
The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021



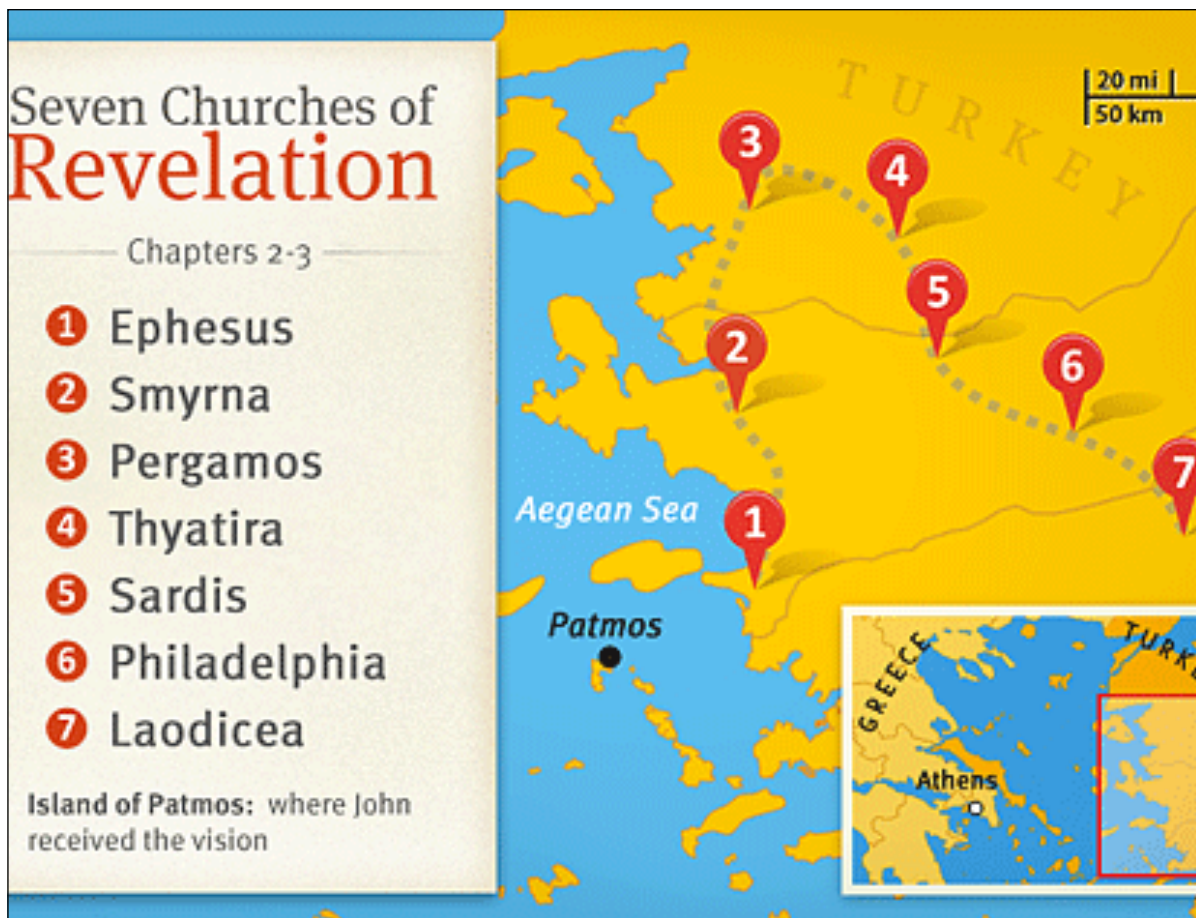
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Jezabel was the wife of Israel's King Ahab (c. 871-852 BCE). During that reign she and her husband were noted for encouraging the worship of Baal and Asherah, Mesopotamian gods who lived in the underworld, and she used royal reserves to fund the work of the prophets of Baal and Asherah.

A word before we begin...

As we begin our study in Revelation, there are three things we have to put aside and keep aside:

1. 21st century readers are far more literal than 1st century readers, so we cannot approach this text looking for anything concrete. Revelation was written in symbolism and metaphor, not exact predictions and representation, and as such has hundreds of allusions to Hebraic culture and history. Those cannot be transposed onto modern times.
2. The word 'Apocalypse' has changed meaning from the 1st century. We cannot read the word as that of doom and destruction. Its meaning in the 1st century was "unveiling, revealing, giving wisdom and knowledge that was hidden before".
3. Revelation is not strictly an historic piece of writing. Though all of the symbolism and metaphor represent the era in which it was composed, it also speaks to the end when the faithful will be reunited with Christ and experience resurrection. This is a timeless promise of Christianity. Hope was the message then, and it remains the message today.



Reading as a Hebraic text

One of the shifts in focus we have to do with Revelation is to not think of it as a strictly Christian book, but rather a combination of Hebraic and early Christian thought. So much of Revelation use symbolism and references from the Hebrew Scriptures, and we will attempt to identify as many of those going forward as possible.

Letter to the Seven Churches 1:4 - 3:22

John opens his letter in the style typical of the day: Sharing greetings to all recipients and showing why he has special authority to address them. Prior to the writing of the Gospels, letters such as this and those of Paul were the only 'Christian' texts copied, compiled into a codex (early form of book) and shared amongst the first congregations. He has obvious familiarity with the congregations and the right to censor their behaviour.

Right away we encounter the number seven. In Hebraic tradition some letters represent numbers and those numbers have spiritual significance. This is called *Gematria*, and is used to understand secondary meaning in the Bible. Though used less frequently by the authors of the Christian scriptures, there are certain number that keep appearing like 3, 12, 40 and 70+7. By maintaining that Revelation is a Hebraic book in an early Christian context, we can see how these number root all messages in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Seven

In Gematria, seven is the number of perfection and the most powerful number in the system and the word for seven, *gad*, is the Hebrew word for luck. God created the world in seven days, ordination of new priests took seven days, and there are seven matriarchs and patriarchs.

In Revelation John chose seven churches, though there were several more in Asia at the time. The seven angels are guardians and messengers for each congregations, the candlesticks are menorahs (candelabras with seven arms). The seven stars bring in a sense of cosmology, that Jesus was part of the beginning of all times and will be there to the very end.

Lampstands (Menorahs)

The seven menorahs harken back to the minor prophet Zachariah, chapter 4. This is a series of visions written in the apocryphal method. Here the lampstands are explained as representing God's power in all things including the active building of the Second Temple after the return to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. "Those seven lamps represent my eyes - the eyes of the Lord - and they see everything on this earth." Zechariah 4:10b

Verse 1:20 identifies the lampstands as the seven churches, shining light in a dark world.

Ears to Hear

This seems to be a common idiom used during the era of the writing of Revelation and the Synoptic Gospels (the phrase does not appear in the Gospel of John). It appears twice in each Matthew, Mark and Luke, in the telling of the parable of the farmer sowing seeds, and the explanation with the disciples afterwards (Matthew 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8). Luke has an additional reference in the discourse on salt and light, 14:35.

In Revelation we hear this idiom which means 'listen and pay attention', after each of the specific messages to the seven churches.

Churches

At this point in history there was no central location for building known as a 'church', these letters were addressed to the community itself which was scattered throughout several house churches around the cities (could be actual homes, or work places). The loose structure of the day had one teaching elder, the bishop, and several deacons or ministers, who carried out the functional acts of worship and caring for their smaller communities. It seems John's letter was addressed through the bishop of each city who was represented in the vision by first a star then an angel.

Nicolaitans

Scholars have no idea who this group was but they are mentioned twice and seem to be actively working against John's understanding of how the Christian community should behave.

Synagogue of Satan

It is far too easy to make the connection between the Synagogue of Satan and Judaism, something centuries of Biblical interpretation encouraged, leading to a great deal of hostility.

Synagogues in the first century were a word for assemblies or gatherings, much like the word 'church'. They were not necessarily buildings dedicated to the use of those following the Hebraic tradition. These synagogues were schools, gatherings for political discussions, and business meetings, as well as places of worship.

Satan was temptation in the Hebrew Scriptures, the tester who offered easy solutions.

It is safest to conclude that this reference were to cultural choices that led the faithful away from their counter-cultural life as Christians. John was against any cultural accommodations with the Greek and Roman worlds.

Balaam

The story of Balaam can be found in Numbers 22, where Balaam told the king of Moab that the way to undermine the Israelites who were trying to move into Palestine, was to offer them food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Throughout history 'sexual immorality' has been a favourite accusation against anyone when there really isn't evidence to find fault. We do it today, especially with women in authority.

Food sacrificed to idols in ancient cultures, was sold in the market for anyone to purchase. Since the early Hebrews held strict purity laws around food, this would have been against their tradition.

Paul argued successfully at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 CE that gentile converts to the early church should not be held to Hebrew standards of purity laws around food. John quite obviously disagreed and told them this action was not acceptable to Christ.

Jezabel

Introduced with the artwork on the front page, Jezabel (1 Kings 16) became a symbol through the period of the Israeli Kings of a woman who would use everything at her disposal, from makeup and dressing for seduction, to setting her favoured prophets against the prophets of God, to have her way and destroy the worship of the Hebrew God.

This could be a reference to a woman prophet that John disagreed with within the community or it could be a powerful and influential woman representing the interests of the wider cultural traditions.

Overall criticism

Of the seven churches, five are found to be in fault of losing their way, giving in to wealth, laziness, and the cultural expectations around them. They are considered lukewarm communities that have lost their zeal and passion for Christ and mission. John sees this as a problem and through him those churches here how Christ is prepared to punish them.

Only two are seen as living the way Christ has required, though one (Smyrna) struggles with financial challenges more than the other (Philadelphia)

Church in Ephesus

The church in Ephesus was the primary church in this group of seven. During the first century it was the midway point between Rome and Jerusalem, having its share of missionaries and travellers. It was also the centre of government and worship for Asia, boasting a large temple to Artemis, considered one of the seven wonders of the world, as well as a temp to Roma, the representation of Rome.

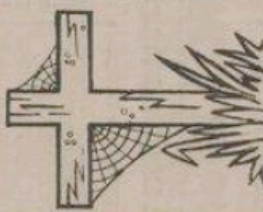


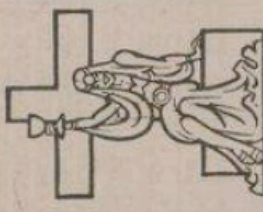
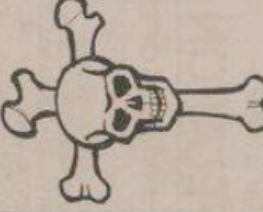


It was the fourth largest city in the empire with an assumed population of 200,000.

Acts 19 talks about how successful Paul was in Ephesus, which boasted a large group of house churches. It was in Ephesus that many of the letters in the Christian scriptures were written.

Letter structure

The same format is used for each of the seven churches: greetings, what Christ knows they do well, what they do wrong, how they need to be corrected and how the Spirit will treat them in the end. The following chart shows a comparison:

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

	EPHESUS (Rev. 2: 1-7) ONCE ON FIRE FOR CHRIST, BUT NOW BECOMING INDIFFERENT.		SMYRNA (Rev. 2: 8-11) PERSECUTED, POOR, BUT EVER FAITHFUL AND RESOLUTE!		PERGAMOS (Rev. 2: 12-17) PERMISSIVE, SHELTERING FALSE TEACHERS, FOLLOWING FALSE DOCTRINES.		THYATIRA (Rev. 2: 18-29) IDOLATROUS, SEDUCED INTO CORRUPT BELIEFS AND PAGAN RITUALS.		SARDIS (Rev. 3: 1-6) A CHURCH IN NAME ONLY. WITHOUT RESULTS AND SPIRITLESS.		PHILADELPHIA (Rev. 3: 7-13) EXEMPLARY! FAITHFUL TO GOD'S WORD AND FILLED WITH HIS LOVE!		LAODICEA (Rev. 3: 14-22) SELF-INDULGENT, RICH, AND OSTENTATIOUS. FULL OF WORLDLY PRIDE.
A BACKSLIDING CHURCH	CRITICISM: "Thou hast left thy first love...."	NO CRITICISM!	A STEADFAST CHURCH	CRITICISM: "Thou hast them that hold the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans...."	CRITICISM: "Thou sufferest that ...Jezebel to teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."	CRITICISM: "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead. I have not found thy works perfect..."
COUNSEL: "Remember from whence thou art." fallen, and repent.	COUNSEL: "Fear not! Be faith- ful unto death and I will give thee a Crown of Life!"	COUNSEL: "Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly!"	COUNSEL: "Repent, or I will come unto thee quickly!"	COUNSEL: "Hold fast to what (little) ye have till I come."	COUNSEL: "Strengthen what (little) remains." Hold fast and repent."	COUNSEL: "Hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy Crown."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."	COUNSEL: "Buy my gold, and white raiment to clothe thee...and anoint thine eyes..."

Maker unknown