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Revelation Text: Chapter 2-3 (Seven Letters)

This is the second unit looking at the text of Revelation; in the first, we looked at chapter 1, which includes the introduction to the first series of seven scenes in the book.



Letter Format

Address: To the angel of...

This first section of Revelation consists of seven letters dictated to John. There is some variation but for the most part, these letters follow the same format. I start with an overview of the elements that make up each letter. First, there is an address: To the angel of the church in ... Ephesus, in the first letter.

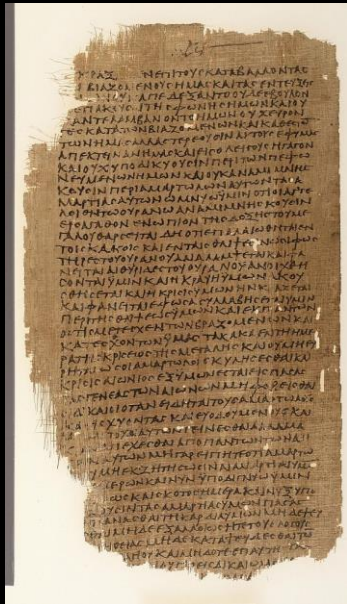
I talked about the difficulty of addressing a letter to an angel in the previous unit: what does this mean? “Angel” may refer to church leadership or to the person reading the letter. Or it may indeed be used in the meaning it has everywhere else in this book: that of a heavenly being, an angel responsible for the church and representing, incorporating, and personifying the church, so that by addressing the angel the church is addressed.

Because whatever the meaning of “angel,” it is clear that the letter addresses *the church* and is to be read (and taken to heart) by *the church*. Indeed, each letter is to be read by all the churches, since every church receives all seven letters.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P_Chester_Beatty_XII_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CC0

Letter Format

Self-identification: The words of him who...

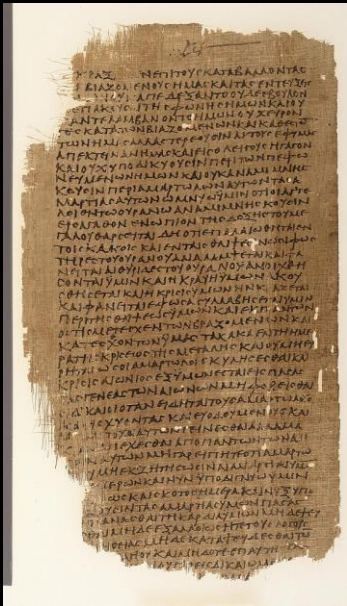


Then the author identifies himself: The words of him who..., in this case, “holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.” With one exception (the letter to Philadelphia), these identifying words are taken from the description of Jesus in the opening vision in chapter 1. In every case, this description of Christ has something to do with the message of the letter. In the letter to Ephesus, Jesus walks among the seven lampstands and threatens to take the lampstand of this church away.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P._Chester_Beatty_XII,_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CC0

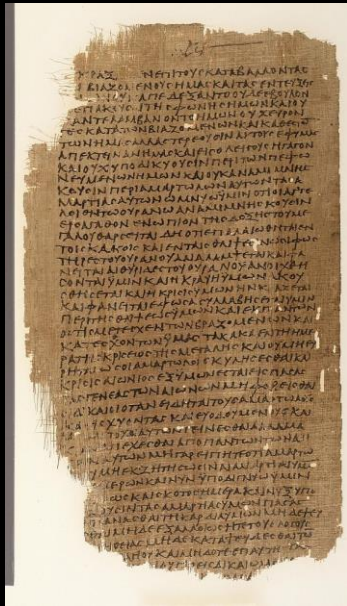
Letter Format

Commendation: I know...



The third element is a commendation, a word of praise: I know..., says Jesus, and what follows in the first letter is quite a list, two verses long. Two churches do not receive such praise: the churches of Sardis and Laodicea.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P_Chester_Beatty_XII,_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CC0



Letter Format

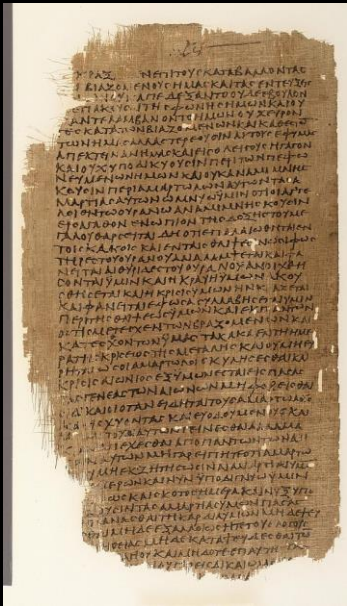
Reproach: But I have this against you...

Next follows a reproach or an accusation: But I have this against you... Two churches are not reproached: the church of Smyrna (the suffering church) and the church of Philadelphia.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P_Chester_Beatty_XII,_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CC0

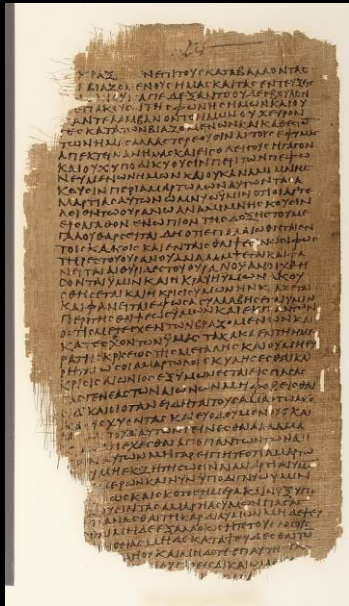
Letter Format

Directive: Repent...



Where there is a reproach, there also is a call to repent, although this element varies in form the most.

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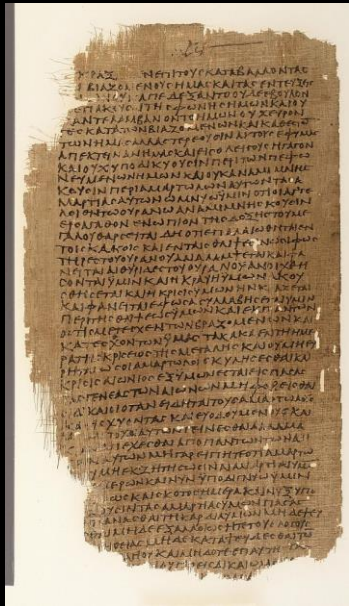


Letter Format

Sanction: If not...

There follows a sanction or a consequence that is threatened if there is no repentance: If not, I will... For Ephesus, its lampstand will be removed from its place (2:5).

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Letter Format

Call: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

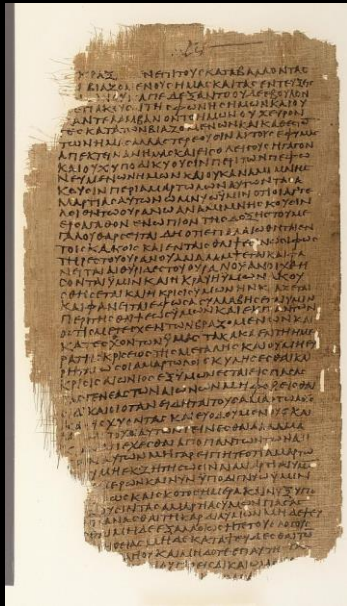
There are two more elements; these change order after the third letter. There is a call to heed what is being said: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7). Notice the plural, “churches”. Although each letter specifically addresses one church, it is to be read and taken to heart by all the churches. It is an indication that these letters have a far broader application than just that to the original audience of the church addressed or even the seven churches in Asia.

It is precisely their concrete, timebound message that makes them timeless – relevant to all ages.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P_Chester_Beatty_XII,_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CCO

Letter Format

Promise: To him who conquers...



And last, there is a promise given to the one who conquers. Notice the military language; we are in the context of warfare, which is an important theme in the book. However, as we will see, the way war is waged in this book and the weapons that are used are highly unusual.

In most cases, the promise takes an element from the concluding chapters of the book. For Ephesus, it is the right to eat of the tree of life in 2:7; this tree will reappear in chapter 22. We shouldn't think that each church receives a different promise, different from the ones the other churches receive; rather, it is a sample of the larger blessing or reward that awaits those who persevere and conquer. In other words, all the churches are to receive all the promised blessings.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:P._Chester_Beatty_XII,_leaf_3,_verso.jpg, CC0

Letter Format

Address: To the angel of...

Self-identification: The words of him who...

Commendation: I know...

Reproach: But I have this against you...

Directive: Repent...

Sanction: If not...

Call: He who has an ear...

Promise: To him who conquers...

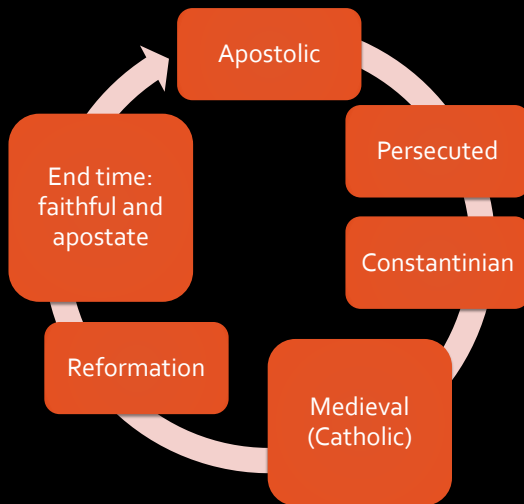
In conclusion, an overview of the elements that appear in all or at least in most letters.

What the letters are not

Phases of church history

Before I talk about a few specifics, one more general point related to these letters. They are NOT six or seven phases in church history, although this is sometimes taught.

The letters are not phases of church history



According to this kind of view, Ephesus may represent the apostolic church, Smyrna the persecuted church in the Roman empire, Pergamum the church after Constantine, the emperor who ended persecution, leading to Christianity becoming the official religion of the empire, and so forth, for the Middle Ages, the time of the Reformation, and the present time or the end time, in which (in many versions of this view) we have faithful Philadelphia and lukewarm or apostate Laodicea existing side by side.

However, nothing in the letters suggests that we are to understand them in this way. They are written to seven very real churches. The division of church history proposed by this interpretation is forced and overlooks the enormous diversity that existed at every time. In any phase of church history, we can find each type of church. Therefore, in any phase of church history, each letter has the potential to speak anew to the church – and to us.

Jesus knows...

... each city, each church



One thing that stands out in these letters is that Jesus knows each church and its local circumstances extremely well.

The Seven Cities of Revelation:

<http://www.wilrens.org/2018/04/cals48/>



I will briefly discuss three examples of this. If you would like more information on the seven cities and their churches, I recommend this article, “The Seven Cities of Revelation,” accessible through this Internet address: <https://www.wilrens.org/2018/04/cals48/>.

I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (Rev. 2:13, ESV)

Pergamum



Wladyslaw Sojka, 2004, CC BY-SA 3.0

First, Rev. 2:13: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)
Wladyslaw Sojka, 2004, A model of the acropolis of the ancient Greek city of Pergamon, showing the situation in the 2nd century AD, by Hans Schleif (1902-1945), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Modell_Pergamonmuseum.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0

Satan's throne

- Altar to Zeus
- Centre of Asclepios cult
- Emperor cult (first city in Asia with temple dedicated to emperor)



Wladyslaw Sojka, 2004, CC BY-SA 3.0

Satan's throne. What does this mean? Several explanations have been proposed.

Pergamum boasted an impressive altar dedicated to Zeus (the photo shows a model of the Acropolis, the ancient centre of Pergamum; it shows this altar in the centre).

Pergamum was an important centre for the cult of Asclepios, the ancient god of healing. Interestingly, Asclepios was often portrayed as a serpent.

The city was the earliest and most important centre for emperor worship in the east.

It was also the seat of the Roman proconsul administrating the entire province. It was therefore the seat of Roman power.

I find the latter two explanations most convincing. After all, in the book of Revelation, it is the emperor cult that will soon bring persecution to the church. The first temple in Asia dedicated to a living emperor was approved by Augustus in 29 BC and built in Pergamum. This temple frequently appears on coins issued by the city. It is in Pergamum that the emperor cult had its strongest centre, therefore "Satan's throne."

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

Wladyslaw Sojka, 2004, A model of the acropolis of the ancient Greek city of Pergamon, showing the situation in the 2nd century AD, by Hans Schleif (1902-1945), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Modell_Pergamonmuseum.jpg, CC BY-SA 3.0

If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against YOU. (Rev. 3:3b, ESV)

Sardis



Carole Raddato, 2015a, CC BY-SA 2.0

Next, Rev. 3:3: “If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.” This is not a reference to the second coming, even though the image of a thief coming at night is used in that context as well.

Twice, Sardis had been conquered because it had been insufficiently watchful. Its upper city was located on top of a hill with steep and crumbly sides, about 500 m above the surrounding plain. This was a strategic location. Nevertheless, the city was captured by surprise twice in its history.

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Persian king Cyrus managed to enter the city by climbing up to an unguarded spot – unguarded because it was considered unassailable; this was in 546 BC. In 214 BC, Antiochus III of Syria likewise took the city by exploiting an unguarded spot.

The image of an intruder coming at an unexpected hour would have evoked painful memories in Sardis.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)
Carole Raddato, 2015a, The Temple of Artemis, originally built in 300 BC, renovated by the Romans in the 2nd century AD,

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For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:17, ESV)

Laodicea



Carole Raddato, 2015b, CC BY-SA 2.0

Third and last, Rev. 3:17: “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

Laodicea was destroyed by a severe earthquake in AD 60. It declined aid from the emperor and financed its own rebuilding in a spirit of proud independence. This is an indication of how wealthy (and proud) the city was. This verse shows that the church was as self-sufficient and independent (“I need nothing”) as the city in which it lived.

Laodicea functioned as a banking centre. There was a well-known medical school where a standard medical text on eye conditions had been written. It is often claimed that it produced an important eye salve, which is possible but not certain. The city was also known for its textile industry, especially for its black high-quality wool. The pillars of Laodicea’s economy, therefore, were banking, medicine, and textile. Yet Jesus describes the city as poor, blind, and naked. Let’s read what comes next:

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Carole Raddato, 2015, Colonnaded street, Laodicea on the Lycus, Phrygia, Turkey,
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I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. (Rev. 3:18)

Laodicea



Carole Raddato, 2015b, CC BY-SA 2.0

“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see” (Rev. 3:18).

Jesus offers gold, white garments, and eye salve: true wealth, true clothing, and true medicine. The advice to “buy” these things fit well with the commercial nature of the city. The sarcasm is obvious; this rebuke must have stung.

Next, I will discuss a few difficulties in the text.

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Carole Raddato, 2015, Colonnaded street, Laodicea on the Lycus, Phrygia, Turkey,
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Nicolaitans?

Not mentioned anywhere else in NT

See 2:14-15: Balaam

See 2:20, same issue

Issue is idol sacrifice and immorality

First, the Nicolaitans. They are mentioned in 2:6 without any explanation of what they stood for. They are not mentioned in any other book of the NT. But they do reappear in 2:14-15. There we learn that their teaching is like that of Balaam. In the book of Numbers, Balaam is the prophet/magician who is hired by the king of Moab to come and curse Israel. This went badly wrong because every time he opened his mouth blessing came out. Nevertheless, he left the Moabites with advice on how they could get the Israelites after all: get them to eat food sacrificed to idols and engage in sexual immorality.

This is the issue: idolatry and immorality. Both were associated with various feasts and occasions that took place in the temples in honour of a god. These were important social and business events. There was a cost to not participating and therefore pressure to do so anyway. Apparently, the Nicolaitans had developed a theological rationalization to make participation acceptable, no doubt thanks to some creative theology and exegesis.

This is confirmed by the fact that in 2:20 we read again about the same issue. There, it is not the Nicolaitans but the woman Jezebel who seduces the people of God to

sexual immorality and idolatry. Jezebel may well be a symbolic name. In the book of Kings, she is the queen who strongly promoted the worship of Baal among the Israelites.

That this issue appears in three of the seven letters shows it was a serious threat. We may not know what the exact teaching of the Nicolaitans entailed, but clearly, it stood for unacceptable compromise – compromise with the ruling religion and ideology.

By the way, the “hidden manna” promised to the conquerors in Revelation 2:17 no doubt stands in contrast to these idolatrous meals.

I will give him a white stone,
with a new name written on
the stone that no one knows
except the one who receives
it. (Rev. 2:17b, ESV)



“I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it” (Rev. 2:17b, ESV). This is a hard one and many solutions have been proposed. Probably, a combination of allusions is intended, especially these two:

One, a stone could be used as a token of admission or membership.

Two, in a law case, a juror would use a white pebble to cast a vote in favour of the acquittal of the accused.

The new name promised is presumably that of the individual receiving the stone, not a new name of God or Christ (different from Rev. 3:12, where the name explicitly is that of God, Jesus, and their city). It symbolizes a new life and a new identity. A beautiful gift.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

The deep things of Satan (Rev. 2:24)



Last: the deep things of Satan in 2:24. It must have something to do with justifying participation in sexual immorality and idolatry in the preceding verses. The exact meaning is lost to us, but the application is clear: don't be swayed by people who claim superior and special spiritual knowledge or insight.



Where do you recognize your church?

What would Jesus say to your church or community?

We have come to the end of the seven letters. I will end with two questions for you.

Where in these seven letters do you recognize your church?

What do you think Jesus would say to your church or community?

Take a moment to think about this and pray for your church or community.

Credits

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Sardis: Carole Raddato, 2015a, The Temple of Artemis, originally built in 300 BC, renovated by the Romans in the 2nd century AD, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/carolemage/24239575789/>, CC BY-SA 2.0

Laodicea: Carole Raddato, 2015b, Colonnaded street, Laodicea on the Lycus, Phrygia, Turkey, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/41523983@No8/21634603051/>, CC BY-SA 2.0

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This is one of twelve units taking a closer look at the text of Revelation, section by section. You are free to pass this PDF on to others, but please don't change any of its content when you do.

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