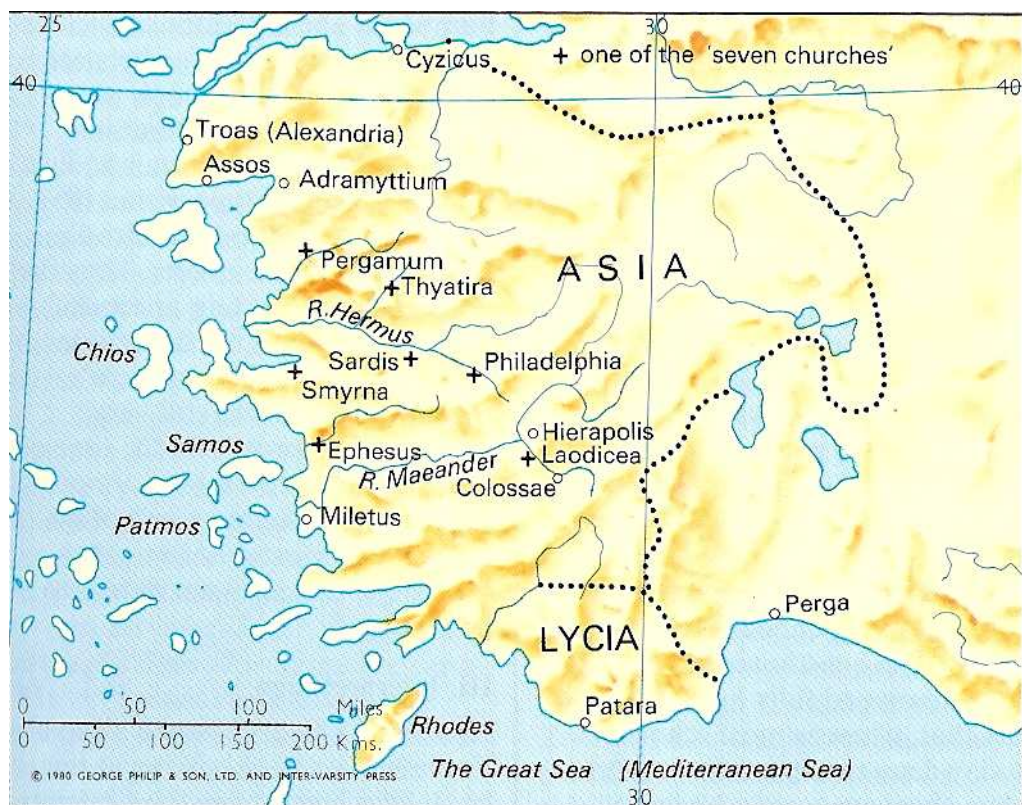


Introduction to the Seven Churches of Revelation

My interest in the Seven Churches of Revelation was stimulated by two visits I made to the seven sites a few years ago. I realised that I was visiting a country where the Early Church first grew in importance until it spread throughout the world. The names of some of these churches and others around them appear frequently in the Scriptures.

In the New Testament the seven Churches in Revelation are shown on the map below as a loop of cities in the Western part of Turkey (known in the Bible as Asia Minor). Patmos where the Apostle John was banished to is seen below the island of Samos. On the mainland Ephesus is seen above Miletus on the coast and travelling Northwards is Smyrna (now Izmir) then up to Pergamum then down to Thyatira and Sardis then across to Philadelphia then down through Hierapolis to Laodicea. Each of the seven churches are marked with a + sign.



Of the seven Churches of Revelation Ephesus is mentioned seventeen times in the New Testament including an Epistle written to those living in the area, and is overwhelmingly the most quoted city in Asia. Paul visited there on both his second and third missionary journeys. The other Churches are mentioned briefly and mainly in the Book of Acts and Revelation. Smyrna is mentioned twice, Pergamum (Pergamos) twice, Thyatira four times, Sardis three times, Philadelphia twice, Laodicea five times. Hierapolis once, Miletus three times, Acts

Local tradition emanating from the Greek Orthodox Church states that the Apostle John went to Ephesus together with the Virgin Mary to oversee the seven Churches in the Western part of Turkey. In the cave at Patmos where it is believed John received his

revelation, the Church has built a chapel. There is a cleft in the roof of the cave and a priest told me that the three part rupture at the entrance is like holding the thumb and first two fingers together. It forms a Y shape. He continued that it was not perhaps incidental that from the first century Greek Orthodox believers put their fingers together in that way every time they cross themselves thereby indicating the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John. He told me that no other part of the Christian Church do this.

Asia Minor (now Turkey) was of great importance to the Early Church. Paul was born in the South coastal town of Tarsus [Acts 21:39]. He wrote an Epistle to the Ephesians, Epistle to Colossians, 1st Epistle to Timothy and Galatians were written from Turkey and writing about Philemon who was living in one of the Churches of Revelation towns, namely Colosse which today is a discarded mount waiting to be excavated.

It is likely that Paul founded the Ephesian Church. He stayed the longest period of time here than at any other church ministering for nearly three years. [Acts 20:31]. Timothy was sent there and it is speculated that he became the first bishop or overseer. The names of Aquila, Pricilla and Apollos are found there [Acts 18:18, 24, 16]. In his later years there is recorded the emotional farewell to the Ephesians elders at Miletus [Acts 20:17-38]. It is thought he wanted the meeting in Miletus because the harbour at Ephesus was already silting up and made docking difficult at certain times of the year and he wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

The sea is now many miles away with the remains of the harbour stranded inland in bothj Ephesus and Miletus. .

In Hierapolis near Laodicea is to be found a 6th century church dedicated to St. Philip who had four virgin daughters who prophesied [Acts 21:9]. Local history confirms that the graveyard in the valley once contained the bodies of these women but due to the Moslem wars the graves were desecrated although the actual stones that made up the tombs remain to this day.

If a Christian wants to understand the history of the first century Christian Church they have to go to Turkey and examine the Seven Chruches of Revelation for themselves.

Why only write to the seven churches?

We know that there were other churches in this region. For instance there was a church at Troas, [Acts 16:8, 11; 20:5, 6; 2 Cor 2:12; 2 Tim 4:13]. Hierapolis [Col 4:17] and Colosse. See the whole book of Colossians specially written for them. There was also a church at Miletus. [Acts 20:15, 17; 2 Tim 4:20].

It is probable that these seven churches were the mainstay of the Christian witness in that part of Turkey. The others would be what we call today satellite churches grouped round one of these leading churches. Possibly the others could have been church plants from the main churches. The Apostle John would know that his letter would be circulated to these churches as this was common practice at this time. This is how the New Testament was circulated particularly those letters of Paul.

Chief Characteristic of each church

The next series of articles will elaborate fully the background in physical and historic terms under the names of each individual Church. There will also be a Bible interpretation of what the Spirit was saying to the Churches. This section is to identify a major characteristic of each church and what made it important.

Ephesus – Contained the Temple of Artemis (Dianna) one of the seven wonders of the ancient world

Smyrna – Developed a modern road system on a grid arrangement East-West; North-South as adopted extensively in the USA.

Pergamum - Discovery and manufacture of Parchment. This was to revolutionise the art of writing and preserving the written word throughout the world. The English Domesday Book written in 1068 is a perfect example of this. It is perfectly readable today and I have seen several of its pages on display before it was rebound in 1986. Later I also had the privilege of meeting with the book binder of the British Library who undertook the work. Even today every Act of the British Parliament is written on parchment to preserve the record.

Thyatira – A hive of manufacturing similar to the city of Birmingham, England in the Victorian era where it boasted of over a thousand trades.

Sardis – A superb example of a fortress City and it contained a large Jewish population.

Philadelphia - The Open door City (Missionary) It had no natural defences against attack.

Laodicea Medical City. Successful in treating eye complaints particularly well.