

Asia Minor: the 'Seven Churches'

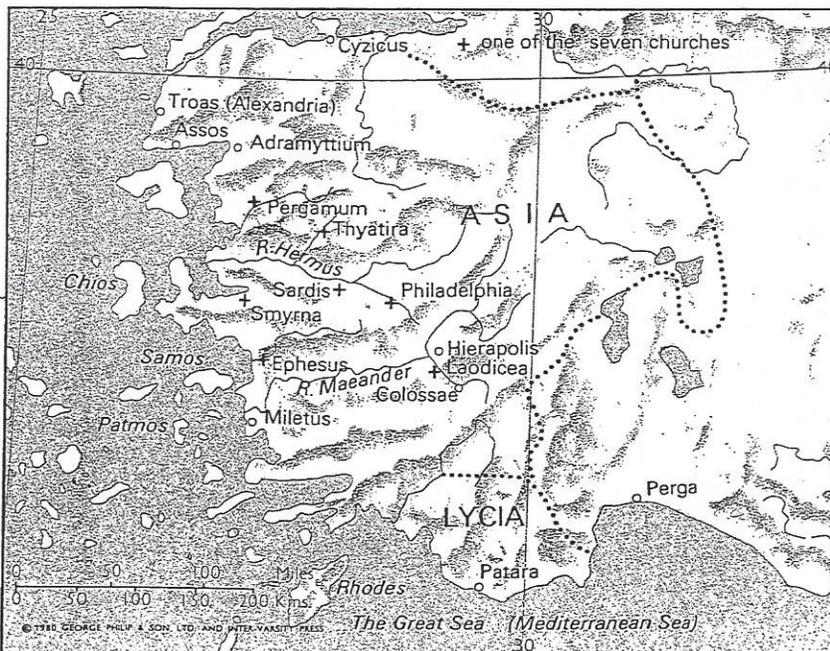
The 'Seven Churches' are those which received messages of encouragement and rebuke from God, through the revelation to John on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9 – 3:22). They were all situated in the Roman province of Asia, in the W of what is now Turkey. In order of mention they are:

1. Ephesus

Ephesus was the most important city in the province but is now uninhabited. It was situated at the mouth of the Cayster River between the mountain range of Coressus and the sea. A magnificent road 11 m (c. 36 ft) wide and lined with columns ran down through the city to the fine harbour, which served both as a great export centre at the end of the Asiatic caravan-route and also as a natural landing-point from Rome. The city has been undergoing excavation for many years and is probably the most extensive and impressive ruined site of Asia Minor. This site was originally sacred to the worship of the Anatolian fertility goddess, later identified with Greek Artemis and Latin Diana.

The church in Ephesus is addressed first of the seven (Rev. 2:1-7), as being the most important church in the *de facto* capital, and as being the landing-place for a messenger from Patmos and standing at the head of a circular road joining the seven cities in order. This church is flourishing, but is troubled by false teachers, and has lost its 'first love'. The false apostles (2:2) are most probably like the Nicolaitans, who seem to have advocated compromise with the power of paganism for the Christian under pressure. The Ephesians were steadfast, but deficient in love.

The 'Seven churches of Asia' of Rev. 1-3 and the island of Patmos where John received the revelation.



2. Smyrna

Smyrna is modern Izmir, the second largest city in Asiatic Turkey.

The gospel probably reached Smyrna at an early date, presumably from Ephesus (Acts 19:10). The 'angel of the church in Smyrna' is the recipient of the second of the letters of the 'seven churches ... in Asia' (Rev. 2:8-11). As in other commercial cities, the church encountered opposition from the Jews (Rev. 2:9; cf. 3:9). The description of the Christ as the one who was dead and lived again (v.8) may allude to the resurgence of the city to new prosperity after a long period in obscurity. The 'crown' (v.10) was rich in associations at Smyrna. It may suggest the victor's wreath at the games, or current forms of eulogy which used the image of the beauty and glory of the city and its buildings. Cf. also James 1:12. The call to faithfulness (v.10) is a call to the church to fulfil in the deepest way the historic reputation of the city.

3. Pergamum

Pergamum is listed third of the 'seven churches' (Rev. 2:12-17); the order suits its position in geographical sequence. This was the place 'where Satan's throne is' (Rev. 2:13). The phrase has been referred to the complex of pagan cults, of Zeus, Athena, Dionysus and Asclepius, established by the Attalid kings, that of Asclepius Soter (the 'saviour', 'healer') being of special importance. These cults are illustrative of the religious history of Pergamum, but the main allusion is probably to emperor worship. This was where the worship of the divine emperor had been made the touch-stone of civic loyalty under Domitian. It marked a crisis for the church in Asia. Antipas (v.13) is probably cited as a representative (perhaps the first) of those who were brought to judgment and execution here for their faith.

4. Thyatira

The Thyatiran church was the fourth of the 'seven churches' that are in Asia' (Rev. 1:11). Some of the symbols in the letter to the church (Rev. 2:18-29) seem to allude to the circumstances of the city. The description of the Christ (v.18) is appropriate for a city renowned for its brass-working (*chalkolibanos*, translated 'fine brass', may be a technical term for some local type of brassware). The terms of the promise (vv.26-27) may reflect the long military history of the city. 'Jezebel' (the name is probably symbolic) was evidently a woman who was accepted within the fellowship of the church (v.20). Her teaching is nowhere recorded but probably advocated a measure of compromise with some activity which was implicitly pagan.

Early church congregations

'overcome' are promised the ultimate stability of being built into the temple of God.

5. **Sardis**
Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and was renowned for its wealth, especially under Croesus.

The letter to 'the angel of the church in Sardis' (Rev. 3:1-6) suggests that the early Christian community there was imbued with the same spirit as the city, resting on its past reputation and without any present achievement, and failing, as the city had twice failed, to learn from its past and be vigilant. The symbol of 'white garments' (vv. 4-5) was rich in meaning in a city noted for its luxury clothing trade; the faithful few who are vigilant shall be arrayed to share in the triumphal coming of their Lord.

6. Philadelphia

The letter to 'the angel of the church in Philadelphia' (Rev. 3:7-13) probably alludes to some of the circumstances of the city. As Philadelphia was renowned for his loyalty to his brother, so the church, the true Philadelphia, inherits and fulfils his character by its steadfast loyalty to Christ (vv. 8, 10). As the city stands by the 'open door' of a region from which its wealth derives, so the church is given an 'open door' of opportunity to exploit (v. 8; cf. 2 Cor. 2:12). The symbols of the 'crown' and the 'temple' (vv. 11-12) point to a contrast between the games and religious festivals of the city. In contrast with the impermanence of life in a city prone to earthquake, those who

7. Laodicea

Laodicea was a city of SW Phrygia. It was founded by the Seleucid Antiochus II in the third century BC and called after his wife Laodice. It was a prosperous commercial centre, lying near Hierapolis and Colossae in the valley of the Lycus, a tributary of the Maeander.

The last of the letters to 'the seven churches ... in Asia' was addressed to Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22). Its imagery owes relatively little to the OT, but contains pointed allusions to the character and circumstances of the city. For all its wealth, it could produce neither the healing power of hot water, like its neighbour Hierapolis, nor the refreshing power of cold water to be found at Colossae, but merely lukewarm water, useful only as an emetic. The church was charged with a similar uselessness: it was self-sufficient rather than half-hearted. Like the city, it thought it had 'need of nothing'. In fact it was spiritually poor, naked and blind, and needed 'gold', 'white garments' and 'eyesalve' more effective than its bankers, clothiers and doctors could supply (v. 18). Like citizens inhospitable to a traveller who offers them priceless goods, the Laodiceans had closed their doors and left their real Provider outside. Christ turns in loving appeal to the individual (v. 20).

Early church congregations of the first century AD (shown in red) and churches founded before Diocletian's persecution of AD 304 (black).

