

THE LETTER TO SMYRNA (REV. 2, 8-11)

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***Abstract:** Among the seven letters written to the Churches, the letter to the Church at Smyrna is the second one. The letters address the various issues – both internal and external – that threaten the faith community. For the community in Smyrna, the problems and persecutions have their origin from the pagans and Jews. Basically, this is written to console, comfort and strengthen the community in such a situation. This academic paper is an attempt to study the letter to Smyrna in the Book of Revelation.*

Key Words: St John, Revelation, The Letter to Smyrna

1. Introduction

Among the seven letters written to the Churches, the letter to the Church at Smyrna is the second one. The letters address the various issues – both internal and external – that threaten the faith community. For the community in Smyrna, the problems and persecutions have their origin from the pagans and Jews. Basically, this is written to console, comfort and strengthen the community in such a situation.

2. Geographical and Historical Background of Smyrna

Known currently as Izmir, Smyrna is a port city at the coast of Aegean Sea and situated 50 km north to Ephesus. The history of this city explains the promises Christ makes and the qualities attributed to Him. King Alyattes destroyed this city in the beginning of 6th century B.C. Later, it was Lysimachus, one of the generals of Emperor Alexander, who rebuilt this city to its glory (301-281 B.C.). This brought about Hellenization of the city. Historians have identified it as Asia's crown and jewel. Smyrna being faithful towards the Roman Empire has enjoyed several privileges for a long time. As early as 195 B.C., it dedicated a temple to the goddess of Rome, and in 26 A.D., it received the privilege of erecting a temple to Tiberius. Hence, it was a place of both pagan and Emperor worship.

3. Textual analysis

An artistic arrangement of the constant contrasting of extremes is visible in this pericope ('first' - 'last',

'became dead' - 'came to life', 'poverty' - 'in abundance', 'second death' - 'crown of life').

v. 8 – 'The First and the Last' (ο πρώτος και ο έσχατος): This description appears before in Rev. 1,17. Christ is designated with the phrase that was exclusively used for Yahweh in Old Testament (Isa. 44,6; 48,12). To the Christians this is a great promise while to the persecutors, it is a warning. In contrast with the city's urge to be in prominence, the author makes clear that it is Christ who is the First and the Last.

'Dead and came to life' (ος εγένετο νεκρός και έζησεν): This refers to Jesus' death and resurrection. The history of the city as once destroyed and later rebuilt after centuries is reflected in this phrase. Just as Christ died and rose again to life, so also though the faithful may suffer death, they will live forever later.

v. 9 – The letter is written to a Church that is facing 'afflictions' (θλίψεις). Also, the church though in their poverty are consoled by stating them rich. This verse is in contrast with Rev. 3,17 where the Church in Laodicea, though claim to be rich, are reminded that they are poor. The clause corresponds to Jesus' words that the poor are blessed (Lk. 6,20). The Greek word πτωχεία describes absolute poverty and complete destitution. The pagan mobs often attacked and deliberately destroyed the goods of Christians. Thus, the Smyrnaen community has experienced tribulations, contempt and rejection from their neighbours.

The main cause of slander is attributed to Jews, the chief instigators of persecution, who by their opposition to Christ, have become people of God's enemy, Satan. Thus,



the 'people of Yahweh' (Num. 16,3; 20,4) have turned to be 'synagogue of Satan' (συναγωγή του σατανά). Now, it is the community of believers in Christ, the Church (εκκλησία), that can legitimately claim to be the people of God. The word 'synagogue' stands in sharp contrast to 'church'. Satan is introduced for the first time in this book. Satan has been thrown from heaven and his presence is expected on earth.

The bitter hostility of the Jews towards the Christians at Smyrna is clear from the letter. Though the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., they had maintained themselves as a strong distinct community here. According to tradition, Jews and joined with the pagans in inciting the people towards the martyrdom of Polycarp. The Old Testament depicts a God who visits and interferes in the lives of His people during afflictions (Nah. 3,7; Isa. 33,2). In view of the imminent persecution (due to their denial in participating in the emperor cult), this verse at the beginning gives them confidence and courage in God who is the supreme authority.

v. 10 – The angel receives words of reassurance in the midst of sufferings. The testing will be limited to only ten days implying that the current suffering is endurable and will end soon. 'Ten days' is symbolic of a short period, yet a crucial period to prove their stand. This has a resemblance in Gen. 24,55 (Rebekah's family asks that she remain with them for ten days) and Dan. 1,12-14 (Daniel and his companions are tested with vegetarian diet for ten days). The devil (διάβολος) is used for Satan in the sense of one who separates, accuses and slanders. In the context of previous verse, this seems a proper depiction of their cause of sufferings.

v. 11– Conformity to one's faith even unto death shall render him/her the crown of life (στέφανον της ζωής). The image appears to be borrowed from the wreath awarded to the winner in the sports. This image appears frequently in New Testament though with slight variations (James 1,12; 1 Cor. 9,25; 2 Tim. 4,8; 1 Pet. 5,4). As the tree of life is a symbol of eternal life, so too the crown of life appears to represent the reward of eternity. This is further accompanied by the assurance of escape from the second death (του θανάτου του δευτέρου). For the Sadducees and Epicureans, death was annihilation, extinction, and the ultimate end of existence. The term 'second death', occurs

four times in this book (2,11; 20,6; 20,14; 21,8). This is different from martyrdom or physical death. Those who persevere in faith in the face of first death (martyrdom), will be saved from the second death (hell and damnation). In Rev. 21,8, second death is identified with being cast into the lake of fire along with the beast, death and Hades.

4. Reflection

The opening verse invites the readers towards radical discipleship. Christ has prominence over everything earthly. Giving preference to anything more than Christ is against the Christian faith. The letter is the shortest of all and never the Church is reproached. Rather, Christ says that he is aware of the tribulations. In times of faith crisis, we must remember that Christ never abandons us. The tests and persecutions are meant for our future glory. The duty of the faithful is to persevere in his faith, even it demands his/her life. This letter shows a wonderful paradox where securing life can be death and embracing death can be life in the end. Physical death is a starting point and deciding factor for last judgement. Though the Lord comforts Smyrnaen Church, they are empowered to take up suffering than escape from it. Cross and sufferings serve according to God's plan, an occasion where the believer must prove his loyalty.

5. Bibliography

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