:10, John writes to the church in Smyrna, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." The word for crown here is "stephanos" the Greek for the laurel wreath given to the victor in the ancient Olympic-like games held at Smyrna.



In 2:17, John specifically writes to the church in Pergamum, "on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it." This stone would have to be an import as Pergamum was known for the very dark stone quarried there.

Verse 2:20 mentions the Prophet Jezebel, when there was a prophetic renewal movement in the area in which female prophets played a major role.

In 3:15, John writes that Laodicea is neither hot nor cold, yet the city was known for its warm water supply, piped down from nearby hot springs. 3:17, has the people of that church say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" when the town was well known to have refused the emperor's aid in rebuilding after an earthquake in 61 A.D. Also, 3:18 mentions an eye salve and the area was famous for its Phrygian eye powder, a doughy paste said to cure eye problems.



So however we read chapters 2 and 3, our interpretation must take into account the fact that these references would have made sense to the churches in each of these cities. Yet, an understanding of the text does not require that one fully understand those historic references. For example, the teachings of the Nicolaitans (mentioned in 2:6) have been lost to time, but that does not hurt our understanding that the church in Ephesus was praised for standing up for the faith in the face of a heretical teaching.

The Cult of the Emperor



The idea of worshipping the emperor as a god, seems to have come into the west through Alexander the Great's conquering of eastern peoples who already saw their emperors as divine. Rome embraced this notion to varying degrees with some emperor's allowing the practice (Nero) and other actively encouraging it (Caligula). If the dating of Revelation to Domitian (81-96 A.D.) is correct, it is significant to note that he reinvigorated the cult of the emperor. Everyone who addressed Domitian in person was to begin "Lord and God" and he put the power of the Roman Legions behind his enforcement of religious veneration. To refuse to honor Domitian as a god was an act of treason, and this idea seems to have had broad grass roots support. Emperor

worship was both as mundane and important as pledging allegiance to the flag. As Romans were polytheists, it did not present a religious crisis for them to worship their emperor as a god and they viewed those who would not do so (primarily Jews and Christians) as atheists.

In this setting, Eugene Boring, in his commentary on the Book of Revelation, cites six typical responses, of which John only found one to be acceptable:

1. **Quit:** Many Christians found that their new-found faith cost them their reputations, jobs, freedom and risked their lives and so they quit the faith.
2. **Lie:** Other Christians felt that as the Romans did not understand the Christian faith, they should not die for a misunderstanding. They would then go through the ceremonies honoring the emperor, mentally crossing their fingers considering true religion to be a matter of the heart.
3. **Fight:** Armed resistance was an option to which some Christians were tempted to appeal, though there is no evidence that this ever took place after the zealot movement within Judaism was killed off in the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 A.D.
4. **Change the Law:** This was a theoretical possibility, to work within the state of Rome for change. In fact, change in Christian-Roman relations did come with the Emperor Constantine in the 300s, but it was not a viable option under Domitian in 95 A.D.
5. **Adjust:** Many Christians chose to adjust their faith to their time and place and attempted to incorporate emperor worship and other pagan practices into their Christian faith.
6. **Die:** Other Christians chose to be faithful unto death and this was the only option which John's vision validated as a truly Christian response.

The vision of Revelation is written to the churches of Asia Minor as Christians are deciding how they will respond to the tension created between the demands of the Cult of the Emperor and the absolute loyalty demanded by faith in Jesus Christ.