

# Letters to the seven churches: historical or prophetic?

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[published in *Ministry* magazine, November 2007: 12-15]

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Does the historicist interpretation that the seven churches of Revelation represent the entire sweep of church history over seven historic periods really make sense?<sup>1</sup> That these letters are ultimately addressed to everyone becomes clear from the admonition at the end of each letter: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."<sup>2</sup> If these letters are for everyone, why does it matter whether or not the seven churches represent seven prophetic periods? More perplexing still, why would Jesus seem to give every indication that He wrote these letters to real Christian congregations in Asia Minor if He really intended them to be understood quite differently, as prophetic depictions of the church throughout history?

From the historicist point of view, these letters could not really be understood until hundreds of years later rather than during the historical times they describe. But wouldn't such a position be reading history back into the Bible rather than accepting what appears to be the obvious meaning of the text? This objection needs to be taken seriously since it suggests, as preferable, a preterist interpretation that the first few chapters of Revelation, if not the whole book, apply to the first-century churches.

First, we will look at whether or not these letters were meant to be read like other letters found in the New Testament. Next, we will look at some textual clues which seem to suggest that the letters should be read prophetically. Finally, we will discuss whether or not these letters should be read *primarily* as a prophetic portrayal of the church rather than as ordinary letters to churches in the Asia Minor of John's day.

## Like other New Testament letters?

The opening chapter of Revelation describes Jesus appearing in vision to John on the island of Patmos and commanding him to write what he was about to see to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11). Even though the letters to these churches take up just two chapters (Rev. 2 and 3), Jesus actually addresses the whole book to them (Rev. 1:4; 22:16). So, if we restrict the application of these letters to the local churches of Asia Minor, why not the whole book? A failure to recognize this connection of Revelation as a whole with the seven churches is one obvious problem with a strictly local application of Revelation 2 and 3.

**A careful study of the text shows that these are no ordinary letters, and they cannot even compare with the other inspired letters of the New Testament.** First, unlike the New Testament epistles that were written by the apostles, the letters in Revelation do not come from John but from Jesus Himself as the opening lines of each letter make clear. In harmony with ancient practice, each letter begins by identifying the author of the letter but, unlike the epistles, Jesus identifies Himself as the Author using the apocalyptic language employed in John's earlier description of Him while closely connecting the letters with the book's opening vision (Rev. 2:1, 8, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; cf. 1:9–20). Second, Jesus *dictates* them to John, telling him at the beginning of each letter to “write” and using phraseology in Greek that emphasizes their divine origin and authority.<sup>3</sup> Some even refer to these letters as “prophetic oracles” in order to distinguish them from the epistles.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars from different denominational backgrounds have long recognized that the letters to the seven churches pertain to more than just local issues. As one commentator observes, the fixed structure and symmetry of the letters “betray a purpose that goes beyond ethical instruction to seven particular churches in the Roman province of Asia.”<sup>5</sup> Also, the content shows that the letters concern more than just the given congregation as they share in common several themes.

Jesus' desire for a close relationship with His church expresses one of these themes. The church of Ephesus has left its first love (Rev. 2:4), reminiscent of how the classical prophets describe Israel's departure from God (e.g., Jer. 2:2; 3:1; Hos. 2:12–15). Jesus assures the church in Smyrna that He knows their suffering and poverty and encourages them to be faithful until death (Rev. 2:9, 10; cf. 1:5). Those in Pergamum are commended for “holding fast” to the name of Christ and not denying their faith in Him (Rev. 2:13). Jesus commends Thyatira for its love, faith, and service to Him and reproves them for tolerating Jezebel, who always leads many away from Him and into idolatrous practices (Rev. 2:19, 20). Those in Sardis who do not defile their garments can look forward to walking with Christ in white (Rev. 3:4). The church in Philadelphia has a special bond with Jesus because they have not denied His name and have kept the word of His patience. Jesus also says of those who do not have such a relationship with Him, “ ‘they will learn that I have loved you’ ” (Rev. 3:8, 9). By contrast, the church of Laodicea continues in their lukewarm attitude to Jesus (Rev. 3:16). Nevertheless, He knocks and waits, longing for a deeper, closer relationship with His people (Rev. 3:20).

Another important theme is the genuineness of one's profession. Several letters refer to false claims of being apostles or Jews (Rev. 2:2, 9; 3:9). The Jezebel in Thyatira calls herself a prophetess but leads the church astray. And then comes a more general warning: “ ‘all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve’ ” (Rev. 2:23). As for Sardis, it has a name of being alive but is in fact dead (Rev. 3:1). Worst of all, Laodicea, as self-deceived, thinking itself rich and in need of nothing, does not recognize itself as actually poor and in need of everything, even clothing (Rev. 3:17). Related to the need for genuineness is the concern over false teachers, including Balaam, the Nicolaitans, Jezebel, and those who focus on the “deep things” of Satan (Rev. 2:14, 15, 20, 24). By contrast, Christ's followers should be like Him—faithful witnesses (Rev. 2:13; 3:14).

These themes of relationship, genuineness of profession, and giving a faithful witness can be seen as applicable in every place and at all times, not just for a particular first-century church. At the same time, of course, these letters also held historical significance for the local churches in these locations, since they so clearly display a knowledge of the history, topography, and economics of these cities and utilize this information to address the needs of Christians there. **But might not these cities and**

their characteristics be also intended symbolically like much of the rest of the book?

### Only historical or also prophetic?

A careful reading of Revelation suggests that the seven churches have a significance beyond a local application to congregations that have long since perished. In Revelation 1:19 Jesus commands John to write down what he saw (a clear reference to John's vision of Jesus in vv. 11–16), as well as “ ‘what is, and what is to take place after this.’ ” **Ostensibly this would suggest that these letters deal with the condition of the churches both in John's day and in the future.** Confirmation of this may be seen from the explicit indication of sequence in chapter 4. Jesus, having just finished dictating the letters to the churches, carries John in vision from earth to heaven and begins revealing to him “ ‘what must take place after this’ ” (Rev. 4:1). **At this point in the book, attention shifts away from the present and future toward a more exclusive focus on the future only.**

As the sidebar diagram illustrates, the book of Revelation can be read as comprising two principal visions, each of which contains prophetic messages from Jesus.<sup>6</sup> The first vision, set on earth, shows Jesus walking among seven lampstands, symbolizing the seven churches (Rev. 1:12, 13, 20) and dictating to John messages for these churches (Rev. 2:1–3:22). The second vision, set in heaven, seems to show heaven's involvement in events on earth that affect the church: the Lamb opening seven seals, angels who stand before God blowing seven trumpets, and angels coming out from the heavenly temple and pouring out seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth. The climax of the book pictures the physical reunion of God and His people. Marking the end of the separation between heaven and earth that was caused by sin is the solemn pronouncement by the Alpha and the Omega: “It is accomplished.”<sup>7</sup> With this as the only time in the visionary portion of Revelation when the Alpha and Omega speaks, highlighting the importance of the verse for the narrative's development becomes apparent. The goal to which the entire book presses is here finally achieved.

Viewing the book as two principal visions, which depict the divine work of reuniting heaven and earth, underscores the claim made from the beginning, that the book is a revelation from Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1). It also helps us recognize that the letters to the seven churches, with their repeated call to hear and understand, intend not only to encourage readers to pay attention to the message of a given letter **but also to prepare readers for comprehending chapters 4–22.**<sup>8</sup>

### Apocalyptic character of the letters

The prominence given to these letters, in terms of the overall structure of the book, as well as the fact that they constitute the first of Revelation's four series of sevens, **suggests that they may also have a prophetic significance.** As with the seals, trumpets, and bowls, the number seven points to comprehensiveness in the case of the churches not only geographically but also temporally.<sup>9</sup> **There were other churches and more prominent ones in the Asia Minor of John's time,** such as Troas, Miletus, Colossae, and Hierapolis, to name a few (Acts 20:6, 17; Col. 1:2; 2:1; 4:13). Yet, considering the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, it is striking that arguably the *least significant* among them, namely Thyatira, has a letter far longer than any of the others. Also, **the chiasmic arrangement of the seven letters lends further credence to the notion that they are intended for a broader application.**<sup>10</sup>

**Most significantly, the fact that apocalyptic imagery and ideas permeate each letter leads the reader to suspect that the churches themselves are meant to be**

**understood symbolically as well and that the letters, like the rest of the book, should be interpreted as apocalyptic prophecy.** Each letter begins with language from the initial vision of Jesus in chapter 1, which itself recalls the apocalyptic language of Daniel (7:9, 13; 10:5–12). Imagery in the body of the letters, such as the lampstand being removed, the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, hidden manna, new names, Jezebel, the rod of iron, the morning star, white garments, gold, eye salve, open and closed doors are all clearly symbolic. Closer study of these symbols reveals an intimate connection with (and prepares readers to understand) the later chapters widely accepted as apocalyptic.

## **A prophetic portrayal of the church**

Viewing the letters to the seven churches as apocalyptic and applicable until the end opens the possibility of their being treated not only as historical but also as *prophetic*. This means that their message, with the primary purpose of predictive prophecy to strengthen faith, becomes especially relevant for the end time (John 13:19). Many Christian interpreters through the centuries have understood these letters as prophetic of the condition of the church in successive ages from the first century to the end, and some today continue to do so.<sup>11</sup> Within the limited confines of this article it is possible only to sketch in broad strokes certain features of these letters to illustrate the appropriateness of applying them prophetically. These chapters deserve further study along these lines.

The letters begin with the description of a “first love” experience, fitting of the apostolic age but already waning by the time John wrote. And they conclude with a view of materialistic abundance so characteristic of the church in the modern age. Interestingly, only in the letter to Ephesus that heads the list do we find the mention of people claiming to be apostles (Rev. 2:2), a problem of the first-century church evident from references elsewhere in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> The persecution described in connection with Smyrna fits well with Rome's persecution of Christians in the early centuries<sup>13</sup> that was followed by the assimilation of the pagan Roman culture into Christianity,<sup>14</sup> evidently reflected in the syncretistic tendencies plaguing Pergamum and Thyatira. The letter to Thyatira, notable for its length, fits well the long period of church dominance during the Middle Ages. As a counterpoint to this dominance, the victor in Thyatira is specifically promised *rule over the nations*. Significantly, in this letter we first hear of “faith” and “love” and that Thyatira's *last works* exceed the first ones—a description that fits well the onset of the Reformation (Rev. 2:19). Also at this point in the series of letters, we see a “remnant” beginning to form (Rev. 2:24). By the time of Sardis, however, reforms have stalled and appear near death.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the appellations with which Jesus describes Himself to the Philadelphian and Laodicean churches, rather than pointing backward to chapter 1, point forward to judgment and the Second Advent. In connection with the letter to Philadelphia, the description of Jesus as “holy” and “true” compares closely to that of the One to whom the martyrs under the altar cry out under the fifth seal for vindication (Rev. 6:10). The “key” and “open door,” alluding to Isaiah 22:22, are apparent references to the intercessory ministry of Jesus,<sup>16</sup> suggested already by the description of Jesus in priestly attire walking among the sanctuary lampstands (Rev. 1:13; cf. Exod. 25:31–35; Lev. 24:4; 1 Kings 7:49; Heb. 9:2). To Laodicea, Jesus stands at the door, “which means in the language of the New Testament that the end is near (Matt. 24:33; Mark 13:29),”<sup>17</sup> and the fellowship meal points to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7–9). The description of Jesus as “faithful and true” (both of which are connoted by the Hebrew word “*Amen*”) compares similarly to the description of the One coming on a white horse to judge righteously and make war (Rev. 19:11). Many examples, such as these mentioned in connection with Laodicea, demonstrate the close connection between the apocalyptic imagery of the letters and later chapters of Revelation. Sometimes the connection appears by way of contrast: The period of the Laodicean church corresponds to that of the “remnant” of Revelation 12:17. **Understanding Revelation 2 and 3 as a prophetic portrayal of God's visible**

**church throughout history provides interpretative help for the later chapters.** The final image of the faithful remnant must be balanced by the humbling image of blind and naked Laodicea.

Despite this perceptible progression in the seven letters toward an increasing focus on the end time, the first-century perspective of the imminent return of Jesus continues to figure throughout them in some way. Already the emphasis on the nearness of the Second Advent is prepared for in the inaugural vision. In Revelation 1:17 Jesus says, “I am the first and last.” And likewise in Revelation 22:12, 13, “See, I am coming soon; ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” The letters themselves refer several times to the “coming” of Christ and yet give no clue as to *when* that coming might be or even *how soon* it might be (Rev. 2:5, 16, 22, 23; 3:3, 11). The book of Revelation quite definitely maintains that it is in a little while (1:1; 22:6), near (1:3; 22:10), and soon (2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). At the same time, the end is only contemplated in connection with Christ’s return, not before.

## Conclusion

The letters to the seven churches are distinctly different from the New Testament epistles in that they come from Jesus Himself and, when viewed together as a group, display a stylized structure, chiasmic symmetry, and universally applicable themes. These features suggest that the letters are concerned with more than matters of merely local interest to a few particular churches. The number seven also suggests comprehensiveness in terms of their scope and application. When compared with the subsequent series of sevens in the first half of the book, i.e., the seals and the trumpets both of which culminate with the end of the world, there exists every reason to understand the seven churches in a similar way. Furthermore, the fact that the letters are permeated with apocalyptic symbols and ideas gives us reason to conclude that, like the rest of Revelation, these chapters may be intended as prophetic. Jesus Himself seems to suggest a future, as well as a present, application for them (1:19). A brief comparison of the letters with church history confirms this suggestion.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Paulien, “The End of Historicism? Reflections on the Adventist Approach to Biblical Apocalyptic—Part One,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14 (2003): 15–43, speaks of a “developing consensus” at one of the Daniel and Revelation Committee meetings that Rev. 2 and 3 “reads most naturally along the lines of the New Testament epistles” (39 n. 123). Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 117, 121, nods to the historicist tradition in his interpretation of Rev. 2 and 3 but uses noncommittal language (e.g., “Those seeking to apply. . .,” “One might see . . .”). For a more in-depth study of this topic, see Clinton Wahlen, “Heaven’s View of the Church in Revelation 2 and 3,” *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 9/2 (2006): 145–56.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> Septuagint uses the striking wording *tade legei* (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; cf. Acts 21:11) to announce prophetic oracles with the words, “Thus says the Lord.”

<sup>4</sup> A. Feuillet, *The Apocalypse*, trans. Thomas E. Crane (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965), 48, 49; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 35, cf. 52; G. K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement series 166 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 303, 304.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament 17 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 84; cf. the recognition by Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16, 17, that the letters address representative contexts which Christians in later periods have found applicable also to the church of their time.

<sup>6</sup> No agreement exists as to the overall structure of the book (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 25). For details on the outline proposed here, see Wahlen, 147–49; Richard Sabuin, “Repentance in the

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Book of Revelation” (PhD diss., Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, The Philippines, 2006), 54–61.

<sup>7</sup> Translation by the author. The Alpha and Omega also speaks once in the introduction (Rev. 1:8) and once in the conclusion (Rev. 22:13).

<sup>8</sup> So W. Popkes, “Die Funktion der Sendschreiben in der Johannes-Apokalypse. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Spätgeschichte der neutestamentlichen Gleichnisse,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 74 (1983): 90–107; cf. Beale, *John’s Use*, 312, linking the hearing formula with the “visionary parables” of chaps. 4–21.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Beale, *John’s Use*, 302. The trumpets are throughout history what the bowl judgments are at the end time; the trumpets are a foretaste and forewarning of the seven last plagues (Stefanovic, *Revelation*, 39).

<sup>10</sup> Various studies have identified themes spread across the letters in a chiasmic pattern. E.g., Robert L. Muse “Revelation 2–3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (1986): 147–61, finds a pattern that we could summarize as *a b a a b a* (*a* for a “warning of judgment” and *b* for a “promise of salvation”), Beale, *John’s Use*, 303, sees the condition of the churches described in an *a b c c b a* pattern. Sabuin, *Repentance*, 112, notes that the call to repentance in the letters conforms to a chiasm (*r – r r<sup>3</sup> r – r*).

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 29–48; James L. Boyer, “Are the Seven Letters of Revelation 2–3 Prophetic?” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985): 267–73.

<sup>12</sup> See 2 Cor. 11:5, 13; 12:11, 12; cf. Matt. 7:15; Gal. 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

<sup>13</sup> Though having periods of greater and lesser intensity, persecution was persistent in the second and third centuries, culminating in the “severest of persecutions under Diocletian, from 303 for a decade.” See Henry Chadwick, “The Early Christian Community,” in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21–69, esp. 47, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Robert A. Markus, “From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms,” in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, 70–100, esp. 73, 74; cf. 79: “The fourth and fifth centuries saw the wholesale Romanization of Christianity and Christianization of Roman society.”

<sup>15</sup> The period surrounding the Reformation is extremely complicated, as Patrick Collinson’s carefully nuanced treatment makes clear (see “The Late Medieval Church and Its Reformation” in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, 243–76). Protestantism quickly established its own confessions which served to bring coherence and consensus out of confusion and to crush theological deviance and dissent. *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>16</sup> The ancient Aramaic translation of Isaiah, known as the Isaiah Targum, makes this explicit in its “interpretative translation” of Isa. 22:22: “And I will place the key of the sanctuary and the authority of the House of David in his hand; and he will open, and none shall shut; and he will shut, and none shall open” (Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible 11 [Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987], 44).

<sup>17</sup> Doukhan, *Secrets*, 44.