

Handout 3: Revelation, Background to Chapters 2 & 3 (Talk 3)
David Crabtree, Reformation Fellowship, July 11, 2021

I. Introduction

- A. The next two chapters are the letters to the churches.
 - 1. When I have read Revelation, I have skimmed these.
 - a) I wanted to get to the good part.
 - b) They are cryptic.
 - 2. They are much more important than I had realized.
 - a) They raise the very important question—Are you ready?
- B. Last week we saw the risen Messiah as high priest.
 - 1. The one who holds the saints' fates in his hands
 - a) He is ready for the judgment to come.
 - 2. The next two chapters contain letters to the churches.
- C. Major Assumption—The challenges facing believers in Asia Minor were very similar to the challenges that will face saints leading up to the Day of the Lord.
 - 1. We can get some idea as to what is coming by reconstructing the issues that those saints faced.
 - 2. This is difficult.
 - a) We don't have a lot of data to work from.
 - b) This is not kings and battles.
 - (1) This is the subject of social history.
 - (a) Using various kinds of evidence: archaeology, study of inscriptions, bank and temple records, etc.
 - c) So the reconstruction is spotty.
 - (1) We often can't get the answers to questions that we would like.
- D. So I need to begin by trying to create in your minds a picture of the cultural and social setting of the world in which these churches were set.

II. Cities of Asia Minor

- A. The west coast of Asia Minor was the most sophisticated area in the entire Roman Empire.
 - 1. It was the most urban, most literate, wealthiest area.
 - a) At the beginning of the first century, it was bankrupt.
 - (1) Still recovering from the Hellenistic-period unrest
 - b) But by the end of the first century, it was one of the wealthiest parts of the Roman Empire.
 - c) It was a center of Greek culture.
 - (1) Greek culture was the dominant culture of the time.
 - (a) Culturally, it was more dominant than Rome or Italy.

- (b) It was like California vis-a-vis the US 20 years ago.
 - (i) Imitated by all
- (2) Rome was more advanced technologically.
 - (a) But Asia Minor drew on the technology of Rome.
- d) We would have felt very comfortable in any of these cities.
 - (1) Beautiful buildings, theaters, temples, streets, sewers, running water, abundance of goods from all over the known world

B. How did this area come to be like this?

1. Large influx of Greeks about 700 BC
 - a) Greek city states started colonies along coast.
 - (1) They maintained close ties to Greece for centuries.
 - b) But they escaped the worst of the destruction that Greece suffered during the Peloponnesian War.
2. Under Persian control, 546 BC
3. Conquered by Alexander the Great in 334 BC
 - a) Controlled by Hellenistic kings over the next two centuries
 - (1) A period of great unrest
4. As Hellenistic power declined, this area came under the control of Pergamum.
 - a) King of Pergamum willed his kingdom to Rome in 133 BC.
 - b) Several cities rebelled against Roman control, 88-41 BC.
5. Under the control of the Romans from 41 AD on
 - a) Romans siphoned off a lot of wealth.
 - b) But were not very destructive.

C. Economic setting

1. Key centers for trade
 - a) Overland trade routes going to the east
 - (1) Only a few routes could be taken from the coastal plain up onto the central plateau.
 - b) Port cities that allowed trade throughout Mediterranean and Black Seas
 - c) Rome brought peace to the sea lanes.
 - (1) This greatly increased the wealth of this area.
2. Key financial centers
 - a) They had the most important banks in the Roman Empire.
3. Religious tourism
4. Experienced some significant setbacks in early first century.
 - a) They chose the losing side in the civil war.
 - (1) War between Mark Antony and Augustus
 - (a) Augustus won
 - (b) He became an extremely powerful emperor.

- (i) He completed the transformation of the Roman Republic into an empire.
 - (2) At the end of the first century AD, they were still working to get in the good graces of the emperors.
 - (3) They found that being in the favor of the emperor was **the** key to prosperity.
- b) Huge earthquakes shook the area.
 - (1) About 6 earthquakes between 17-60 AD
 - (a) Biggest were in 17 AD and in 60 AD.
 - (b) They were still rebuilding at the end of the century.

D. Cultural setting

1. Culture was very complex and cosmopolitan.
 - a) Base population was Asian.
 - (1) Hittite Empire controlled area in ancient times.
 - (2) Trade and cultural ties to ANE
 - b) Greek overlay was very significant.
 - (1) Probably the dominant cultural influence
 - (a) But the Asian component was significant.
 - c) Various migrations and invasions added to the mosaic.
 - (1) Hellenistic kings tried to bring unity to the area by promoting Greek culture.
 - (a) Established colonies throughout the area
 - d) Significant Jewish component in all these cities
 - (1) Some came before the first century AD.
 - (a) Some of these came from Babylon.
 - (2) Many more came after the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD).
 - (a) It is thought that some of these more recent arrivals would have been particularly knowledgeable about Judaism, the OT, and the temple.
 - (3) At the end of the first century, the population of Asia Minor was 20% Jewish.
 - (4) Jews had a special status in the Roman Empire.
 - (a) They did not have to worship the gods of the Romans.
 - (5) There was significant anti-semitism throughout the area.
 - (a) It was worse in some cities than in others.
2. Significant cultural distinctives for understanding the letters
 - a) The people of Asia Minor were used to seeing their rulers as gods.
 - (1) This goes way back to Mesopotamian and Egyptian beliefs.
 - (2) This was at odds with Greek culture.
 - (a) It was a firm belief of Greek and Roman culture that leaders were fully human.
 - (i) This despite the fact that they believed human society was hierarchical.
 - (3) But Greek and Roman rulers were easily seduced by this idea.

- (a) Nero was the first Roman ruler.
 - (4) In the second century AD, Roman worship of rulers became commonplace.
 - b) Guilds were a very important feature of these cities' culture.
 - (1) A significant and very enduring feature of their social organization
 - (2) Each guild was usually organized around a particular craft.
 - (3) Worship of the ruler was an aspect of their gatherings.
 - (4) I will talk about this more later.
- E. Arrival of Christianity
1. Paul's ministry
 - a) Some missionaries had been through this area before Paul first arrived.
 - (1) Some brought the baptism of John.
 - b) Paul took two trips through the area.
 - (1) Went to synagogues first
 - (a) Some converts, but great hostility
 - (2) Had meetings elsewhere
 - (a) Better success among gentiles
 - (3) Paul established churches in some of these 7 cities.
 - (4) Had lengthy stays at some of the cities
 - c) Paul's stay in Ephesus
 - (1) Taught at the synagogue for 3 months.
 - (a) Jews began to bad mouth "the Way."
 - (2) Moved to hall of Tyrannus
 - (a) Taught there regularly for 2-3 years
 - (3) We learn of an incident during this stay that helps us see the social dynamics at work in Asia Minor
 2. The riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41)

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. 24 A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. 25 He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. 26 And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. 27 There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

Acts 19:28 When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 29 Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. 30 Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. 31 Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

Acts 19:32 The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. *33* The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. *34* But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Acts 19:35 The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? *36* Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. *37* You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. *38* If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. *39* If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. *40* As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it." *41* After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.

- a) Demetrius argues Christianity poses an economic threat to Ephesus.
 - (1) The metal workers get a good income from making little shrines.
 - (2) Paul teaches that man-made gods are not real gods.
 - (a) He has won over many followers throughout Asia.
 - (3) This will bring great harm (economic) to the region.
 - (a) Many will be hurt.
 - (i) Metal workers
 - (ii) The temple
 - (iii) The goddess herself
 - b) A mob goes to the theater.
 - (1) They take two companions of Paul.
 - (2) Paul wanted to go.
 - (a) He was held back by the disciples and some friendly government officials.
 - (3) There is great chaos.
 - (4) Jews push Alexander forward to defend their interests.
 - (a) He is shouted down.
 - (i) They recognize he is a Jew.
 - (ii) The crowd shouts "Great is Artemis" for two hours.
 - c) City clerk quiets the crowd.
 - (1) The whole world knows Artemis is Great.
 - (2) So relax.
 - (3) These men have committed no crime.
 - (4) If they have, take them to court.
 - (5) This unruly assembly might cause the Romans to come and establish order.
 - d) The crowd dispersed
3. Things to note:

- a) Christianity could be seen as an economic threat to the city.
- b) Jews acted to distance themselves from Christians when there was trouble.
- c) There was anti-semitism.
- d) Christians enjoyed some support from some people in government.
- e) This was in the very early years of Christianity in Asia.
 - (1) By the time Revelation was written, tensions had increased significantly.

III. Predicament of Christians in Asia

- A. Emperor worship developed in Asia Minor because it was in the best interests of both the Asian cities and Rome,
- B. Asian cities wanted to increase their prosperity.
 - 1. They actively courted the patronage of the emperors.
 - a) The emperors were becoming more imperial.
 - (1) Imperial favors and contracts were critical for the Asian economy,
 - b) Big money could be made by locals.
 - (1) Most of their trade was with Rome.
 - (a) New and lucrative opportunities were opening up.

When John wrote Revelation late in the first century, the economy had accelerated to a new level. The number of Roman merchants in the East began to diminish late in the first century BCE, and provincial entrepreneurs more than filled the void. Commercial magnates from Italy still made enormous profits, but such wealth now spread more widely across the Empire. (Kraybill, p. 81)

- 2. The advantage that cities in Asia Minor had over cities in the west was that they could worship the emperor as god.
 - a) There was a lot of competition for the favor of the emperor in Rome.
 - (1) But that favor was the key to economic prosperity.
 - b) So the cities in Asia Minor led the way in worshipping the emperor.
 - (1) They needed to have everyone on board in order to have the full favor of the gods and the divine emperor.

The very fabric of society depended on continued devotion to the traditional gods. Cicero believed 'the disappearance of piety towards the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and social union among men as well, and of justice itself...' In his popular history of the Roman people, Livy has one character caution that 'all things turned out well when we obeyed the gods, and ill when we spurned them'. (Kraybill, p. 52)

- (2) Citizens sought 100 percent participation in emperor worship.
 - (a) Encouraged by the emperor himself.
 - (b) This was a required part of guild gatherings.

3. Guilds were one of the main social institutions in this area.
 - a) Most were organized according to craft.
 - b) But the guild was the key to economic success.
 - (1) Apparently, one could engage in a trade without being in the guild.
 - (a) A lot of networking happened at these meetings.
 - (2) To not be in the guild was to be condemned to a meager existence.
 - (3) To not be in the guild was to be an outsider to society as a whole.
 - c) The guilds had many social events.
 - (1) Honoring the gods and the emperor as god was a regular part of the events.

All guilds at Rome and in the East had a religious character, often centered on the patron gods or goddesses of the association. By the late first or early second century, some form of the imperial cult also found expression in nearly every guild. (Kraybill, p. 117)

(a) Jews alone were allowed an exemption.

- C. Rome wanted to unify the empire.
 1. Rome had created a multinational, multiethnic empire.
 2. At first, the only thing that held it together was Roman power.
 3. Rome slowly developed some other ways to hold it together.
 4. As emperor worship developed, Rome saw that as a unifying force.
 - a) Asia Minor was a patchwork quilt of ethnic groups.
 - (1) They each had their own gods and their own language.
 - b) The cities were very Hellenized.
 - (1) Greek culture and the Greek language dominated completely.
 - (2) But religious differences continued to be strong.
 - c) When they began to worship the emperor, that was seen as having the potential to unify.
 - (1) At first Rome was reluctant to encourage it.
 - (2) But then Rome turned around completely and supported it.
- D. So pressure was applied to the Christians to conform.
 1. The difficulty Christians faced appeared gradually.
 2. And it was a big sacrifice to give up their comfortable situations.
 3. Various means were used to get cooperation.
 - a) Social pressure
 - (1) Ostracization
 - b) Economic pressure
 - (1) Could be kicked out of guilds
 - (2) Making a living became much harder
 - c) Political pressure
 - (1) Corporal punishment, exile, death

Our interpretation of Revelation proceeds with the notion that most Christians in Asia were functioning well in society. John and a few others eventually came into conflict with fellow provincials and Roman authorities; but other believers enjoyed comfortable status. Members of the seven churches struggled to decide how involved Christians could be in the affairs of pagan society around them. This debate over the Christian role in society began a generation earlier during the ministry of Paul. By the time John wrote Revelation, residents of Asia Minor noticed that some Christians drew back from the imperial cult. The refusal of some believers to make *any* concessions to the cult limited their participation in social and economic life of the region. Suspicious of the motives for such withdrawal from society, some provincials harassed believers or hounded them into court on various charges. (Kraybill, p. 56)

- E. Christians were tempted to one of two means of escape.
 - 1. Jewish Christians could try to gain favor from the Jewish community to qualify for their exception.
 - 2. Gentile Christians could rationalize worship of the emperor.
 - a) When did participation in social and economic matters cross the line?
- F. The question on the minds of believers
 - 1. Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God.
 - 2. So why are Christians suffering intense persecution, even execution for their faith?
 - a) Has God lost control?
 - b) How should we think about what is happening to us?
 - 3. Revelation gives no practical advice.
 - a) "You need theology."
- G. Revelation answers these questions.

IV. Some comments about the letters

- A. Show good knowledge of each church's particular situation
 - 1. Jesus shows knowledge of
 - a) Individuals
 - b) Recent events
 - c) Theological camps in each church
 - 2. Uses allusions that are directly connected to the circumstances of each city
 - a) Ramsay was the first to develop this idea.
 - (1) Others have developed this idea.
 - (2) This is less clear in the first couple of cities.
 - (a) It is quite clear when we get to the seventh city.
- B. Why seven churches?
 - 1. Seven is a number that shows up frequently in Revelation.

- a) The whole complement of something sanctified.
 - 2. So these seven churches are representative of the Church as a whole.
- C. Why these churches?
- 1. Seven of the most important cities in Asia Minor.
 - 2. They are in a circuit.
 - a) Starts in southwest
 - b) Go north
 - c) Turns east
 - d) Goes south to the southeast corner of the region
 - 3. According to tradition, John made this circuit teaching in the churches.
 - a) John probably knew them well.
 - 4. The issues for these churches appear to be representative of the problems faced by churches under the pressure of persecution.
- D. What are these letters doing in the book of Revelation?
- 1. Revelation is describing the build-up toward and the events of the Day of the Lord.
 - a) Part of that is a description of the ongoing conflict between Satan and the people of God.
 - (1) That conflict has been going on for a very long time.
 - (a) It has ebbed and flowed at different places and different times.
 - (2) But in the end, that conflict will build up to a crescendo.
 - 2. In the first century AD, these churches were facing a threat similar to that which will be faced by the saints at the end.
 - a) It was a part of this ongoing conflict, but it was not the climax.
 - (1) Revelation is using that period of persecution as a foretaste of the persecution at the end.
 - (a) A means by which we can get some idea of what the end will look like.
 - 3. It is a good time for a gut check.
 - a) To deal with persecution, it makes sense to reexamine one's relationship with God.
 - 4. These two chapters are worthy of our attention.