

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Literary Analysis

A. Length: the letters are approximately the same.

B. Unity with chapter 1

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| 1. 2:1b = 1:16 | holds the seven stars in his right hand |
| 1:12b-13a | walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks |
| 2. 2:8b = 1:17b | the first and the last |
| 1:18a | who was dead and lives again |
| 3. 2:12b = 1:16b | the sword of my mouth (out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword) |
| 4. 2:18b = 1:14b | his eyes were like a flame of fire |
| 1:15a | his feet were like burnished brass |
| 5. 3:7b = 1:18b | he that has the key of David |
| | and I have the keys of death and Hades |
| 6. 3:12b = (1:4a | the seven Spirits of God) |
| 1:16a | he that has . . . the seven stars (in his right hand) |

C. Unity with succeeding chapters

1. Words and phrases

2:7	<i>“he that has an ear let him hear”</i>	13:9
2:10	<i>“he that overcomes” plus a blessing</i>	21:7
2:7	<i>“the tree of life”</i>	22:2, 14
2:11	<i>“faithful”</i>	17:14
2:16	<i>second death</i>	20:6, 14; 21:8
2:16	<i>“I come to you quickly”</i>	22:7, 12, 20
2:17	<i>“[the new name] that no one knows but the one who receives it”</i>	19:12; 14:3
2:21	<i>“not willing to repent”</i>	9:20, 21; 16:9, 11
2:22	<i>commit (spiritual) adultery</i>	17:2; 18:9
2:26	<i>authority over the nations</i>	20:4
2:27	<i>rule with a rod of iron</i>	12:5; 19:15
2:28	<i>the morning star</i>	22:16
3:3	<i>“I will come like a thief”</i>	16:15 (associate watching, walking, and clothing—nakedness)
3:4	<i>“names” used instead of “persons”</i>	11:13
3:5	<i>arrayed in white</i>	4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:(8), 14
3:5	<i>(blotting) names . . . the book of life</i>	13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27

3:7	he that is holy (Christ)	(6:10)
3:10	trial comes on the whole world	(16:14)
3:10	them that dwell on the earth	6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8
3:12	name of my God	14:1; 22:4 (name of the city of my God, 21:2)
3:12	the new Jerusalem	21:2, 10
3:21	I overcome	5:5; 6:2; 17:14

2. Parallels between the promises to those who overcome and the saints of the millennium

- a. Ephesus: eat of the tree of life
- b. Smyrna: not hurt by the second death
- c. Laodicea: sit with me on my throne

“on either side of the river was the tree of life . . . Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life” (**22:2, 14**)

“Blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection; for on them the second death has no power” (**22:6**)

Their names were written in the Book of Life (**20:12, 14, 15**) reigning with Christ a thousand years (**20:4; 22:5**)

Literary connections between the individual letters (chapters **3-4**) and the previous and succeeding chapters (**1, 5-22**) show that the seven “sub-letters” were not written separately from the letter as a whole and that they were not meant to be interpreted aside from the rest of the book.

D. Unity among the letters

1. Words and phrases

a. Nicolaitans	2:6 & 15
b. New name	2:17 & 3:12
c. Clothed so as not to be naked	3:4 & 18
d. Repent	2:5², 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19
e. White	2:17; 3:4, 5, 18
f. Commit fornication	2:14, 20, 22
g. Christ(’s) coming	2:5, 16, 25; 3:3², 11
h. Tribulation	2:9², 10², 22; 3:10

2. The elements of form

- a. *“To the church of . . .”*

- b. “*These things says . . .*” and a description of Christ taken from the first chapter
 - c. “*I know your works*” and description with compliment followed by warning
 - d. “*To him that overcomes I will give . . .*”
 - e. “*He that has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”
3. Comparison of messages (See Appendix A.)
4. Geographical setting
- a. All are in Asia.
 - b. All these cities had favorable opportunities opened to them by geographical and communication convenience.
 - c. The order follows that of the Roman post road, beginning and ending at Ephesus: “. . . in the image before the eye of the Seer the seven stars probably appear as a chain of glittering jewels hanging from the hand of Christ” (A. Scott, *Century Bible, in loco*).

E. Unity within the Letters

1. Ephesus

- a. Walks among the seven golden lampstands: “*I will remove your lampstand out of its place*”
- b. Garden of Eden atmosphere

(1) Walking among the lampstands may mean that he is keeping watch as God walked in the garden in the cool of the day. It may mean that he is near; so they are safe.

(2) “*Remember from where you have fallen from.*”

(3) “*Do the first works.*”

(4) The tree of life in the paradise of God

2. Smyrna

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| a. “ <i>Who was dead and lived</i> ” (8) | cast into prison (10)
about to suffer (10)
tribulation ten days (not forever; 10)
faithful to death—crown of life (10)
the second death will not hurt the
overcomers (11) |
| b. Poverty (9) | (you are rich)—crown of life (10) |

3. Pergamum

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|---|--|
| a. Sharp two-edged sword (12)
(official authority) | Satan’s <u>throne</u> (13)
Israel (a national fall; 14)
I will make war with the sword of my mouth
(16) |
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b. The Pergamum letter has the atmosphere of the Jewish wilderness peregrinations, which is appropriate for those destined to enter the “promised land.” Balaam and Balak, who caused the Israelites to stumble, are mentioned as well as the manna.

4. Thyatira

a. 2:18 mentions “feet of burnished brass,” and 2:27 speaks of ruling with a rod of iron as vessels of a potter are broken.

b. The Thyatira letter has an atmosphere of the divided kingdom period.

(1) Jezebel and her evil influence (toward Baal worship) is alluded to.

(2) The woman called herself a prophetess as Jezebel was a daughter of the priest-king of Sidon.

(3) Fornication is alluded to, not only spiritual fornication in the Old Testament case, but ritual fornication in the pagan rites as well.

(4) *“Kill her children with death”* and cast them into tribulation is reminiscent of the 450 Baal prophets that were killed after Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel.

(5) The potter’s pots are broken, recalling Jeremiah’s potter passage (Jeremiah 19).

5. Sardis

You are alive in name; and you are dead: only a few names in Sardis did not defile their garments.

6. Philadelphia

a. He that is true (3:7)	say they are Jews, but lie (3:9) they kept my word and did not deny my name (3:8)
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b. Key of David (3:7) opened door (3:8)

c. He opens and no one shuts (3:8) door that no one can shut (3:8)

d. Did not deny my name (3:8) a new name (3:12); the name of my God
(3:12)

e. The Philadelphia letter has a Jewish atmosphere—a people in right relationship with God: key of David, synagogue of Satan, say they are Jews, temple of my God, the new Jerusalem.

F. Unity with other Johannine literature

1. 2:2 1 John 4:1 (cp. 6:6): trying the words of teachers/their spirits
2. 2:3 John 15:21: persecution for my name’s sake
3. 2:17 John 6:49-50: hidden manna
4. 2:25 John 21:22-23: till I come
5. 2:28 the morning star
6. 3:9 the world’s knowing that Christ loves the faithful is prominent throughout the high priestly prayer of John 17 (3, 8, 21, 23, 25; cp. 3:17).

7. **3:10** John **17:16**: keep my word
8. **3:20** John **14:23**: knocking, entering and supping together
9. **3:21** John **20:4**: to sit with Christ on his throne
10. **2:9; 3:9** “Jews” Among the gospel writers John uses this expression far more extensively than the others—mostly in a pejorative sense.

This partial list of literary connections between Revelation and the Johannine literature tends to offset the tendency to use Greek stylistic peculiarities as a basis for suggesting a difference in authorship.

G. Unity with the Old Testament

1. 2:7 the tree of life	Genesis 2:9 (3:22) ; Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4
2. 2:7 paradise of God	Ezekiel 31:8 (Septuagint—LXX)
3. 2:10 tribulation for ten days	Daniel 1:12, 14
4. 2:14 Balaam	Numbers 22-23
5. 2:17 manna	Exodus 16
6. 2:20 Jezebel	1 Kings 16:31; 21:25 ; 2 Kings 9:7
7. 2:23 searches the reins and hearts	Psalm 7:9; 26:2; 139:1
8. 2:26 authority over the nations	Psalm 2:8
9. 2:27 vessels of the potter broken to slivers	Isaiah 30:14 ; Jeremiah 19:11
10. 3:9 make the nations come and worship before you	Isaiah 45:14; 49:23; 60:14
11. 3:9 the nations know I loved you	Isaiah 43:4
12. 3:12 name of my God	1 Kings 7:21 ; Jeremiah 1:18
13. 3:12 name of the city of my God	Ezekiel 48:35
14. 3:14 the Amen	Isaiah 65:16
15. 3:17 I am rich	Hosea 12:8 ; Zechariah 11:5
16. 3:18 buy from me	Isaiah 55:1

Unity with the Old Testament shows that the background for Revelation is to be found there and that the manner of interpreting the book should follow from Jewish background rather than a Greek one—as the drama approach assumes.

H. Peculiarities of some letters

1. Smyrna has no condemnation and is the shortest letter.
2. Thyatira is the longest letter.
3. Sardis has no commendation section.
4. Philadelphia has no condemnation; it is the only letter with a repeated commendation—about endurance; and the opportunity to evangelize is made possible.
5. Laodicea is the only letter that does not use a Christological description from the portrait in chapter 1; there is no condemnation section; and it is the only church that is wholly and absolutely condemned (even Sardis has a remnant).

I. Parallels between Ephesus and Sardis

1. Ephesus includes a reference to seven golden lamps, while Sardis has notes about seven spirits of God and seven stars.
2. Ephesus was the practical center and leading city of Asia, and Sardis was the ancient capital of Lydia and historical center of the Asian churches.

J. Parallels between Philadelphia and Smyrna

1. No condemnation is offered to either.
2. The writer invests himself with the same character that he praises in the church addressed. The Philadelphia letter combines “he that is true” (Christ) with “*did not deny my name*” (Christians). The Smyrna letter refers to Christ as “*he who was dead and lived*” and to the persecution and death of Christians in Thyatira.
3. These two churches are praised far more than the others.
4. They both contend with especially serious difficulties.
5. Jews are mentioned only in Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:9; 3:9) probably because in wealth and numbers they were strongest there. In keeping with their wealth is the fact that the Christians’ weakness and poverty are mentioned only in these two churches.

These and other parallels between the letters together with the unity among the letters (D above) show that the letters were not sent out individually to the seven churches. Each church received the whole set. Otherwise, the effect of the parallels would be lost.

II. Historical Analysis

A. Ephesus

1. “*He that holds the seven stars in his first hand*” “Ephesus, as in practical importance the leading city of the Province Asia, might be said to be the center, to be in the midst of the Seven Churches” (Ramsey).
2. “*He that walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands*” “. . . the Divine figure that addresses her appropriately holds in His right hand the Seven Stars, which are the Seven Churches” (Ramsey).
3. “*I will move your lampstand out of its place.*” Ephesus, as a city, no longer exists. Ephesus had moved forward with the receding sea (Ramsey).
4. “*Tree of life*” sacred trees worshipped by Asian peoples.
“*The divine tree had always been the seat of Divine life and the intermediary between Divine and human nature. The tree of life in the Garden of Eden is probably more the point, however.*” (Ramsey)

B. Smyrna

1. “*I will give you the crown of life.*” “*The crown of Smyrna*” was a familiar expression (see Apollonius Aristides’ *Orations 15, 20-22, 41; and Philostratus*) arising from the appearance of Pagos, the central hill on which the public buildings were located.” (Ramsey)

2. Was dead and is alive

years—at least as a Greek city. It lived on as a small village after the autonomous Anatolian system. Smyrna was “dead and lived” not “lived again,” but retained life under apparent death resulting in being rebuilt. This contrast between apparent death and actual vitality forms a characteristic contrast parallel to (1) the poor church that was rich, (2) the troubled church that triumphed, (3) boasting Jews who were not Jews, and (4) who claimed to be the people of God but were the synagogue of Satan.

The ancient city of Smyrna, destroyed by the Lydians, ceased to exist for four hundred

C. Pergamum

1. “*The sharp two-edged sword*”

The sword was regarded as the symbol of the highest order of official authority, and Pergamum was the seat of imperial rule in Asia (Ramsey).

2. “*Make war against you with the sword of my mouth*”

Officials were categorized as higher or lower depending on whether they had the power of capital punishment (Ramsey).

3. “*Where Satan’s throne is*”

The first Asian Augustan temple was built at Pergamum, where Satan opposed the church

by using emperor worship as the test for patriotism. Historically this city was where the first political persecutions against Christians occurred. (Note Antipas, who was killed where Satan’s throne is.)

D. Thyatira

1. Jezebel

like the prophetess at the shrine of Sambethe, who was supposed to utter sayings that the deity would impart to the worshipers perhaps a woman who advocated joining the guild system in Thyatira, which included pagan ritual and dancing slave girls a dinner couch used at the public feasts; respectable women never ate among the men, but separately.

2. Eating of meat sacrificed to idols—fornication

3. “*I cast her into a bed.*”

E. Sardis

1. “*I will come upon you like a thief in the night.*”

The mountains overhanging Sardis were a haunt for robbers who made sallies on the

surrounding areas; compare the message on the marble throne of the Bishop of Sardis (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

2. “Establish the things that remain” After the earthquake in A.D. 17, Sardis never recovered its former importance.
3. “If therefore you do not watch” Sardis was situated on the top of an impregnable hill, and it was only through negligence that the city was ever captured. Herodotus gives the account of the first capture of Sardis, when the Persian army was able to climb a difficult cliff that they had seen climbed by a soldier retrieving a helmut.

F. Philadelphia

1. “Little strength” As was true of the city, so of the church; the place was weakened by constant earthquakes.
2. “Pillar in the temple of my God” a permanent pillar that could not be thrown down by earthquakes.
3. “Not go out from there” Many of the people finally moved outside Philadelphia because the buildings were continually being shaken and broken.
4. “I will keep him from the hour of trial.” The Philadelphians abandoned its old name and took instead a name derived from the imperial religion. *Neokaisaraia* was its new name throughout thereafter. It wrote on itself the name of its imperial god.
5. naked Philadelphia was a textile center.

G. Laodicea

1. “You say, ‘I am rich and have riches, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing.’” In A.D. 60 an earthquake nearly destroyed the city, but because of the affluence of its people the proffered aid of Rome for rebuilding was rejected.
2. “Buy eye salve from me”; blind Laodicea was the center of the production of a powder used to treat ophthalmia.
3. Lukewarm water Laodicea was on the edge of a volcanic district. Hot water springs often accompany volcanic territories. As the water ran down the streams, it would become lukewarm.

These observations show that (1) the message of Revelation was relevant. It was expressed in the everyday concerns of its readers. (2) The historical and geographical allusions in these two chapters were verisimilar to a book whose message is “signified.” (3) The historical and geographical emphases in these chapters should turn one away from spiritualizing these short letters into something remote. (4) Revelation was a practical book. It was not written to the insular vacuum of the isle of Patmos, but to the social fullness of seven bustling cities. It did not present the subjective visions of an introverted mystic, but an “objective” message for pragmatists influenced by what they saw and heard and felt.

III. Special Points of Interpretation

A. Ephesus

The church is a “lampstand.” It is not the light itself but that from which the light shines—a more apt figure even than “candlestick.” These seven “lampstands” are not like the seven-branched candlestick; they are seven individual stands.

B. Smyrna

Being cast into prison was not the punishment itself, because the Romans put a person in prison only to await trial or execution. The “true Jews” are those that accepted Christ, sent to be received by God’s people.

C. Pergamum

1. *“The white stone”*

a. There was a relationship between permanent validity of the message and the imperishable material used for recording it. The validity was as permanent as the record was imperishable. The name was written on imperishable material.

b. There was a suitable relationship between the subject matter and the material it is written on. Lead was used for curses, but white signified good fortune.

2. *“The new, unknown, name”*

a. The new name perhaps reflects the custom of name-changing at baptism. In Acts Saul is increasingly called Paul after his conversion (although there are probably other factors that produced that phenomenon in Acts).

b. Eastern cultures give names appropriate to the person and occasion. Names were often changed as an indication of one’s entering a new capacity of new life, for example, after severe sickness. Christians receive a new name in Christ because they become new persons.

c. The true name of the god in certain religions was kept secret except from the devotees lest an enemy could gain influence over the god by knowing the god’s name. The name guaranteed and even gave existence and life.

Augustus was a name not previously used for individuals, but only in the language of the priests. Receiving it indicated the man’s elevation to a higher level, from which he transmitted the divine power to his descendants. Christians are given their divine name to indicate their association with the divine realm and to pass on that name to their spiritual children.

Ramsey recounts the case of the poet Aelius Aristides, whose new name *Theodorus* was given in a vision in which Aesculapius sent him to be conspicuously grand in the oratorical delivery of philosophical and moral teaching. The name *Christian* is a constant reminder to the wearer that he is supported and sent by the one whose name he wears.

3. Balaam

Being unable to satisfy Balak by cursing Israel, Balaam in the Old Testament suggested that he corrupt them and bring them under the curse of their God. The point here may be that some were advocating a compromise between Christian allegiance and political religion.

D. Sardis

“Blotting one’s name out of the book of life,” taken with 20:15, makes clear that a person may be listed in heaven among the saved and yet ultimately be lost. His name may be removed. Not only may he backslide; he may apostatize as well.

E. General observations

1. The author tends to move forward through Old Testament history in these letters.
 - a. Ephesus compares with the Garden of Eden.
 - b. Pergamum compares with the wilderness wanderings.
 - c. Thyatira compares with the divided kingdom.
 - d. Sardis relates to a pagan atmosphere.
 - e. Philadelphia relates to a Jewish atmosphere.
 - f. Laodicea (along with Philadelphia) compares with the consummation atmosphere.

Does the writer draw on chronological Old Testament history to bring the reader up to present-time prophecies that begin in chapter 4? If so, John may not be looking so much at distant future events in Revelation as at present recurring processes and imminent trials for his original audience—which may, of course, have counterparts later.

2. The letters seem to be directed toward “*the things that are*” (1:19), while the rest of the book concerns “*the things that will shortly be hereafter*” (1:19).

Appendix A

	<u>Ephesus</u> 2:1-7	<u>Smyrna</u> 2:8-11	<u>Pergamum</u> 2:12-17	<u>Thyatira</u> 2:18-29	<u>Sardis</u> 3:1-6	<u>Philadelphia</u> 3:7-13	<u>Laodicea</u> 3:14-22
1. Destination	2:1a	2:8a	2:12a	2:18a	3:1a	3:7a	3:14a
2. Speaker	2:1b	2:8b	2:12b	2:18b	3:1b	3:7b	3:14b
3. Words: good bad	2:2-3, 6 2:4	2:9a 2:9b	2:13 2:14-15	2:19 2:20-21	3:4a 3:1c	3:8 3:11b	3:15 3:18,19b
4. Commandment	2:5	2:10a	2:16a		3:2-3a	3:10-11a	3:20
5. Promise: good bad (threat) “he that overcomes”		2:10b		2:24-25 2:22-23	3:4b 3:3b	3:9 3:12	16-17,19a 3:21
6. Admonition	2:7a	2:11a	2:17a	2:26-28 2:29	3:5 3:6	3:13	3:22