

The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor

—Socio-Historical Reality Behind the Prophetic Words—

Part I: The Letter to the Church of Ephesus

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Abstract

The Revelation of John is the last book in the canon of the New Testament, and it tells about “*what will take place very soon*” (Rev 1: 1). This naturally indicates that the focus of the Book is strongly connected with the future that is prophesied by Jesus Christ, but it does not exclude narratives relating to contemporary problems. The fact that after the introduction to the book (Rev 1) the first section of the book contains the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia (Rev 2–3), where the problems in each Church is a main theme of each letter, attests that the author “keeps his foot on this earth”. There are seven letters addressed to the Christian communities of seven cities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea) located in Asia Minor and all of them are close to the most important city in the region, Ephesus.

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus is the first among the seven letters to churches in Asia Minor included in the book of Revelation. Probably there is more than one reason for giving priority to Christian community in Ephesus, but the major reason is the role the city of Ephesus played during the first century AD, as well as superior position of the Church of Ephesus among other churches in the region making the community in Ephesus to take the role of “mother church”.

1. General introduction to the series of studies on the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia

The Revelation of John is the last book in the canon of the New Testament, and it purports to tell about “*what will take place very soon*” (Rev 1: 1). This naturally indicates that the focus of the Book is strongly connected with the future that is foretold by Jesus Christ, however, it does not automatically exclude narratives relating to contemporary problems. The fact that after the introduction to the Book (Rev 1) the first section of the book contains Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia (Rev 2–3) in which the present problems in each Church is a main theme of each letter, attests that the author “keeps his feet on this earth”.¹ There are seven letters addressed to the Christian communities of seven cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira,

¹ Concerning the genre of Revelation, there is consensus that it contains three genres: apocalyptic, prophecy and epistle. G. K. Beal, *The Book of Revelation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1999, 37.

Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These communities are located in Asia Minor, today the west part of Turkey, and all of them are close to the most important city in the region, Ephesus. This strongly suggests the existence of a chain of Christian communities in the region, which were connected to each another during the mission activities that contributed to their establishment during the middle of the first century DA, as Luke's account in the Acts of Apostles confirms. In his presentation the first wave of mission activities outside Judea and Syria reached the northern lands of the eastern Roman Empire, including modern Turkey and Greece (Ac 16: 1-21: 14). Unfortunately, Luke limited his account to only one of the seven churches mentioned by John, namely Ephesus, which played the role of being head of all the churches in the region. Nevertheless, Luke's limited narrative in Acts concerning the city of Ephesus is picked up again and extended in the account concerning other cities in the region by John. This indicates the importance of John's presentation of various situations in which the Christian communities in Asia Minor existed. When writing a letter to each community, John was concerned about the possibility of development of the community. This factor can also be detected from the structure of each of the letters that are all short and schematic. Each letter contains three basic sections. In the first the community is praised; the second section presents the problem that is disturbing the community; the third underlines the community's obligation to solve the problem. In this last section sanctions are indicated should the community fail to obey.

This series of seven studies begins with the first letter which is to the church in Ephesus. The structure of each study will be the same, and it will contain:

- a socio-historical presentation of the city;
- a history of the church in the city;
- an analysis of the text of the letter in the Book of Revelation.

2. Introduction to the Letter to the Church of Ephesus

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus is the first of the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor included in the book of Revelation. There is probably more than one reason for giving priority to the Christian community in Ephesus, but the main reason is the role the city of Ephesus played during the first century AD, in the world of the Aegean Sea region, as well as the superior position of the Church of Ephesus over the other churches in the region. For this reason probably the accusation directed against the Church in Ephesus: "*you have abandoned the love you had at first*" (Rev 2: 4), although it specifically concerns this particular community, may be seen as pointing to the basic problem that concerned all seven churches. While there were differences in particular issues for each church, they were all losing the vitality that had characterized them at the beginning.

3. Socio-historical background of the city of Ephesus

Before the text of the Letter to the Church in Ephesus will be analyzed, first the socio-historical background of this letter must be presented because the historical and geographic setting greatly influences human behavior, and this applies equally to religious convictions. For this reason, a short history of Ephesus will be provided with special focus on Ephesus in the first century AD (3.1). Then the structure of society in Ephesus at this time will be analyzed (3.2), to be followed by an examination of the economic (3.3.) and political (3.4) structure of Ephesus. Finally, the religious structure of society in Ephesus will be examined (3.5).

3.1. Short history of Ephesus

The city of Ephesus is located near the nexus of the river Cayster and the Aegean Sea, on the west coast of modern Turkey. Archeological excavations show evidence for inhabitation of the region in the 15th–14th centuries BC. Usually the history of Ephesus is divided into four periods. The first period called “the old Ionian city” is dated from the tenth century to the middle of the sixth century BC; the second period is called “the Greek city” beginning in 550 BC and ending in 300 BC; the third period extends through the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, and the last period called “the late Byzantine” ended with a dispersal of the inhabitants of the city.² Urban development of the city depended considerably on the topography of the region, where hilly terrain, the river and three harbors made it difficult for the city to expand. The harbors were indispensable for commerce, and despite the fact that their greater glory was during the Hellenistic period, during the Roman period there still were important economic infrastructures as late as the fifth century AD. The location of Ephesus, which was also a part of the trans-Anatolian road system leading to the east of the Empire, contributed greatly to its commercial success. The city of Ephesus had strong influence on urban development of the region, and even the city managed to annex some suburban areas like Metropolis, Magnesia, Priene and Cayster, but Ephesus did not have colonies of its own.

Although the origin of the city is usually connected with Greek migration to Ionia, and according to legends Androclus the son of Athenian king Codrus is recognized as the ruler who colonized and united twelve cities in the region, with Ephesus as the royal seat, some Mycenaean influences have been discovered in the city attesting habitation in this place before the arrival of the Greeks.³ Before the Persian period, during the rule of the Lydian kingdom, the temple of Artemis was built in Ephesus, despite opposition from the ruling Lydian kings. During the Persian period the city had a better relationship with the Persian rulers than many other cities which helped the city to develop its commercial status. After the death of Alexander the Great, during the period of his successors, the city was involved in several wars

² According to Strabo, the city of Ephesus was founded by Amazons (*Geography* 11.5.3–4).

³ The other cities were Miletus, Myus, Lebedus, Colophon, Priene, Teos, Erythrae, Phocaea, Clazomenae, Chios, Samos (Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.4). J. M. O'Connor, *St. Paul's Ephesus. Texts and Archeology*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2008, 9–10.

between the successors. In the end the city was under the rule of Lysimachus who decided to relocate the city to a site between two hills (Panayir Dagħ and Bülbül Dagħ) and built a great wall to protect the city. Until the domination of Rome over the Mediterranean Sea, Ephesus was under the rule of two Greek dynasties, the Seleucids and the Ptolemies. At the beginning of the period of Roman domination Ephesus became a part of the Roman kingdom which granted it freedom, but Ephesus was ambivalent in its attitude toward Rome varying between cooperation on the one hand, but on other hand was involved in resistance against Roman power during the revolt of Mithridates, the king of Pontus.⁴ The real change for Ephesus occurred during the time of Caesar Augustus who made the city the capitol of the province of Asia with title "*First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia*". The period of prosperity for Ephesus began in the late first century BC and lasted until the middle of the second century AD. During this time the city was to a considerable degree Romanized as the architectural remains attest. After the third century AD the city began to suffer the general fate of the decline of the Roman Empire, especially its eastern part, with the severe treatment by Romans troops, as well as the invasion of the barbarians from the north, slowly brought the city to its partial desolation in the seventh century AD.

3.2. The society in Ephesus

The city of Ephesus was first inhabited by Carians and by Leleges who were driven out by Androclus the son of the king of Athens. This marks the beginning of Greek colonization of Ionia. During the so-called Greek period, Ephesus for short time was ruled by Athens and Sparta, but for most of the period Ephesus was under the rule of Persia until the beginning of Hellenistic times. During the period of the *Pax Romana*, no significant changes took place in the structure of society in Ephesus, which contributed greatly to peace and commerce until the revolt of Mithridates during which the Ephesians opposed Rome (85 BC).⁵ As a result the city lost its freedom (84 BC) until Octavian's victory at Actium (31 BC) when Ephesus again became a free city, at least became nominally.⁶ The "golden age" of Ephesus seems to begin with the reign of Caesar Augustus, during which the city became the capitol of the province of Asia.⁷ In the first century AD the city of Ephesus, with a population of about 250.000 and a flourishing economy, became the third largest city in the Empire, after Rome and Alexandria, and even greater than Syrian Antioch.⁸ As a Greek city and a very important economical and communication center Ephesus was home to several minority groups, including Jews, which were free to practice their religions and cults. The Jewish community was granted many privileges in order to preserve their native customs, such as in matters of food, observance of

⁴ For more information concerning the revolt and its consequences, cf.: D. Gwartzney, *A Journey Through Ephesus*, N. D., Las Vegas 2017, 7–9.

⁵ D. Gwartzney, *A Journey Through Ephesus*, 7.

⁶ P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2004, 13.

⁷ Ephesus was not the only city to profit greatly from the Pax Romana. Other cities in the region, such as Pergamon, Smyrna and Cyzicus, also enjoyed a time of prosperity until the middle of second century AD.

⁸ These cities were not only the largest cities of the Empire but also the most distinguish cultural and religion centers.

the Sabbath, and they were also exempt from military service.⁹

3.3. Ephesus' economy

As was noted above earlier “the Golden age” for Ephesus is connected with Rome’s domination over the Mediterranean Sea from the end of the first century BC to the middle of the second century AD, and it naturally led to ongoing expansion of the empire to the east.¹⁰ The city, with three harbors and in a strategic position and a developed network of roads, easily became a crucial center of communication that greatly influence economically not only the city but also the neighboring regions and cities. During the rule of Augustus, Ephesus became the capitol of Asia, which naturally resulted in increase in donations and public buildings that changed the character of the city, transforming it into the fourth most important city in the empire.¹¹ The most notable public buildings in Ephesus included the Temple of Artemis, the Magnesian Gate, the State Agora with the Basilica Augustus and Chalcidicum, the Bouleuterion, the Temple of Dea Roma and Divus Iulius, the Prytaneion, the Memmius monument, the Temple of Isis, the monument of Pollio, an Octagonal structure, the Heroon of Androklos, the Gate of Mazaeus and Mithridates, the Tetragonos Agora, the Fountain House, the Palace of the Proconsul, the Theatre, the Harbour Gate, the Temple of Apollo, the Stadium and the Koressos Gate.¹² The Emperor Domitian granted to the city the third imperial cult of the koinon of Asia in 89/90 AD.¹³ According to Friesen this had a strong impact on the status of the city in the whole of Asia. “*Ephesus would henceforth be more prominent in provincial assemblies, it would have more distinguished offices, delegations from various cities would make annual trips to her festivals, and new sources of revenue would become available*”.¹⁴ The political and economic importance of Ephesus is most accurately presented by Aelius Aristides who said that Ephesus was recognized as “*the common chancellery of Asia ... and her recourse in need*”.¹⁵ That means that during the first two centuries AD Ephesus has a substantial place in the structure of the Roman Empire, particularly in the region of Asia but also in the whole eastern part of the Empire and this ensured its wealth.

3.4. Ephesus: the socio-political background

The city of Ephesus was established by Ionian colonists and consequently the roots of the city are strongly connected with Greek culture. This culture dominated until the period of

⁹ According to Josephus, Jews in Ephesus possessed extended privileges regarding their religion, customs and social services (*Ant.* 14.225–27; *Ant.* 14.262–64; *Ant.* 16.167–68).

¹⁰ Until the reign of Augustus, Ephesus' economy was burdened by obligations toward the Roman army, as well as by financial punishment after the rebellion against Rome in 85 BC. C. S. Keener, *Acts. An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 3*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2014, 2887.

¹¹ P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus*, 14–15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15–16. For a short description of each of the buildings cf. R. E. Oster, Ephesus, in: *ABD*, Vol. 2, 544–548.

¹³ The first imperial cult was built in Pergamon (29 BC), and the second in Smyrna (26 BC).

¹⁴ S. J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family*. (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 116), Brill, Leiden 1993, 16.

¹⁵ P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus*, 16.

Roman dominion during which the city was largely Romanized, but it retained its Greek roots. During the “Golden age” of Ephesus when the Roman administration elevated the city to the rank of the four top cities of the entire Empire, Ephesus continued as a free Hellenistic city rather than becoming a Roman colony.¹⁶ Concerning the social characteristic of Ephesus during the flourishing period many nations, cultures and religions were present, as can be expected in an important cosmopolitan city with three commercial harbors and enjoying the status of “capitol of the province of Asia”. The leading nation represented was obviously Greek, who had to compete, however, with other nations such as Jews, Lydians, Phrygians, Cretans, Romans, Egyptians and many others from the area of the Aegean Sea. As a cosmopolitan city Ephesus was known for its tolerance and the ability for coexistence of many different nations and cultures, without any marked friction between them. Since Ephesus was the capitol of the province the city was the seat of the Roman proconsul who held the highest power and to whom all local authorities (city assembly, town clerks, temple wardens, etc.) were subordinated. The local authorities held responsibility for all social matters under their jurisdiction with special concern for maintaining the socio-political peace in the city.¹⁷

3.5. Religions in Ephesus

3.5.1. The cult of Artemis

The religious environment in Ephesus must be seen as unique. Although there were about fifty deities worshipped in the city, one particular cult, that of “Artemis of the Ephesians,” was not only the cornerstone of the religious life of the city, but also the one who made Ephesus the most important religious center in the Aegean Sea world. The first temple of Artemis was probably built as early as the Bronze Age, but it was destroyed by a flood in the seventh century BC.¹⁸ Reconstruction of the temple took place during the rule of the Lydian Kingdom over the region of Anatolia in the middle of the sixth century BC, but this was destroyed by Herostratus in 356 BC. The temple was rebuilt again during the reign of Alexander the Great who offered to rebuild the temple, but the Ephesians decided to rebuild it by themselves. The rebuilding began in 323 BC and continued for several years. The temple of Artemis, sometimes called the Artemision or also the Temple of Diana was finally closed by the Christians at the beginning of the fifth century AD.¹⁹

The name Artemis is explained by Strabo: “Artemis has her name from the fact that she makes people *artimeas*” (Geography 14.1.6), which means “*secure and healthy*” or in its adjectival form “*to be safe and sound*”. Artemis, the daughter of Leto and Zeus, was the virgin

¹⁶ C. S. Keener, *Acts*, 2791.

¹⁷ In general, the Roman authorities had little tolerance for any kind of riot or social disturbance, which were often severely punished. For several cases regarding the Roman treatment of cities in which there were riots cf.: P. Trebilco, Asia, in: D. W. J. Gill, C. Gempf (eds), *The Book of Acts in First Century Setting, Vol. 2. Graeco-Roman Setting*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1994, 344–347.

¹⁸ Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.22–23, LOEB Vol. 5, Harvard University Press, London 1928, 227–230.

¹⁹ The earliest date proposed is 407 AD. For details regarding the history of the Artemision cf.: J. M. O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus*, 21–24.

goddess, a divine huntress and fertility deity.²⁰ As the benevolent deity, she was acclaimed “the Queen of Heaven,” or “Lord” or “Savior”, because she had full authority over heaven, earth and the underworld. The cultic image of Artemis differed from temple to temple, with the result that the attributes of Artemis also differed according to the place of the cult.

Artemis was the tutelary deity of Ephesus and her cult played an important role in many aspects of the life of the city, political, civic, cultural, educational, economic and religious. It was also an international cult, and the temple of Artemis in Ephesus was listed as one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world.

3.5.2. The Temple of Hestia

Hestia or Vesta was daughter of Cronus and Rhea and was venerated as the goddess of fire. In her primary role she watched over the domestic hearth, and she also guarded the spirit of mankind, making here to be the protector of the sanctity of domestic life.

The temple of the Hestia was located on the north side of Ephesus’ city hall.²¹

3.5.3. The Temple of Serapis

The Temple of Serapis was located on the south-west side of the Agora of Ephesus. The building of the Temple began in the second century AD, but it is assumed that it was never fully completed. It is believed that this project was undertaken by Egyptian merchants who maintained regular trade between Ephesus and Alexandria. One of artifacts recovered by archeologists, a monument now in the Ephesus Museum, shows the image of Serapis and image of Artemis joined with a garland, which suggests the friendship and peaceful coexistence between these two cults. The cult of Serapis itself seems to be kind of political and religious attempt to accommodate Egyptian religion traditions to the political needs of the Ptolemaic kingdom. In fact the resulting cult has the appearance of the Greek polytheistic religious system but based on the old Egyptian traditions. Temples of Serapis were found in Alexandria, Corinth, Copae in Boetia, as well as in Ephesus. The deity it itself a product of the syncretism of two cults, that of Osiris and of Apis. The original form of the name comes from the Coptic word *Userhapi* which in Hellenistic Greek became *Serapis*.

3.5.4. The Sanctuary of Zeus and of the Mother Goddess

On the north side of mount Panayir Dagħ several inscriptions were found that suggest the existence there of some kind of sanctuary. Because the inscriptions mention Zeus and the Phrygian Mother Goddess archeologists think that they were venerated in a sanctuary there. The deity of this sanctuary was a trinitary deity consisting of Cybele the mother goddess, the young male deity and the old male deity.²² Due to the paucity of sources more detailed information about this cult remains speculative.

²⁰ E. A. Clinton, *Ephesians. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2010, 31.

²¹ R. E. Oster, Ephesus, in: *ABD*, Vol. 2, 545.

²² R. E. Oster, Ephesus, in: *ABD*, Vol. 2, 545–456.

3.5.5. Deities worshiped in Ephesus

Like other Hellenistic and Romanized cities in Asia Minor in Ephesus also many gods and goddess were worshiped even though all of them did not have a particular temple or sanctuary. Based on the archeological discoveries in Ephesus is possible to name some deities that were worshiped in the city: Aphrodite, Apollo, Asclepius, Athena, Gabiri, Demeter, Dionysus, various Egyptian Cults, Ge, God the Most High, Hecate, Hephaestus, Hercules, the Mother goddess, Pluto, Poseidon, Zeus. Considering the fact that some of the deities worshiped in Ephesus were foreign gods or goddesses it may be assumed that economic and political influences contributed to the development of these cults.

3.5.6. Veneration of the Heroes in Ephesus

In Ephesus some people, both alive and dead, were venerated due to their exceptional contribution to civic and political life. Among them was Alexander the Great whose cult continued until the middle of the second century AD. Another one was Androclus, who according to tradition was the founder of the city. Apollonius of Tyana, a neo-Pythagorean philosopher, was venerated for his skill in exorcism that helped the city to overcome a plague. Pixoderus Evangelus was venerated in Ephesus due to his contribution to funding the marble from which the Temple of Artemis was built. Even the Roman proconsul of Asia, Publius Servilius Isauricus, was venerated in Ephesus due to his just conduct toward the city.

3.5.7. The Imperial Cults in Ephesus

Following the establishing of the first imperial cult in Asia Minor in 29 BC, which was dedicated to Rome and Augustus, after Octavian (Augustus) won the war against Mark Antony, Augustus established in Ephesus a cult for Rome and Divus Julius which was intended for the Romans living in Asia.

The second imperial cult in Ephesus was permitted by the emperor Tiberius in 23 AD, and it was dedicated for Tiberius, Livia and the Senate, however later in 26 AD this cult was removed to the city of Smyrna. In 40 AD the imperial cult dedicated to Gaius Caligula was established in Miletus but after the assassination of Caligula the cult was discontinued.

The third imperial cult was permitted in Ephesus by the emperor Domitian in the mid-eighties, and the temple was dedicated in 89/90 AD. The temple was intended for the “cult of Sebastoi” which contained the names of Flavian emperors, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, but the last one was removed from the cult after his assassination in 96 AD.²³

In 130–132 AD the Temple of Hadrian Olympios was built in Ephesus. This temple was also dedicated to Artemis, which shows the tendency to link the new imperial cults with old traditional cults of Asia Minor.

²³ P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus*, 31.

4. Christianity in Ephesus

4.1. Biblical accounts

The establishing of the Christian community in Ephesus is usually attributed to Paul of Tarsus, mostly based on the Acts of Apostles written by the Evangelist Luke (Ac 18: 19–20). However, Paul was not the first to spread the kerygma in Ephesus. Acts mentions also Priscilla and Aquila, the close friends of Paul working in Ephesus, where they met another preacher from Alexandria, named Apollos who also was involved in mission work in Asia, including the city of Ephesus (Ac 18: 24–26). Additionally, Acts attests also the existence of a small group of John the Baptist's disciples in Ephesus who became subjects for Paul's evangelization (Ac 19: 1–7). Paul's mission activity in the city was initially targeted at the Jewish community dwelling in Ephesus which possessed a Synagogue (Ac 19: 8–10).²⁴ The presence of the Jewish community in Ephesus is attested not only by Acts but also by Josephus who mentions the city twelve times in his *Jewish Antiquities* (*Ant.* 16. 27–65). Unfortunately, Josephus' account focuses particularly on Jews dwelling in Ionia who struggled to receive the privileges that would them to live according to Jewish tradition. As a result, Josephus gives little detailed information about the size, structure and role of the Jewish community in Ephesus.

Concerning the Christian communities in Ephesus, the basic information comes from the Acts (Ac 18: 19–24; 19: 1. 17. 26. 35; 20: 16–17; 21: 29) which can be supplemented by some mentions of Ephesus and Paul's work in the city during the so-called third mission journey, that are found both in Paul's letters and in the letters attributed to Paul. Despite the fact that the account in Acts is the largest one concerning Paul's work in Ephesus (Ac 18: 19–20: 38), due to Luke's theological and literary concept of the account, the focus is on the effect of Paul's mission in the city rather than giving a detailed account concerning Paul's work.²⁵ Most of the narrative concerns Paul standing against the old cults, false exorcists, and magic (Ac 19: 11–20) that created strong opposition to Paul among the people, especially those who prospered because of the cults and magic (Ac 19: 23–40). The mission in Ephesus (and probably in the neighboring cities) lasted more than two years, but Luke summarized it in a very short and general way in a mere three verses (Ac 19: 8–10). In this context some references to Paul's activity in Ephesus in his letters and in the letters attributed to him help us to make the account of the mission in the city more coherent. There are five references to Paul's work in Ephesus (1 Cor 15: 32; 1 Cor 16:

²⁴ Although Luke in Acts mentioned the existence of the Synagogue in Ephesus, archeologists have found no trace of it, to attest the account about the Synagogue in Acts. Cf. P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus*, 43–44.

²⁵ Here we refer to the fact that each of the accounts in Acts regarding each of Paul's mission journeys contains one topical speech in which the main merit of the particular mission is presented. The speech in the narrative regarding the first mission journey (Ac 13: 17–41) contains the speech addressed to Judeo-Christian and has an introductory character; the speech in the narrative concerning the second mission journey (Ac 17: 22–31) is addressed to Gentile Christians and marks progress; and the speech in the narrative regarding the third mission journey (20: 17–35) is addressed to the leaders of the Christian community, particularly to leaders of the communities in Ephesus, and has a conclusive character. The account in Acts, then, has a theological and literary character and is not strictly chronological.

8; 1 Tim 1: 3; 2 Tim 1: 18; 2 Tim 4: 12), which can be divided into two groups. The first concerns Paul's suffering during his ministry in the city (1 Cor 15: 32; 2 Tm 1: 18), and the second regards Paul's constant service for the Ephesian communities even during his physical absence from Ephesus (1 Cor 16: 8; 1 Tm 1: 3; 2 Tm 4: 12). Both of these topics are also presented by Luke in Acts (Ac 19: 23–40; Ac 20: 17–35), showing coherence between these two sources.

4.2. Paul's third mission journey (Ac 18: 24–21: 14)

Luke's account concerning Paul's mission activity in Ephesus during his so-called third mission journey consists of three sections. The first (Ac 18: 24–19: 10) concerns mission work among the inhabitants of Ephesus by Apollos of Alexandria (Ac 18: 24–28) and Paul of Tarsus (Ac 19: 1–7). The second section contains a short and schematic summary about the outcome of Paul's work in Ephesus (Ac 19: 8–10). The third section concerns the opposition to Paul's activities in the city which finally forced Paul to leave Ephesus (Ac 19: 13–20: 6).

The narrative of Ac 18: 24–28 concerns Apollos of Alexandria. He was a Jew and was probably a disciple of John the Baptist believing in Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah. He was active in Corinth and Ephesus where he established a reputation as a skillful preacher, boldly arguing to Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Apollos contributed much to proclaiming the kerygma about the Lord Jesus, showing an excellent education and zeal in proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Although Luke in his narrative does not directly connect Apollos with Paul, despite the fact that Paul mentions such a relationship in 1 Cor 15–16 where he gives credit to the work of Apollos.

The narrative of Ac 19: 1–7 concerns the encounter of Paul with twelve disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus. Despite the fact that the disciples most probably believed in Jesus as the Messiah they were not aware of the important role of baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Christian Way, which Luke considered to be a serious lack in their faith. This becomes the direct reason for Paul to take action concerning the disciples in order to make up for this lack. First Paul taught them about the real purpose of the baptism performed by John the Baptist, which according to Paul had only a preparatory function (Ac 19: 4), but which was not sufficient for faith in Jesus the Messiah. Paul states that in order to fully understand the teaching of the Jesus baptism in the Holy Spirit is indispensable. After this process of correcting the knowledge of the twelve disciples, Paul took the second step of baptizing them in the name of Jesus the Messiah which makes them disciples of Jesus and members of his messianic movement. The third step undertaken by Paul was the laying on of hands in order that the Holy Spirit come upon them. This manner of receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit is identical in all cases of receiving the Holy Spirit that occurred after the Pentecost Event. For this reason the narrative of Ac 19: 1–7 may be interpreted as a kind of example concerning incorporation of the members of John's messianic movement into Jesus' messianic movement, which contributed greatly to the development of Jesus' messianic movement in the primitive stage of Christian Church.

After this short episode concerning Apollos' activities in Ephesus and Paul's encounter with the disciples of John the Baptist, Luke presents the main topic of the narrative regarding the third mission journey, with particular focus on some aspects and results of Paul's activity in Ephesus (Ac 19: 8–40). It began with Luke's narrative concerning Paul's encounter with the

twelve disciples of John the Baptist (Ac 19: 1–7), which is followed by a short and very schematic account of Paul’s mission work in the city (Ac 19: 8–12) that allows us to grasp at least some elements of Paul’s *modus operandi*. From the narrative of Ac 19: 8–10 we learn that Paul started his mission in the city by approaching the local Jewish community gathered every Sabbath in the Synagogue, and this custom continued for three months until strong opposition to Paul’s kerygma on the part of some Jews in Ephesus made impossible for Paul to continue the work in the Synagogue. The fact that Paul after leaving the Synagogue and continuing his mission in the school of Tyrannus (Ac 19: 9–10) for two years, where he mostly undertook mission activity directed at non-Jews, does not automatically suggest that he abandoned the work among the Jews.

The third section concerns exclusively the outcome of Paul’s mission work, which is mostly focused on social and religious changes in the structure of society in Ephesus, namely the decreasing influence of magic and different spiritual movements in the city (Ac 19: 13–20), which ultimately resulted in strong opposition to Paul’s influence in Ephesus as is presented in the narrative of Ac 19: 23–40. In a general way Luke’s narrative regarding the third mission journey of Paul has two major sections: the first refers to the relationship between the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples who believe in Jesus (Ac 19: 1–7); the second section concerns the relation between Paul’s mission activity in Ephesus and reaction of society in Ephesus to the outcome of the mission (Ac 19: 8–40). According to Luke’s narrative (Ac 19: 11–20) Paul performed miracles in the city (Ac 19: 11–12) which led some people to try to imitate Paul, but with disastrous outcomes (Ac 19: 13–17). Luke uses the episode concerning the Jewish exorcist to show the radical change among the people who came to the faith, Jews and Gentiles, due to Paul’s activity, including his performing miracles. He speaks about their fear of the magic that made them to praise the Lord Jesus (Ac 19: 17), and in the end forced them to abandon these practices (Ac 19: 18–20).²⁶ Luke admits that this kind of outcome from Paul’s mission greatly influenced in a negative way the economic income of those who were engaged in business connected with religious practice. Naturally it led to a conflict of interest between Paul and the business community which is narrated by Luke as “the silversmiths’ riot” that in the end was the direct reason for Paul having to leave Ephesus (Ac 19: 23–40).

Luke’s narrative regarding Paul’s mission in Ephesus during so-called the third mission journey is fragmentary with only some particular topics being elaborated sufficiently. For this reason, the narrative only offers some samples of Paul’s activity rather than giving a full presentation of the mission work that lasted for more than two years. This kind of narrative serves well Luke’s theological and literary strategy, but at the same time contributes little to our knowledge about real outcome of Paul’s mission effort in the city and the region of Anatolia. Fortunately, at the same time quite surprisingly, the gap left by Luke is supplemented by the narrative of the Book of Revelation, where chapter two and three, commonly known as “the Letters to the seven Churches” contain a narrative directly related to Ephesus and neighboring cities. Although the narrative of the Book of Revelation represents a stage of development later than that presented by Luke’s narrative in Acts, nevertheless it points to the

²⁶ E. J. Schnabel, Acts. *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2012, 798–799.

fact that the community established by Paul and other missionaries were capable of existing in the socio-political reality of Asia Minor.

4.3. The Church in Ephesus

The Book of revelation is classified as an apocalyptic writing, mostly due to the fact that the main section (Rev 4–22) concerns the private revelation of John. However, before the narrative of the book turns exclusively to prophetic and apocalyptic topics the narrative of Rev 2–3 presents the state of each church in the region of Anatolia region – the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. All these Churches are located in cities near Ephesus in the north-west region of modern Turkey. It is probable that Ephesus became a kind of “mother Church” for these churches, continuing the mission in the region that was initiated most probably by Paul and other missionaries.²⁷ Probably also for this reason the Letter to the Church of Ephesus is the first among the letters to the seven churches in the region.²⁸ Following the narrative of Luke concerning Paul’s mission activity in Ephesus is possible to say that communities of the churches in Ephesus consisted of Jews believing in Jesus as the Messiah as well as Gentiles sharing the same belief. These communities were able to provide for themselves when after two years the mission of Paul came to the end, which shows the considerable growth of the Christian faith among the inhabitants of the city. Later the Church of Ephesus will play an important role when Christianity became the main religion in the Mediterranean World.

5. Analyses of the Letter to the Church of Ephesus (Rev 2: 1–7)

5.1. Text of Rev 2: 1–7

Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ, ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσοῦν.² οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου καὶ τὸν κόπον καὶ τὴν ὑπομονήν σου καὶ ὅτι οὐ δύνῃ βαστάσαι κακοὺς, καὶ ἐπείρασας τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν καὶ εὗρες αὐτοὺς ψευδεῖς,³ καὶ ὑπομονὴν ἔχεις καὶ ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου καὶ οὐ κεκοπίακες.⁴ ἀλλ’ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφήκες.⁵ μνημόνευε οὖν πόθεν πέπτωκας καὶ μετανόησον καὶ τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον· εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς, ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσης.⁶ ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχεις, ὅτι μισεῖς τὰ ἔργα τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν ἃ κἀγὼ μισῶ.⁷ Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ φαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ. (Rev. 2: 1–7 BNT)

¹ To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus, write; this says the One holding seven stars in His right hand, the One walking in the middle of seven gold lampstands: ² I have known your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance, that you cannot endure wicked people, and that you have tested those who claim

²⁷ This statement is based on the account of Ac 20: 17–38, known as Paul’s farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus, that took place in Miletus. In this speech Paul, leaving for Jerusalem, ceded responsibility for Churches in Ephesus to the elders of each community.

²⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, 228.

themselves to be apostles, and you found them to be false, because they are not. ³You hold steadfast and you suffer for my name, but you have not tired. ⁴Nevertheless, I hold against you this: that You have departed from your primal love. ⁵You have to remember that from which you have departed! You have to repent, and you have to do the works as you did at the beginning. If not, I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place if you do not repent. ⁶However, you have this: You hate the works of Nicolaitans, which I hate also. ⁷He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who prevails, I himself will give to eat from the tree of life which is in God's paradise. (J. Kucicki)

5.2. Structure of the text of Rev 2: 1–7

The letter to the Church in Ephesus and the other letters in Rev 2–3 follows a standard structure that shows the main problem that must be solved by the letter. Each of the letters has three sections: an introduction, which can be couple with the ending of the Letter, the second section contains a eulogy of the addressers that is repeated, the first time after the introduction and second time before the conclusion, and the third contains the problem that must be fixed which is the most importunate part of the letter. The structure of the letter to Church in Ephesus is chiasmic (A-B-C-B¹-A¹):

A - Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ, ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν

B - ²οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου καὶ τὸν κόπον καὶ τὴν ὑπομονὴν σου καὶ ὅτι οὐ δύνῃ βαστάσαι κακοῦς, καὶ ἐπείρασας τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν καὶ εὗρες αὐτοὺς ψευδεῖς, ³ καὶ ὑπομονὴν ἔχεις καὶ ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου καὶ οὐ κεκοπίακες.

C - ⁴ἀλλ' ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφῆκες. ⁵μνημόνευε οὖν πόθεν πέπτωκας καὶ μετανόησον καὶ τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον· εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς, ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσης.

B¹ - ⁶ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχεις, ὅτι μισεῖς τὰ ἔργα τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν ἃ κἀγὼ μισῶ.

A¹ - ⁷Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ φαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ.

The structure indicates that the main subject of the Letter to the Church in Ephesus are verses 4 and 5 (Rev 2: 4–5) which obliges them to return to the primal devotion that characterized the Ephesus community at the beginning of their way through faith in Jesus:

⁴ Nevertheless, I hold against you this: *that You have departure from your primal love.* ⁵ You have to remember from which you have departure! You have to repent, and you have to do the works as you did at the beginning. If not, I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.

5.3. Analyses of the text (Rev 2: 1–7)

Based on the structural analyses provided in previous section we will offer an exegetical analyzes of each section following the structure of Rev 2: 1–7.

5.3.1. Message from Jesus (Rev 2: 1)

¹To the Angel of the Church in Ephesus, write; this says the One holding seven stars in His right hand, the One walking in the middle of seven gold lampstands:

The letter to the church in Ephesus begins with an address containing the commission to John to write the letter to the angel of the church.²⁹ The first information provided by this Rev 2: 1 is the corporate identity between angel and the church of Ephesus, which means that the church of Ephesus has its own angle.³⁰ Use of the indirect object (angel) and the imperative aorist (write) gives the address considerable power and to some extent confers on it a strictly official character.

John has to write to the angel of the church in Ephesus the prophetic message that comes from “*the One holding seven stars in His right hand, the One walking in the middle of seven gold lampstands*”, which in this case is Jesus himself. Jesus in his heavenly glory is not only the owner of the seven churches in Asia (*the One holding seven stars in His right hand*) but is also permanently present in daily life of each of the churches in Asia (*the One walking in the middle of seven gold lampstands*).³¹

5.3.2. Praise for the Ephesus Church (Rev 2: 2–3)

After introducing the agents of the letter in Rev 2: 1, the narrative continues with praise for the church of Ephesus in Rev 2: 2–3.

² I have known your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance, that you cannot endure wicked people, and that you have tested those who claim themselves to be apostles, and you found them to be false, because they are not. ³ You hold steadfast and you suffer for my name, but you have not tired.

In Rev 2: 2, Jesus as the owner of the church shows his full knowledge of church’s activities, which are positively evaluated.³² There is list of four attitudes mentioned: hard work; perseverance; opposition to wicked people; challenging the false apostles. The first concerns the hard work of the Ephesus Church, which was constantly and probably still deeply involved

²⁹ This address is identical (with exception to the name of the city) for each of other letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2002, 110.

³⁰ This statement applies to each of the other seven cities that are addressees of the letters.

³¹ Beale thinks that in Rev 2: 1 “Jesus assumes the role of Yahweh”, which has been presented already in Rev 1: 12–18. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 228–229.

³² The phrase “*I have known your deeds*” appears in each of the letters to the seven churches. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Thomas Nelson, Mexico City 1997, 142–143.

in spreading the kerygma, shaping the faith and building communities.³³ This work requires from each of the members their utmost effort, and involves hardship and sacrifice, but also carries reward.³⁴ The second attitude is perseverance. It is connected with the first attitude of hard work and shows the high level of determination required in spreading the kerygma and strengthening the faith.³⁵ The third attitude is opposition to wicked people, and is more specific than the previous two. The Ephesus Church does not tolerate wicked people, probably referring here to the false apostles mentioned in Rev 2: 3.³⁶ The community of Ephesus found these self-appointed apostles' teaching to be contrary to the kerygma passed on to the Ephesus Churches by the founders of the Christian community in the city (Paul, Apollos, and others).³⁷ John indicates that the Ephesus Churches put these false apostles on trial and found that they were not apostles.³⁸ It is difficult to be more specific concerning the trial or on what basis it was determined that they were false apostles.³⁹

The last reason for praising the Churches of Ephesus is their perseverance, as was already mentioned in Rev 2: 2, however this time it is mentioned in a different context (Rev 2: 3), namely a context of persecution during which the Ephesus Church stayed faithful to the name of Jesus.⁴⁰ This challenge did not cause them to abandon their faith or induce despair, but on the contrary it made them even more determined to continue the Lord's work for the churches in Asia Minor.

5.3.3. Bitter words to the Ephesus Church (Rev 2: 4–5)

After expressing gratitude for the performance of the Ephesus Churches for the name of the Lord, John goes directly to main purpose of the letter, which regards the declining intensity of the

³³ Rev 2: 2–3 is similar to exposition presented in 1 Thess 1: 3.

³⁴ B. M. Fanning, *Revelation*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2020, 116–117.

³⁵ The term “perseverance” belongs to the one of the most important terms in Revelation and is usually connected to hardship and various trials (Rev 1: 9; 2: 2, 3, 19; 3: 10; 13: 10; 14: 12). P. S. Williamson, *Revelation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2015, 60.

³⁶ Some scholars have identified the self-styled apostles (Rev 2: 2) as the Nicolaitans mentioned in Rev 2: 6. Cf.: W. J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2008, 57. The problem of the pseudo-apostles, however, is presented as a past problem (aorist tense), whereas that of the Nicolaitans is seen to be in the present (present tense). D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 143–144.

³⁷ The problem of these groups of self-styled apostles is not confined to Revelation. A similar problem is indicated in 2 Cor 11: 4–5; 12: 11–12.

³⁸ The term *apostle* appears in the Book of Revelation three times (Rev 2: 2; 18: 20; 21: 14). In Rev 2: 2 the term refers to a special messenger whose authority could be confirmed or not, based on certain criteria. In Rev 18: 20 *apostle* refers to a restricted group of special messengers and should be understood in a wider meaning than the Twelve. In Rev 21: 14 the term refers strictly to the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 144.

³⁹ On the analogy of 2 Cor 12: 12 (*I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles*) it is possible to assume that Church of Ephesus uses this (2 Cor 12: 12) as a criterion for challenging the claim of the self-styled apostles.

⁴⁰ In Rev 2: 2 the perseverance is connected to guarding true of the teaching and kerygma. In Rev 2: 3 the perseverance references to stay faithful during the time of turbulences. B. K. Blount, *Revelation*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2009, 50.

Ephesus Church in their love for the Lord. This problem is not merely a matter of sentiment; the contrary it is critically serious problem that may determine the future of this Church. Although the intent of the criticism is clear, some expressions, however, are difficult to interpret unambiguously.

⁴Nevertheless, I hold against you this: that You have departed from your primal love. ⁵You have to remember that from which you have departed! You have to repent, and you have to do the works as you did at the beginning. If not, I will come to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent.

This rebuke starts with an indication that they neglected the most important among the Christian virtues ἀγάπη in direct personal offence to the Lord (*I hold against you this*). Even in the case of the Ephesus Church is not simply neglecting ἀγάπη, rather the problem concerns the difference in the level of ἀγάπη that is performed at the time of writing the letter in comparison with to the level that the Ephesus Church performed it at the time they first come to the faith in Jesus. Their performance of ἀγάπη now is evaluated by Jesus as “*You have departure from your primal love*” which shows that the ἀγάπη is not the same as it was at the beginning. The Lord does not tell John directly what is exactly the difference between the present ἀγάπη of the Ephesus Church and the first ἀγάπη of the Church. There are two possible ways to solve this problem. One is to consider the moral and theological aspects of ἀγάπη, and the other concerns the kerygmatic aspect of ἀγάπη. In case of the first possibility the problem concerning ἀγάπη refers to the relationship with the Lord which is less intense than at the beginning. It does not concern feeling and enthusiasm in its emotional aspect, but first at all the daily attitude of the Ephesus Churches as witnesses to Jesus in its practical aspect. It does not mean that the Christians in Ephesus did not gave testimony to Jesus the Lord; on the contrary, they live in a very unfavorable environment dominated by polytheistic religions in a cosmopolitan culture, and subject to the socio-political cult of Caesars. All these made the life of Christian to be significantly restricted since many obligations (such as the worship of the Emperors, attendance at feasts, etc.) were impossible to follow by them. However, they suffered these “inconveniences” and were praised by Jesus himself because of their faithfulness (*You hold steadfast and you suffer for my name, but you have not tired*). This excludes the moral and theological aspects as the reason for Jesus’ words of concern to them. Although the actions of the Christians in Ephesus are not the subject of Jesus’ criticism, the manner and most importantly the reason and purpose for doing them is not considered to be satisfactory, by the Lord. The Christian in Ephesus did act as witnesses to the name of Jesus, which means they did not grow in true faith and showing social behavior that is characteristic for Christians. They acted out of a sense of duty, in faithfulness and with zeal, and probably for many over reasons that helped them to be “good Christian”. It seems that Jesus appreciated these efforts, and yet He did not find the attitude of the Ephesus Churches be sufficient to prevent their lampstand from being taken from its place, because all these things are done for many different reasons but not just for love of Jesus the Lord. Why did Jesus ask the Ephesus Church to base all their deeds on love for Jesus, and not on mere routine or custom? Probably because in time of peace and safety the routines, the customs and the traditions may possibly be enough to preserve the faith, but in time of persecution (in this case Domitian’s persecution)

it may not be sufficient.

In the face of severe persecution of the faith, only love for Jesus will help believers to stay faithful to the Lord. Jesus directly indicates that the crucial problem of the Ephesus Churches is a change in the way they love their Lord. Jesus in his *paranesis* (*You have to remember from which you have departed! You have to repent, and you have to do the works as you did at the beginning*) requires first of all *μνημονεύω* - *to remember*, which is a direct order addressed to the Christians. It has two specifications. They have to remember that they have fallen from their first love for Jesus (their first attitude of living as Christians), which now is not the same as it was, but it must be returned to the same level as it was at the beginning.⁴¹ They also have to remember that they have to *μετανοέω* - *to repent* which again is a direct order from Jesus to change their own way of thinking.⁴² The processes of remembering and repenting have a precisely designed purpose, which is expressed by Jesus as “*to do works as you did at the beginning*”. It shows the main point of Jesus’ *paranesis*, which is a return to the first deeds.⁴³

This result seems to point to the kerygmatic character of *ἀγάπη* rather than to its moral or theological aspect. Jesus’ rebuke (*You have departed from your primal love*) of the Ephesus Churches concerns their mission attitude in proclaiming the Lord’s kerygma. The first love of those who became Christian was to proclaim Jesus and his teaching to inhabitants of Ephesus and the other cities in the region. Because of this work the Church in Ephesus became the “mother Church” for other churches in the region, giving it privilege and honor among Christians of Asia Minor.

This interpretation fits perfectly with following rebuke of Jesus (Rev 2: 5) addressed to the Church of Ephesus if they do not follow the Jesus’ order (Rev 2: 4–5). It is not clear if this refers to a diminishing eagerness on the part of the Ephesian Christians about proclaiming the kerygma among the citizens of Ephesus, which would indicate some stagnation of the first basic duty of Christian which is to spread the kerygma, or to the Ephesus Church neglecting its duty to assist other churches in the region in order to spread the kerygma.⁴⁴

5.3.4. The issue of Nicolaitans (Rev 2: 6)

After rebuking the Ephesus Church for the decline in zeal for spreading the kerygma in comparison with the first years of the Christian life in Ephesus, and insisting that repentance will lead them to spread the kerygma in the same way as at the beginning, Jesus returns to praising the Christians in Ephesus for their struggle to preserve the theological correctness of Jesus’ teaching as

⁴¹ D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 146–147.

⁴² B. M. Fanning, *Revelation*, 118–120. It may directly indicate that the reason for abandoning the first enthusiasm they had shown is most probably connected with slow and constant change in their attitude under the pressure of the circumstances of their daily life. Even they themselves may not have been aware of this.

⁴³ G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 116–117.

⁴⁴ Beale rightly indicates that the problem of the decline in love for the Lord may refer to the second generation of Christians in Ephesus, rather than that the first generation’s eagerness had slackened. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 231–233. Nevertheless, the problem still concerns the Ephesus Church which must find the way to spread the kerygma in more severe circumstances such as those in the time of the persecution by Diocletian.

taught to them by the apostles. This aspect was already indicated in Rev 2: 2, where the Christians in Ephesus were praised by Jesus on the occasion that they stood up to self-styled apostles and found them to be false apostles. However, in Rev 2: 6 the problem concerns the Christian sect called Nicolaitans, which should not be equated with the false apostles in Rev 2: 2 because the issue of the false apostles is presented by Jesus as a past event, but the issue of the Nicolaitans is a present problem. The text says almost nothing about the sect, limiting the reference to strong negative evaluation of the Nicolaitans' works (*however, you have this: You hate the works of Nicolaitans, which I hate also*) which is shared by both, Jesus and the Ephesian Christians. The problem of this group appears also in Rev 2: 15 as a part of the Letter to Church of Pergamon (Rev 2: 12–17), where further explanation about the possible wrongdoing of this group is given. Based on Rev 2: 14 is possible to say that the Nicolaitans were a group of Christians from Asia Mino, who made some a compromise between the Christian way of life and thought, and pagan culture, society and religion. Two particular problems may be detected: some Christians ate the meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods, which the majority of the Ephesus Church considered to be idolatry. It led to spiritual and sexual fornication as in the case of Balaam and Israel as recounted in the Book of Numbers (Num 22: 5–25).⁴⁵ Probably “the works” of the Nicolaitans was the result of considerable pressure from pagan society, where “behaving differently” from the rest of society readily led to economic and social ostracism.⁴⁶ The Nicolaitans' decision was not accepted by the majority in the Ephesus Church. The attitude of Christians to compromise to some degree with the pagan world was not something unique to the Ephesian Christians; it was a real temptation for all followers of Jesus living in a society dominated by polytheistic religious systems. A similar case is found in the Letter to the Church of Pergamon (Rev 2: 12–17).

5.3.5. He who has ears (Rev 2: 7)

⁷He who has ears, have to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who prevails, I himself will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in God's paradise.

The letter to the Church of Ephesus ends with standard phrase that appears also in other letters to the Churches but with some modification resulting from different circumstances of the Churches.⁴⁷ It starts with an exhortation (*He who has ears, have to hear what the Spirit says to the churches*) which contains a strong obligation to pay careful attention to these words, meditate on them and apply them in daily life.⁴⁸ Involving “the Spirit” in this exhortation,

⁴⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 248–250.

⁴⁶ D. F. Watson, Nicolaitans, in: *ABD*, Vol. 4, 1106–1107.

⁴⁷ The Letter to Church of Ephesus – Rev 2: 11; the Letter to Church of Smyrna – Rev 2: 11; the Letter to Church of Pergamon – Rev 2: 17; the Letter to Church of Thyatira – Rev 2: 26–29; the Letter to Church of Sardis – Rev 3: 5–6; the Letter to Church of Philadelphia – Rev 3: 12–13; the Letter to Church of Laodicea – Rev 3: 21–22.

⁴⁸ P. S. Williamson, *Revelation*, 62–63. This close is a standard pattern used in all seven letters. B. K. Blount, *Revelation*, 51–52. Aune names this close as “the proclaiming formula” that is intended to amplify the requirement to follow the order of Jesus. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 123.

directly points to an obligation for Christians to hearken to the Spirit who guides and protects them during their journey on this earth. This obligation is followed by a promise that for those who prevail Jesus himself “*give to eat from the tree of life, which is in God’s paradise*” which means the eternal life in paradise.⁴⁹ The connection with the story from the Book of Genesis is obvious. In the story from the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are banished from paradise in order that they will not be able to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of Eden (Gn 3: 22), in the Book of Revelation, those who prevail (νικῶντι) will receive access to the tree of life from Jesus (Rev 2: 7).⁵⁰

5.4. Interpretation of Rev 2: 1–7

The letter to the Church of Ephesus concerns the existence of the Christian community within a non-Christian world, which naturally generates several issues, mostly concerning the three dimensions of the relationship. The first and the most crucial relationship regards Jesus and the Church of Ephesus. This relationship includes the subordination the Church of Ephesus to will of Jesus who is the owner, guardian and final destination of this Church. The Church of Ephesus exists because Jesus is present within the community, like an owner carefully looking over his own possession (Rev 2: 1). The church depends entirely on its owner, and its fate depends on the way the Church serves the owner (Rev 2: 5). So far, the Church serves the Lord well by opposing the false apostles and the Nicolaitans (Rev 2: 6), undertaking activity and working hard for spreading the kerygma, persevering and suffering persecution for the Lord’s name (Rev 2: 2–3). All these seem to attest the principal status of the Ephesus Church as the “Mother Church” for the other churches in Asia Minor. Despite all these achievements of the Ephesus Church, there is some slight change in the relationship between the Church and its Lord, which is probably not yet noticed by the Church, but is already detected by the owner, who makes a decisive statement in the worm of a conditional sentence (Rev 2: 4–5). Instead being a threat, the statement is an *exordium* containing the way to solve the problem. The problem itself does not refer to the “turning back” on Jesus, rather it refers to the fact that for the Church of Ephesus, Jesus is no longer the only relation the Church wants to continue, even though this relation is the first. To some degree the Church of Ephesus wants to establish “more friendly” relations with the world in which they live, but this means some kind of compromise that cannot be tolerated by Jesus. The Lord wants the Church to be radical in its commitment to the owner because He knows that without radical commitment to Him the lampstand of the Church will fall sooner or later.

⁴⁹ In this translation we used English word “prevail”, however the Greek term νικῶντι literally means “be victorious” and it refers to one of the most important themes of the Book of Revelation. P. S. Williamson, *Revelation*, 62. The term “be victorious” appears in all seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor, with many nuances of meaning: “keeps my words until the end” – Rev 2: 26; shares victory of Christ – Rev 3: 21; etc. outside the section of Rev 2–3, the term is associated with different kinds of narrative concerning “martyrdom” (Rev 7: 13–14; 12: 11; 15: 2). W. J. Harrington, *Revelation*, 57–58.

⁵⁰ This is another important theme in the Book of Revelation that will reach its climax in the narrative of Rev 22: 2. B. K. Blount, *Revelation*, 52.

The second dimension regards relationships within the Christian community in Ephesus. In general terms the Church in Ephesus is doing well, not only providing for themselves but also for other churches in the region. However, this Church is not free from some problems, tensions and issues, which do not seem to disturb the community to a degree that could threaten the existence of the Church. It does not mean that some issues are not serious problems which may cause serious damage if not be properly handled by the community which must solve the problem in order to serve the Lord according to His will. According to the narrative of Rev 2: 1–7, the Lord praises the Ephesus Churches for many reasons, but especially important are two issues. The first concerns the fact that the Church of Ephesus challenged some people who claimed to be apostles and found them to be false and self-styled apostles (Rev 2: 2). This information shows the problem of false apostles who usually enter the Christian community in order to find followers, fame, recognition and secure lives for themselves.⁵¹ More dangerous is the case of some people who presented themselves as apostles but were spreading a false Gospel or teaching contrary to the tradition passed on to the believers by the true apostles of Jesus.⁵² It is obvious that they could not claim to be among the Twelve, however, they could claim to be members of the so-called “the second circle of Jesus’ apostles” since the number of Jesus followers (apostles) was changeable during His ministry.⁵³ Their activities among Christian communities could deceive, discourage, bring doubts about the faith and teaching, and even cause a rift between the members of the community.⁵⁴ For this reason, the Church must constantly be concerned about preserving the true teaching and tradition of the Apostles.

There was another problem within the Ephesus Church community. Some of them, who are called by John, Nicolaitans (Rev 2: 6), were tempted to compromise their Christian lifestyle with the lifestyle of the general society in Ephesus. For those Gentiles who became Christian it was not easy to be Christian in the non-Christian society of Ephesus, where matters of faith and religious convictions were significantly determined the social environment of the city. The radical monotheism of Christianity was not easily maintained in a society with a polytheistic diversity of gods and many ways of worshiping. This naturally created a kind of invisible wall that divided these two worlds in which the new world (Christianity) was expected to fit into the old world (polytheism) preferred by the majority of the inhabitants of Ephesus. The majority of the Christians in Ephesus refused to fit into the polytheistic society, but there were some devoted Christian who were on the opinion that they should interacting with the society of Ephesus despite its character. Most probably they wanted to preserve their relations with their non-Christian fellow citizens. This attitude was rebuked strongly by the members of the

⁵¹ Since this pattern is also presented in other writing of the New Testament (ex. Ac 19: 13–17) this should be considered to be something common rather than unusual in society in the first century AD.

⁵² This problem is presented also in Paul’s speech to the Elders of the Ephesus Church in Ac 20: 17–38).

⁵³ The number of the Twelve apostles of Jesus should be understood rather in theological way than in the strict fractographic way. Like the Israel was established based on the twelve sons of Jacob, so the New Israel was established on the Twelve Apostles of Jesus.

⁵⁴ Concerning these kind of problems, the Paul’s letters provide many interesting examples.

Ephesus Church as well as by Jesus Himself (Rev 2: 6).

The third dimension regards the relationship between the Christian community in Ephesus and society in Ephesus at the end of the first century AD, when the city of Ephesus was enjoying its “golden age” characterized by the esteem in which it was held by the other cities of Asia Minor, and by the cult of the goddess Artemis that made the city to have an importance second only to Rome.⁵⁵ Concerning the relationship between the Christians of Ephesus and the non-Christian part of the society, fortunately the narrative of Rev 2: 1–7 is not the only source available to us, because the issue of the relationship between these two parts of society is also presented in a direct and extensive way in Ac 19: 11–40; 20: 17–38 as well in an indirect way in the Letter to the Ephesians.⁵⁶ In fact, in the New Testament, there are three different writings referring to three different periods of coexistence between Christian and non-Christian in Ephesus. The first testimony comes from Ac 19: 11–40; 20: 17–38, where Luke presents the effects of Paul’s mission activity in the city. A deep impact on the society in Ephesus was made by spreading the kerygma, but at the same time there was strong and radical position against Paul and his activities that resulted in his discontinuing the work. Although Luke shows the economic aspects of the problem between Paul and a part of society in Ephesus, and his narrative attests that a strong and large community of Christians was established, it does not mean that the community was easily accepted by mainstream society in the city. Despite some obstacles the community in Ephesus was able to create a kind of “Christian society” within the society in Ephesus as the Letter to Ephesians seems to attest. They were united, well informed about the doctrine of the faith, with a high standard of Christian living, and at the same time they became the moving force for mission activity in the region of Asia Minor, as the Book of Revelation shows. Despite some problems indicated in Rev 2: 4–5, the Ephesus community remained the mother Church for other churches in the region in leadership and assistance. Jesus’ rebuke toward the Ephesus community was strong but helpful in assuring that the community remain true to its origin, despite the changing nature of society and challenges from the non-Christian society of Ephesus.

5.5. Function of Rev 2: 1–7

Since John the Evangelist was related to the Churches in Asia Minor before his death, he was sentenced to spend the rest of his life on the island of Patmos. There he had several revelations which were written down by him and in their final version became the Book of Revelation. In that book he first paid attention to the present situation of the Churches to which he was related. The seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor in Rev 2–3 are probably his last *exordium* addressed to the leaders of the churches in the places where he also

⁵⁵ Because the city of Ephesus was keeper and protector of cult and the Temple of the Artemis (one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), the citizens of the city calls themselves “νεοκόρος τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος”. From period of Caesar Domitian who was worshiped in Ephesus as the god, they also used phrase “twice neokoros”. P. Treblico, *The Early Christians in Ephesus*, 29.

⁵⁶ Despite a problem of authenticity of the Letter to the Ephesus, this letter in indirect manner shows some aspect of relationship between Christian and the Ephesus society during post Paul period.

was active. This *exordium* has divine authority, since it is dictated to John by the Lord himself, and it contains not human judgment of the situation in each of the churches but is a critical judgment by the owner of the churches, who will decide their fate. And this fate depends on the realization by each church of the mission for which it was established, in other words, it depends on the fruit it bears. The fruit will decide if the church, understood as the believers, will participate in reality of the heavenly Jerusalem. This concerns all seven churches to which a particular message is addressed.

Regarding the letter to the church in Ephesus (Rev 2: 1–7), which is presented by Jesus as the first among the other churches due to its superior role as “the mother church” for all the churches in this region, the message is of fundamental importance because despite the fact that it is addressed particularly to the community in Ephesus, the response to this message will influence also the other churches. If the church in Ephesus should fail to preserve its “first love” it was to be removed by the Lord even though it be the most important “lampstand” among others. When the mother church will fail it is only a matter of time that all the other churches will fail too. For this reason, it is crucial that the Church of Ephesus maintain the requirement of the Jesus, because “love” is greater than faith and hope (1 Cor 13: 13). Osborne rightly says: “a church that has forgotten to love is church that has ceased to be a church, and that is why Jesus warns that he will remove its lampstand”.⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 125.