

# 4.15 - Seven Churches of Asia

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#### ■ [4.15.1 - Why these Seven Churches?](#)

The immediate audience for the Revelation recorded by John is “the [seven churches](#) which are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4<sup>+</sup>, 11<sup>+</sup>). *Asia* is not the Asia of our day which is the world’s largest continent stretching from the Pacific Ocean on its eastern border to the Ural Mountains in the west. At the time of John, the region refers to the peninsula known as *Asia Minor*.

At the end of the first century the peninsula known as Asia Minor seems to have embraced six provinces, Asia, Bithynia (including Pontus), Galatia, Cappadocia, Cilicia, Lycia (including Pamphylia). The Province of Asia had been created as far back as the year B.C. 120 out of the domains bequeathed to the Senate by Attalus III., the last king of Pergamum. . . . “Asia in the New Testament,” wrote Dr. Lightfoot in 1865, “is always Proconsular Asia.”; and his *dictum* has not been seriously shaken by the researches of the last forty years.<sup>1</sup>

We would locate the churches today on a map of *western Turkey*.

The Seven Churches of Asia



[2](#)

These churches were directly or indirectly the result of Paul’s missionary journeys recorded in the book of Acts. Paul taught at Ephesus for over two years at the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:1, 9-10; 20:31) and his disciple Timothy was an elder there (1Ti. 1:3). It is probably for this reason, together with its prominence and location on the seacoast close to Patmos, that the first church John is told to address is at Ephesus (Rev. 1:11<sup>+</sup>; 2:1<sup>+</sup>).

The prominence of this church is reflected in its being the possible recipient of as many as eight NT books: the gospel of John, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation. Besides, Paul was ministering in Ephesus at the time he wrote 1 Corinthians.<sup>3</sup>

One of the principles of Scripture is that those who have received the *greater revelation* have *greater responsibility* for correctly responding to what they have been shown. Peter mentions this principle: “For the time *has come* for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if *it begins* with us first, what will *be* the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1Pe. 4:17). This may explain why the letters to the churches which appear in Rev. 2<sup>+</sup> and 3<sup>+</sup> precede the portion of the book which describes God’s “correction” of the non-believing (Rev. 6<sup>+</sup> and beyond).

### 4.15.1 - Why these Seven Churches?

It is known that there were other churches in Asia Minor at the time John wrote.<sup>4</sup> Some of them are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture:

There were other churches in Asia at the close of the first century. The NT itself refers to congregations at Troas (Acts 20:5-12), Colosse (Col. 1:2), and Hierapolis (Col. 4:13). There might also have been churches at Magnesia and Tralles, since Ignatius wrote to them less than twenty years later.<sup>5</sup>

The question naturally arises as to why Jesus chose *these* [seven churches](#) from among all the churches in the region? And why *seven*? The answer to the first question would seem to be found in their geographical distribution which facilitated communication by letter along the established trade routes between the cities:

Ephesus was the messenger’s natural place of entry to the mainland of the province of Asia, and the other cities lay in sequence on a circular route round its inner territories. It may readily be supposed that a regular itinerary had been perfected since Pauline times and that the seven focal cities on the route had acquired a special importance as organization and distributive centres for the church of the area.<sup>6</sup>

It is not at first sight easy to explain the principle on which the Apocalyptic list of seven has been formed. Why does it include two

comparatively small towns, Thyatira and Philadelphia, while Tralles and Magnesia, Hierapolis and Colossae, Alexandria Troas and Adramyttium, Miletus and Halicarnassus, Dorylaeum and Synnada, are passed by? Some at least of these cities had Christian communities before the end of the first century; . . . the first three cities in St John's list were by common consent primary cities in Asia, and they stand in the order which would normally be followed, at least by a resident at Ephesus. Moreover Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum were in direct communication with one another by the great road which the Romans had constructed shortly after their occupation of Asia. So far then both the selection of the names and their order are easy to understand. But why should not the Apocalyptic messenger have been sent on from Pergamum to Cyzicus or to Troas? Why was his course at this point diverted to the inland towns of Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, . . . all the Seven Cities stand on the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Province, . . . Planted at these seven centres, the Apocalypse would spread through their neighbourhoods, and from thence to the rest of the province.<sup>7</sup>

As to why *seven* churches were chosen: the [symbolic meaning of seven](#) indicates completeness or perfection. It appears to be a deliberate choice, like the many other occurrences of seven in the book of Revelation, to signify that these seven churches typify all churches in every age.

#### 4.15.1.1 - Representative of All Churches of All Ages

The [seven churches](#) appear to typify a broad range of strengths and weaknesses which are found in any church in any location in any age. Each letter to an individual church is given for the benefit of all seven churches of the Revelation (and all saints of every age: Rev. 2:7<sup>+</sup>, 11<sup>+</sup>, 17<sup>+</sup>, 29<sup>+</sup>; 3:6<sup>+</sup>, 13<sup>+</sup>, 22<sup>+</sup>).<sup>8</sup>

This theory says the churches, which were actual existing congregations, are like seventypes of churches that one might at any given time in the history of the church. The historicity of these assemblies is not denied, but this view holds that the Lord chose to single them out because they represent seven kinds of problems that typify various congregations of believers.<sup>9</sup>

Of this larger Epistle, namely the Apocalypse itself, these seven Churches are the original receivers; not as having a nearer or greater interest in it than any other portion of the Universal Church; though as members of that Church they have an interest in it as near and great as can be conceived (Rev. 1:3<sup>+</sup>; 22:18-19<sup>+</sup>); but on account of this their representative character.<sup>10</sup>

These letters have the same universal application to the saints of all ages as the epistles written to various churches in the [NT](#):

These seven Epistles, however primarily addressed to these seven Churches of Asia, were also written for the edification of the Universal Church; in the same way, that is, as St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, or to Timothy, or St. James' to the Dispersion, were written with this intention. The warnings, the incentives, the promises, the consolations, and, generally, the whole instruction in righteousness in these contained, are for every one in all times, so far as they may meet the several cases and conditions of men. . . Thus far there can be no question. "All Scripture," and therefore this Scripture, "was written for our learning."<sup>11</sup>

It also seems probable that these churches were the ones with which John enjoyed the closest relationship.<sup>12</sup>

##### 4.15.1.1.1 - Historical Significance

A number of these churches remained viable for many years beyond the date of John's writing.<sup>13</sup> We have record of early documents which were written to some of them:

The seven accepted letters of Ignatius, datable to about AD 115, are of great value to our study, for three of them were addressed to three of our seven churches, Ephesus, Smyrna and Philadelphia, and a fourth to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. It is not clear whether Ignatius knew the Revelation. . . . His impressions of the churches are independent.<sup>14</sup>

Several of the early Church Fathers, who attest to the [canonicity](#) of the book of Revelation and to its [authorship](#) at the hand of John the Apostle, lived among these churches to which John wrote. Their testimony regarding these facts is especially weighty since they were intimately familiar with the region and times of which John wrote.

#### 4.15.1.2 - Believers and Unbelievers

The letters recognize that each church is composed of both believers and church-going unbelievers. "Church" ([κκλησία](#) [Ekklēsia]) is a compound word made up of "from" or "out" ([ἐκ](#) [ek]) and "I call" ([καλέω](#) [kaleō]) and is used in a variety of contexts:

This word [ecclesia] translated church or assembly is found in at least four important meanings in the New Testament. It is used (1) to mean an assembly of people. In this sense it has no special theological meaning. It can refer to Israel as a gathered people in the wilderness (Acts 7:38) or a regular assembly of citizens (Acts 19:39) or a group of people gathered for religious worship (Heb. 2:12).

(2) The same word is used for an assembly of Christians in a local church (Acts 8:1, 8:3; 11:22, 26) and in the plural for a group of such churches (1Cor. 16:19; Gal. 1:2). Each assembly or church has a local gathering composed of professed Christians. That all in the assembly are not necessarily true believers is clear from the messages to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2:1+3:22+). (3) Ecclesia is also used of the total of professing Christians without reference to locality and is practically parallel in this sense to Christendom (Acts 12:1; Rom. 16:16; 1Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Rev. 2:1-29+, 3:1-22+; etc.). The same word is used (4) of the body of Christ, composed of those baptized by the Holy Spirit into the church (1Cor. 12:13). Ecclesia used in this connection becomes a technical word referring to the saints of this age.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to recognize that the letters to these [seven churches](#) use the term “church” in the sense of a local gathering of *professing believers*. It is not used in a technical sense to describe all those who are known to have been born again—the true *body of Christ* (Luke 15:24, 32; John 3:3, 7; Gal. 6:15; 1Pe. 1:3, 23; 1Jn. 2:29; 3:9; 5:1, 18). If we fail to understand that the letters address both believers and “church-going” unbelievers, then the promises attending each letter will be misconstrued.<sup>16</sup>

[the letters] involve the visible church rather than the invisible Church. The latter is the Body of Messiah, composed of all true believers since Pentecost. It is sometimes referred to as the Universal Church. But the visible church is the local body or local church, which may have both believers and unbelievers. It includes all professing believers whether they really are or not.<sup>17</sup>

The omniscience and piercing gaze of Jesus is evident by His detailed knowledge of the condition of each church. Jesus “knows” their works (Rev. 2:2+, 9+, 13+, 19+; 3:1+, 8+, 15+). “Know” ([Οἶδα](#) [Oida], Rev. 2:2+) expresses the Lord’s self-claim of knowledge in each of the seven messages in contrast to [γινώσκω](#) [ginōskō] (“I know”), which speaks of progress of knowledge, oida reflects full or complete knowledge. It depicts absolute clearness of mental vision, which photographs all facts of life as they pass. It, not ginōskō, is always the word used of Christ’s knowledge in Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

We call the contents of these chapters *Epistles*; but they are not so much messages from an absent Lord as sentences of a present Judge, engaged in the solemn act of inspection and decision.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4.15.1.3 - Who is the Overcomer?

Each letter closes with one or more promises for “he who overcomes.” The question arises, “Who is the overcomer?”

The question that needs resolving involves a proper identification of this overcomer. Does he belong to a special class of Christians composed of those who are spiritual and not carnal? Or is he part of a special group of Christians who are set apart for eventual martyrdom? Or is “overcomer” simply another name for those who are genuinely regenerate believers?<sup>20</sup>

A survey of the rewards promised for the overcomer in each church shows that they correlate with the general benefits of salvation offered to all believers (Rev. 2:7+, 11+, 17+, 26-27+; 3:5+, 12+, 21+). These promises describe the rewards for true believers *within* the larger body of each church, composed of both true and professing Christians.

Almost all the references to overcoming mention a promise for all believers, promises that accompany salvation. . . . It would seem strange to think of only **some** believers eating of the tree of life, or not being hurt by the second death, or not being clothed in white garments. [emphasis added]<sup>21</sup>

As to the definition of *overcomer*, it can best be understood in light of what John says elsewhere:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. **Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?** (1Jn 5:4-5) [emphasis added]

The overcomers in each church do so, not *by* their actions—rather their actions are an *indication* of their identification with the Overcomer, Jesus Christ (John 16:33; 1Jn. 4:4). John indicates that those who overcome do so by way of their relationship with God:

I write to you, fathers, because **you have known** Him *who is* from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because **you have overcome** the wicked one. I write to you, little children, because **you have known** the Father. (1Jn 2:13) [emphasis added]

Those who overcome do so by trusting in Christ and His sacrifice, remaining unwavering in their faith, even when faced with death (Rev. 12:11+). They inherit all things because of their *position in Christ* as sons of God (Rev. 21:7+).

Promises to the Overcomer

Church	Promise
Ephesus	To eat from the tree of life (Rev. 2:7+).

Smyrna	Not be hurt by the second death (Rev. 2:11 <sup>+</sup> ).
Pergamos	Hidden manna to eat, a white stone with a new name written (Rev. 2:17 <sup>+</sup> ).
Thyatira	Power over the nations, the morning star (Rev. 2:26-28 <sup>+</sup> ).
Sardis	Clothed in white garments, name not blotted out from the Book of Life, name confessed before the Father and angels (Rev. 3:5-6 <sup>+</sup> ).
Philadelphia	Made a pillar in the temple of God, name of God, New Jerusalem, and Jesus' new name written upon (Rev. 3:12 <sup>+</sup> ).
Laodicea	Sit with Jesus on His throne (Rev. 3:21 <sup>+</sup> ).

#### 4.15.1.4 - The Structure of the Letters

The seven letters to the [seven churches](#) follow a well-developed pattern.<sup>22</sup>

They are constructed precisely on the same model. They every one of them contain. . . **1.** A command . . . to the seer that he should write to the Angel of the Church. **2.** One or more glorious titles which Christ claims for Himself. . **3.** The action message from Christ to the Angel of the Church. . . **4.** A promise to the faithful. . . **5.** . . . an exhortation which give a universal character to these particular addresses.<sup>23</sup>

The titles used by each letter are taken primarily from John's vision of Jesus in the first chapter (Rev. 1:12-18<sup>+</sup>) and relate to the situation of the particular church.<sup>24</sup>

##### 4.15.1.4.1 - Ephesus

#### The Letter to Ephesus

Attribute	Description
Meaning	desirable, darling, beloved, relaxation <sup>25</sup>
Titles <sup>26</sup>	To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:' (Rev. 2:1 <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. (Rev. 2:2-3 <sup>+</sup> ) But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (Rev. 2:6 <sup>+</sup> )
Criticism	Nevertheless I have <i>this</i> against you, that you have left your firstlove. (Rev. 2:4 <sup>+</sup> )
Exhortation	Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. (Rev. 2:5 <sup>+</sup> ) <sup>27</sup>
Promises	To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God. (Rev. 2:7b <sup>+</sup> )
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 2:1</a>

##### 4.15.1.4.2 - Smyrna

#### The Letter to Smyrna

Attribute	Description
Meaning	myrrh, bitter <sup>28</sup>
Titles	And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:' (Rev. 2:8 <sup>+</sup> )

Commendation	I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and <i>I know</i> the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but <i>are</i> a synagogue of Satan. (Rev. 2:9 <sup>+</sup> )
Criticism	<b>None!</b>
Exhortation	Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw <i>some</i> of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. (Rev. 2:10 <sup>+</sup> a)
Promises	Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev. 2:10 <sup>+</sup> b)
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 2:8</a>

#### 4.15.1.4.3 - Pergamos

##### The Letter to Pergamos

Attribute	Description
Meaning	much marriage, thoroughly marriage, <sup>29</sup> high tower, <sup>30</sup> parchment <sup>31</sup>
Titles	And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:' (Rev. 2:12 <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne <i>is</i> . And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas <i>was</i> My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (Rev. 2:13 <sup>+</sup> )
Criticism	But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine oBalaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. (Rev. 2:14-15 <sup>+</sup> )
Exhortation	Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. (Rev. 2:16 <sup>+</sup> )
Promises	He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives <i>it</i> . (Rev. 2:17 <sup>+</sup> )
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 2:12</a>

#### 4.15.1.4.4 - Thyatira

##### The Letter to Thyatira

Attribute	Description
Meaning	odor of affliction, continual sacrifice <sup>32</sup> , feminine oppression <sup>33</sup>
Titles	And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass:' (Rev. 2:18 <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and <i>as</i> for your works, the last <i>are</i> more than the first (Rev. 2:19 <sup>+</sup> ).
Criticism	Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that womanJezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent (Rev. 2:20-21 <sup>+</sup> ).
Exhortation	Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. But hold fast what you have till I come (Rev. 2:22-25 <sup>+</sup> ).

Promises	And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations— ‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’ —as I also have received from My Father; and I will give him the morning star (Rev. 2:26-28 <sup>+</sup> ).
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 2:18</a>

#### 4.15.1.4.5 - Sardis

##### The Letter to Sardis

Attribute	Description
Meaning	remnant, <sup>34</sup> those escaping, <sup>35</sup> renovation, <sup>36</sup> the sun, red ones, prince of joy <sup>37</sup>
Titles	And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: (Rev. 3:1a <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments (Rev. 3:4 <sup>+</sup> ).
Criticism	I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead (Rev. 3:1b <sup>+</sup> ).
Exhortation	Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you (Rev. 3:2-3 <sup>+</sup> ).
Promises	You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels (Rev. 3:4-6 <sup>+</sup> ).
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 3:1</a>

#### 4.15.1.4.6 - Philadelphia

##### The Letter to Philadelphia

Attribute	Description
Meaning	brotherly love
Titles	And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘These things says He who is holy, He who is true, He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens:’ (Rev. 3:7 <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name (Rev. 3:8 <sup>+</sup> ) you have kept my command to persevere (Rev. 3:10 <sup>+</sup> ).
Criticism	<b>None!</b>
Exhortation	Indeed I will make <i>those</i> of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you. Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown (Rev. 3:9-11 <sup>+</sup> ).
Promises	He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And <i>I will write on him</i> My new name (Rev. 3:12 <sup>+</sup> ).
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 3:7</a>

#### 4.15.1.4.7 - Laodicea

## The Letter to Laodicea

Attribute	Description
Meaning	rule of the people
Titles	And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:' (Rev. 3:14 <sup>+</sup> )
Commendation	<b>None!</b>
Criticism	I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' —and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked — (Rev. 3:15-17 <sup>+</sup> )
Exhortation	I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, <i>that</i> the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent (Rev. 3:18-19 <sup>+</sup> ).
Promises	Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Rev. 3:20-21 <sup>+</sup> ).
Commentary	<a href="#">Revelation 3:14</a>

### 4.15.1.5 - Representative of Seven Stages of Church History?

A number of expositors down through history have held that the [seven churches](#) represent seven sequential stages of church history.<sup>38</sup> While we do not favor this view, it is instructive to understand the arguments for and against such a view since it will frequently be encountered by students of the book of Revelation. The view is known as the historical-prophetical view:

The historical-prophetical interpretation . . . states that while all seventypes of churches always exist, one type dominates a particular era of church history. Throughout church history all seven types of churches will be present, but one type will tend to dominate a particular period of church history. . . .<sup>39</sup>

Fruchtenbaum responds to the assertion that such a view of the letters to the churches violates the [Golden Rule of Interpretation](#):

The question this . . . perspective raises is: Does this view not violate *The Golden Rule of Interpretation* and the principles of a literal hermeneutic? If it could be clearly shown that all that was said in a particular letter can be or was true of that particular church or that type of church, then the answer would be: "Yes." But if statements are made that cannot in any way be true of that particular church, then the answer would be: "No." This author would prefer to limit the interpretation to that church only or to that type of church only, but now and then statements are made which render that impossible. . . .<sup>40</sup>

Certain statements made to individual churches cannot be true of the strictly local situation, and they must have a far wider meaning. . . . One example is the promise to keep the Church of Philadelphia from *the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole earth*. The time is long past that this promise could be kept only to that particular church, for that local church no longer exists; nor can this promise be limited to that type of church because other types of churches of these two chapters will also share in the promise. . . . It is statements like this [the use of the Phoenician name Jezebel at Thyatira] that lend credence to the historical-prophetical interpretation. . . . In [Rev. 2:22<sup>+</sup>], the woman is to be cast into the Great Tribulation. This means that unlike the true Church, the Roman Catholic Church [represented by Jezebel] will go into the Great Tribulation . . . This is another example of a passage that simply cannot be limited to the local situation.<sup>41</sup>

Fruchtenbaum suggests the following historical correlation.<sup>42</sup> We've augmented Fruchtenbaum's suggestions with those of Bullinger that each assembly denotes a unique phase in *Israel's history*.<sup>43</sup>

#### Seven Stages of Church History

Church	Church History Typified	Dates	Israel's History Typified <sup>44</sup>	Verses



Ephesus	The Apostolic Church	A.D. 30-100	The Day of Israel's Espousals (Exodus)	Rev. 2:1-7 <sup>±</sup>
Smyrna	The Church of the Roman Persecution	A.D. 100 - 313	The Period of Israel's Wanderings (Numbers)	Rev. 2:8-11 <sup>±</sup>
Pergamum	The Church of the Age of Constantine	The Wilderness Period (Numbers)	A.D. 313-600 <sup>45</sup>	Rev. 2:12-17 <sup>±</sup>
Thyatira	The Church of the Dark Ages	A.D. 600-1517 <sup>46</sup>	The Wilderness Period (Numbers)	Rev. 2:18-29 <sup>±</sup>
Sardis	The Church of the Reformation	A.D. 1517-1648	The Period of Israel's Kings (1 and 2 Kings)	Rev. 3:1-6 <sup>±</sup>
Philadelphia	The Church of the Great Missionary Movement	A.D. 1648-1900	The Period of Israel's Removal (1 and 2 Chronicles)	Rev. 3:7-13 <sup>±</sup>
Laodicea	The Church of the Apostasy	A.D. 1900-present day	The Period of Judah's Kings (2 Chronicles)	Rev. 3:14-22 <sup>±</sup>

It is our view that the historical-prophetical view suffers from numerous problems.

1. There is significant disagreement between different proponents of the view concerning which periods of history are represented, both their characteristics and dates. In this, the historical-prophetical scheme suffers from the same problems as the [Historicist Interpretation](#) of Revelation.<sup>47</sup>
2. Church history is far more complex than can be reflected by seven periods sharing global characteristics.<sup>48</sup>
3. The correlation made between the letters and church history is entirely westernized and fails to take into account important movements and activities elsewhere in the world.
4. If the churches truly are representative of the course of church history, this fact must have been concealed from the early church or it would have destroyed the concept of [imminency](#).<sup>49</sup>
5. The historical-prophetical interpretation seems to read more into the text than what is intended.<sup>50</sup>

Trench observes;

The multitude of dissertations, essays, books, which have been, and are still being written, in support of this scheme of interpretation, must remain a singular monument of wasted ingenuity and misapplied toil . . . a future looking into Scripture for that which is not to be found there . . . a resolution to draw out from it that which he who draws out must first himself have put in. Men will never thus make Scripture richer. They will have made it much poorer for themselves, if they nourish themselves out of it with the fancies of men, in place of the truths of God.<sup>51</sup>

For further information on this subject, see [Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 505-515].

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), li-iii.

<sup>2</sup>Photograph courtesy of [NASA](#).

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 130.

<sup>4</sup>"There were other churches in the Asian province: Colosse, near Laodicea, to which Paul wrote in one of his epistles; Troas, where he held a meeting and restored Eutychus to life (Acts 20:5-12); Magnesia and Tralles, to which Ignatius indited letters at the beginning of the second century. Colosse and Troas were certainly founded before the writing of the Apocalypse, and probably the others were also."—Merrill C. Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 29. "There were more than seven churches in the region meant by 'Asia,' for instance, Magnesia and Tralles."—A. R. Fausset, "[The Revelation of St. John the Divine](#)," in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, [A Commentary. Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 1877), Rev. 1:1.

<sup>5</sup>Alan F. Johnson, [Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 23.



<sup>6</sup>Colin J. Hemer, [\*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 15.

<sup>7</sup>Swete, [\*The Apocalypse of St. John\*](#) liii-liv.

<sup>8</sup>"The [Muratorian Canon] states in lines 47-59, "For also John, in his Apocalypse, while writing to the seven churches, yet speaks to all."—Mark Hitchcock, ["The Stake in the Heart—The A.D. 95 Date of Revelation,"](#) in Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, eds., [\*The End Times Controversy\*](#) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2003), 132.

<sup>9</sup>Mal Couch, ["Ecclesiology in the Book of Revelation,"](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [\*A Bible Handbook to Revelation\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 125.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Chenevix Trench, [\*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia\*](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1861), 5.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>12</sup>"These adequately represented the various spiritual situations of the surrounding churches at the time. Then too they were probably the ones with which John enjoyed the closest relationship."—Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 64.

<sup>13</sup>Bullinger holds the unusual view that the church has been raptured before the book of Revelation opens. He believes the seven churches of Revelation 2+ and 3+ are seven, literal, Jewish churches or assemblies yet to come. [E. W. Bullinger, [\*Commentary On Revelation\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1984, 1935), xiii] He believes this explains the lack of historical evidence for the existence of some of the churches which some have noted. "Tertullian (about 145-220) says that leaders of certain sects, such as Cerdon and Marcion, rejected the Apocalypse on the ground that it could not have been written by John, inasmuch as (among other reasons) there was no Christian Church in existence at Thyatira in the time of John. Epiphanius (who wrote about A.D. 367) deals with the Alogi, a sect which disputed the genuineness of the Apocalypse, and on the same grounds. . . . The answer of Epiphanius acknowledged the historical fact: but his answer was that St. John wrote to the church at Thyatira, not because it was then in existence, but because it would be at some future time. . . . In A.D. 363 was held the Council of Laodicea. It was attended by thirty-two bishops of Asia, among whom was the bishop of Ephesus. This Council framed a list or canon of the sacred books, but the Apocalypse was not included in the catalogue. How can we account for this as a historical fact if these seven churches were all *then existent*; and if these epistles were sent to them at that time, Laodicea being one of them?"—*Ibid.*, 70-71. Thomas counters: "The basis of the assumption [that no church existed in Thyatira] being statements by Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) and by Epiphanius (about A.D. 367). . . . Tertullian does not agree with the faithfulness of this assertion, but merely cites the claims of certain sects. Epiphanius too was answering unorthodox objections of the Alogi to the genuineness of the Apocalypse. The absurdity of this position is readily seen when one recollects the evidence of the Apocalypse itself. . . . [The author] would not have assumed as fact a thing known to be erroneous. How much more true this is with the inspired apostle as author."—Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 506. This view seems implausible when one considers that these churches, once viable, have lain in ruins for most of two millennia. Are we to suppose they will spring back to life at the time of the end?

<sup>14</sup>Hemer, [\*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting\*](#) 19.

<sup>15</sup>John F. Walvoord, [\*The Millennial Kingdom\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 224-225.

<sup>16</sup>The "overcomer" (Rev. 2:7+, 11+, 17+, 26+; 3:5+, 12+, 21+; 21:7+) is not a special class of Christian, but a simple believer (1Jn. 5:4).

<sup>17</sup>Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [\*The Footsteps of Messiah\*](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 47.

<sup>18</sup>[Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 133]. See also [Swete, [\*The Apocalypse of St. John\*](#) 24].

<sup>19</sup>J. A. Seiss, [\*The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 67.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 151.

<sup>21</sup>Mal Couch, ["Soteriology in the Book of Revelation,"](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [\*A Bible Handbook to Revelation\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 164-165.

<sup>22</sup>See also [Monty S. Mills, [\*Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John\*](#) (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1987), Rev. 2:8]

<sup>23</sup>Trench, [\*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia\*](#) 65-66.

<sup>24</sup>"The first thing in common is that every letter has a description of the Messiah taken from the description of the Glorified Son of Man found in chapter one."—Fruchtenbaum, [\*The Footsteps of Messiah\*](#), 47. "Each feature thus emphasized has an appropriate connection with the nature of the church, as if the manifestation of Christ were specially designed for that church. To the careless assembly at Ephesus He is the inspector who walks among the lampstands; to the oppressed flock of Smyrna threatened by persecution He is the risen Lord whom death could not destroy; to the lax church at Pergamum He appears with the sharp two-edged sword of judgment. Each feature of the portrait is made significant for the addresses."—Tenney, [\*Interpreting Revelation\*](#), 123.

<sup>25</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, [\*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 151.

<sup>26</sup>Taken primarily from Rev. 1:12-18<sup>+</sup>.

<sup>27</sup>"Gibbon (*Decline and Fall*, c. lxiv.), . . . writes like one who almost believed that the threatenings and promises of God did fulfill themselves in history: 'In the loss of Ephesus the Christians deplored the fall of the first Angel, the extinction of the first candlestick, of the Revelations; the desolation is complete; and the temple of Diana or the church of Mary will equally elude the search of the curious traveller. The circus and three stately theatres of Laodicea are now peopled with wolves and foxes; Sardis is reduced to a miserable village; the God of Mahomet, without a rival or a son, is invoked in the mosques of Thyatira and Pergamus, and the populousness of Smyrna is supported by the foreign trade of the Franks and Armenians. Philadelphia alone has been saved by prophecy, or courage. . . . Among the Greek colonies and Churches of Asia, Philadelphia is still erect—a column in a scene of ruins, —a pleasing example that the paths of honour and safety may sometimes be the same.'—Trench, [\*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia\*](#), 187-188.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 158.

<sup>29</sup>Pentecost, [\*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology\*](#), 152.

<sup>30</sup> [Seiss, [\*The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation\*](#), 71] and [Pentecost, [\*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology\*](#), 152].

<sup>31</sup>"This city, whose name means 'parchment,' was where parchment was first manufactured."—Thomas, [\*Revelation 1-7\*](#), 177.

<sup>32</sup>Pentecost, [\*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology\*](#), 152.

<sup>33</sup>"If we take it as a compound of [θυγατρὸς](#) [thygatēs] and [τεῖρω](#) [teirō], we get the idea of feminine oppression. The false prophets who first enticed the members of this church into apostasy were women."—Seiss, [\*The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation\*](#), 71.

<sup>34</sup>"[Some] have derived it from the Hebrew, and have assigned it the signification of *remnant*, or *an escaped few*."—Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Pentecost, [\*Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology\*](#), 152.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Jerome Smith, [\*The New Treasury of Scripture Knowledge\*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), Rev. 3:1.

<sup>38</sup>"They affirm that we have in them, besides counsels to the Churches named in each, a prophetic outline of seven successive *periods* of the Church's history; dividing, as they do, into these seven portions the whole time intervening between Christ's Ascension and his return in glory."—Trench, [\*Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia\*](#), 224. "The notion itself undoubtedly dates back to a period anterior to the Reformation. The *Fratres Spirituales*, or more rigid Franciscans, who refused the mitigations of the strictness of St. Francis' rule, in which the majority of his followers allowed themselves, and who on this account separated themselves from them, and from the Church which sanctioned such relaxations, are the first among whom this scheme of interpretation assumed any prominence."—Ibid., 227.

<sup>39</sup>Fruchtenbaum, [\*The Footsteps of Messiah\*](#), 48-49.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 49, 58, 60.

<sup>42</sup> [Ibid., 50-90] A fatal weakness of this view, in our opinion, is the variation in the results of different expositors. For example, see LaHaye. "Chart of Church Age View"—Tim LaHaye, [Revelation Unveiled](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 24. Even Fruchtenbaum admits a reduction in his emphasis on the interpretation of the letters to the seven churches as historical periods: [Fruchtenbaum, [The Footsteps of Messiah](#), xxxi].

<sup>43</sup> Bullinger, [Commentary On Revelation](#), 73-86.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> "300 to 800 A.D."—Pentecost, [Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology](#), 153.

<sup>46</sup> "800 to 1517."—Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "There is no . . . accurate correspondence . . . the interpreters of the historico-prophetical school, besides their controversy with those who deny *in toto* what they affirm, have also an intestine strife among themselves. Each one has his own solution of the enigma, his own distribution of the several epochs; or, if this is too much to affirm, there is, at any rate, nothing approaching to a general *consensus* among them."—Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#), 234. "Schaff, in speaking of the periods of church history, notes, 'In regard to the number and length of periods there is, indeed, no unanimity.' He then goes on to observe that if any general agreement exists, it is in respect to a threefold division into ancient (A.D. 1-590), medieval (A.D. 590-1517) and modern (A.D. 1517-1880) periods. If a further breakdown is desired, Schaff proposes a division of each of the three into three subdivisions, resulting in nine, not seven periods of church history."—Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 510.

<sup>48</sup> "One has to force the specific problems of each congregation into a certain period of church history. And those issues do not fit as easily as one may wish. Church history is far more complex."—Couch, [Ecclesiology in the Book of Revelation](#), 127.

<sup>49</sup> "If the churches were genuinely prophetic of the course of church history rather than representative in every age, those who hold to the imminent return of Christ would have been quickly disillusioned once they realized this."—Johnson, [Revelation: The Expositor's Bible Commentary](#), 24.

<sup>50</sup> "We ask, what slightest hint or intimation does the Spirit of God give that we have here to do with the great successive acts and epochs of the kingdom of God in the course of its gradual evolution here upon earth? Where are the finger-posts pointing the way? What is there, for instance, of chronological succession? Does not every thing, on the contrary, mark *simultaneity*, not *succession*? The seven candlesticks are seen at the same instant; the seven Churches named in the same breath."—Trench, [Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia](#), 233. "It will be good always to remember, that there is a temptation to make Scripture mean *more* than in the intention of the holy Ghost it does mean, as well as a temptation to make it mean *less*; and that we are bound by equally solemn obligations not to thrust on it something of ours, as not to subtract from it any thing of its own (Rev. 22:18-19<sup>+</sup>); the interpretation *in excess* proving often nearly, or quite, as mischievous as that *in defect*."—Ibid., 221.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 237.

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