

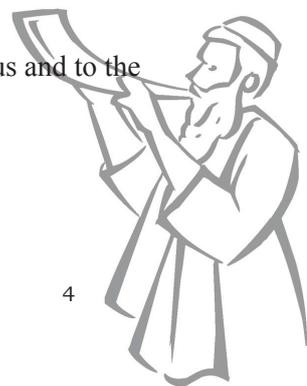
## 2. God's Servants Worshipping on Earth and in Heaven - 2:1-5:14

### a) Seven churches - 2:1-3:22

1. John wrote to seven concrete churches in Asia Minor. The sequence of the seven letters does reflect, many think, the postal route of those days.
2. According to church tradition (and this is a strong one) John was based in Ephesus.
3. To each of the churches Jesus is presented in a manner that was already introduced in Rev 1, and these images of Jesus return again in the latter part of Revelation.
4. Notice the similarities between these seven letters. 'Write to the angel...', a description of Christ, a compliment, some accusations, a challenge, an eschatological promise for those who conquer, and 'he who has an ear, let him hear...'
5. Though the seven churches had some major differences, the common threat in the seven letters is that they were being persecuted and that there were some heresies. Because the churches were from the same region, it is logical that their external circumstances (persecution, heresies) were similar. However internally there were some differences; some were more faithful to the Gospel and a Christian lifestyle than others.
6. We read of false apostles (2.2), Nicolaitans (2.6, 2.15), teachings of Balaam (2.14) and Jezebel (2.20). They were teaching immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. It seems to me that these are, generally speaking, designations of a similar cluster of ideas that were promoted in the seven churches.
7. The 'jargon' and the images John uses are absolutely 'Hebrew'.
8. The persecutions come from the side of the synagogue (2.9, 3.9) Because twice the synagogue is called the synagogue "of satan", I assume that the other two occurrences of "satan" in these seven letters (2.13, 2.24) are also references to synagogues or Jewish matters. Maybe there is some reference to persecutions by the Roman State - see 2.10. But clearly, the major problem for the seven churches was with the synagogue, not with the State.
9. To people (Jews and gentiles) who suffer from the synagogue, John promises things that have always been claimed by the synagogue as their own unique birthright. To eat from the tree of life in Paradise (2.7), not hurting (2.7), nor being hurt by second death (2.11), hidden manna, white stone with new name (2.17), power over the nations - rule with a rod of iron (2.26-27), to be a pillar in the temple of God, name of God written on him, participate in the new Jerusalem (2.12-13), sit on the throne with the Messiah (3.21).
10. It is very easy to underestimate the impact of this complete reversal of roles. The synagogue considered itself the community of the faithful, but John says that those who are persecuted by the synagogue are the faithful and that Jesus will save them from the persecutors.
11. Because the synagogue and not the Roman State is the persecutor, it might be better to date the book of Revelation earlier rather than later. Basically, because Eusebius (4th century) writes that John wrote this book under Domitian (Ca. 95AD) many have followed this idea. In that time, the State had become the persecutor. A sizeable minority of theologians today (about 30%) thinks the book might be written at the time when the synagogue was the major persecutor, that is, before 70AD. A caveat: We must be careful to not make the dating of the book - which we cannot be sure of - too important for our efforts to understand what John wrote.
12. I think we must read Rev 4-22 from the perspective of Rev 1-3. Rev 4-22 is to encourage and strengthen the seven churches in Asia Minor to hold on to the faith in the midst of problems. The lessons in Rev 4-22 were meant for them. But as with all letters in the New Testament, though we are never the primary recipients, we can learn similar lessons for our own time.

When John describes the seven churches, he liberally uses language related to the Hebrew exodus and to the Temple of Israel:

1. Jesus walks among the seven golden lamp stands (2.1)
2. You will eat from the tree of life. (2.7).



3. The persecution is called a testing (2.10), as the desert journey of Israel was also a testing (Deu 13.3)
4. Jesus has a sharp two-edged sword (2.12, 2.16), just as in the desert, God fought for Israel (Ex 14.14) The reference is concretely to Balaam and how God defeated Israel's enemies.
5. The church will receive manna (2.17), a reference to God's provision of Israel in the desert.
6. Some try to entice the church to idolatry (2.14) as Israel was sometimes idolatrous in the desert. (Golden Calf, etc).
7. 'Power over the nations' (2.26) was also an exodus-concept. Again and again in Israel's re-telling of the exodus-story, the victories over Egypt, and over the Amorites, Moabites and Amalakites were recounted.
8. 'They will walk with me in white' (3.4) is a reference to the priestly service in the tabernacle. The churches are a priestly nation with God in their midst.
9. Endurance (3.10) was what Israel needed in the desert.
10. Those who persevere will be a pillar in the temple of God. (3.12)
11. Sit on the throne (3.21) is also temple language. It is about the throne of grace, the mercy seat, the ark of the covenant.

So the lesson for the seven churches: They are seen as being delivered from Egypt (sins), and presently on the march through the desert where temptations and persecutions abound. The Christian life is a journey of testing. But be encouraged - those same tempted and persecuted believers are in reality the true priests of God, serving in his temple. God travels with his temple (tabernacle) with the people through the desert to defend them and help them. And those Christians must in that difficult journey, be faithful and serve God as priests.

