

The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor

—Socio-Historical Reality Behind the Prophetic Words—

Part II: The Letter to the Church of Smyrna

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Abstract

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna (Rev 2: 8–11) is the second letter among the Letters to the Churches in Asia Minor. The letter deals with two problems: one is the socio-economical ostracism of the Christians, which made their lives in the city harsh and constantly under pressure; the other is the persecution of the Christians in order to force them to deny their faith in Jesus, the Lord. The second problem is the main theme of the Lord's teaching to the Smyrna community. It concerns the priority of being free from the "second death" that is the eternal condemnation, before the "first death" that is death of the earthly body. Avoiding the "first death" and denying the faith leads to eternal condemnation (the second death) but accepting the "first death" in order to preserve faith in the Lord leads to eternal life with the Lord and avoiding the "second death."

Introduction

The second part of the series of articles regarding the Letters to the Churches in Asia Minor, which are included in John's Book of Revelation (Rev 2: 2–3), concerns the Christian community dwelling in the city of Smyrna. In order to present the socio-cultural background for the text Rev 2: 8–11, first a brief history of the city will be presented (1), and then a brief history of Christianity in Smyrna will be provided (2). After a presentation of the necessary background information, the analysis of the text of Rev 2: 8–11 will be offered in four stages: first the text and structure of Rev 2: 8–11 (3.1; 3.2); secondly an analysis of the text (3.3); thirdly, the interpretation of the text (3.4); and finally the function of the text (3.5).

1. Smyrna from the beginning until the time of the Apostles.

Among the Letters to the Churches in Asia Minor, the second is the Letter to the Church in Smyrna. The city of Smyrna (today Turkish Izmir) was located north from Ephesus on the

east coast of the Aegean Sea in the region of Anatolia¹. The city itself and the two harbors of the city were strategic points for the whole region². This location was the source of the prosperity of the city since the natural location of the city and the harbors provided necessary safety and greatly contributed to defense during invasions³. The city prospered greatly due to the harbors that connected the city with Athens and other cities of Aegean Sea, as well as due to its location on the end of the minor Asia Minor trade route connecting it with the eastern parts of the Roman Empire.

The beginning of settlement in this region is dated to the third millennium BC, however, the Greek colonists appeared in this region probably in the second millennium BC, and in 688 BC the city of Smyrna became the thirteenth city-state of Ionia⁴. As an essential trade city between Anatolia and the Aegean Sea, Smyrna in the seventh century BC became wealthy and prospered, but after 500 BC it began to lose its power, and at the end of fourth century the city's greatness was already a thing of the past.

During the Hellenistic period the city was rebuilt, according to the wish of Alexander the Great, by Antigonus and Lysimachus during the period 316–281 BC, and the beauty of the city became proverbial. Archeological excavations confirm the existence of the city wall, acropolis, several temples, a gymnasium, the stadium, and theatre⁵. Since the city was built on the slope of the mountain the main road called Golden road runs from west to east, from the top of the city to the lower parts of the city which were frequently flooded during the rainy season.

At the end of second century Smyrna turned from its Greek ally Pergamum in order to form an alliance with the new rising power of Roman Empire. After falling under Roman influence, Smyrna accepted Roman and Greco-Roman cultic religions, building the temple for the goddess Roma (195 BC) and for the emperor Augustus, making it possible for the city to receive the title “*neokoros*” (“temple keeper”) due to the erection of a temple for the Emperor Tiberius (AD 26)⁶. During the first century AD the city was home to a large Jewish community, and also had a significant Christian community⁷.

2. The beginning of Christianity in Smyrna.

The city of Smyrna is mentioned in the New Testament only twice (Rev 1: 11; 2: 8), which clearly enough attests that the city itself was not a subject of interest to the authors who

¹ The distance between Ephesus and Smyrna is about 57 km.

² Smyrna was located almost on the shore of the river Hermus which flows to the Aegean Sea, thus making it possible for ships to enter the harbor though it was a considerable distance from the sea.

³ An example of this was the unsuccessful invasion by king Gyges (680–644 BC) of the Mermnad Dynasty.

⁴ According to Strabo, however, the city of Smyrna was a colony of Ephesus. Strabo, *Geography* xiv. 634.

⁵ G. M. Burge, Smyrna, in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freedman, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000, pp. 1233–1234.

⁶ B. K. Blount, *Revelation. A Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2009, p. 53.

⁷ G. R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2002, p. 127.

contributed to the canon of the Christian Bible. The inclusion of the name of the city by John the Evangelist in the Book of Revelation was the result of his collective approach to the Christian communities dwelling in the region of Anatolia⁸. Also, due to lack of information regarding the Smyrna Christian community, our knowledge regarding the establishing of the community is very hypothetical, since no missionaries mentioned by name in Luke's Acts of the Apostles, or by other authors contributing to the canon of the New Testament, are explicitly associated with the community of Smyrna. We can only speculate on the identity of the founder.

Although it is impossible to name with confidence even one person known to us from the New Testament tradition, nevertheless it is possible to name some possible candidates for the title "the founder of the Smyrna Christian community." The most suitable candidate is John the Evangelist, the author of the Gospel according to John, the Book of Revelation and the three letters attributed to him (1Jn; 2Jn; 3Jn). John spent several years in Ephesus before he was banished from the city to the island of Patmos. Judging from the fact that he is the subject of the revelation concerning the temporal conditions of the Christian communities in the region of Anatolia to which the letters were addressed, it is possible to assume with some confidence that during his stay in Ephesus, John visited and promoted these communities. However, it does not automatically mean that he was the founder of these communities. The region of Anatolia was a place where many other missionaries, Apostles and witnesses participated in spreading Christ's *kerygma*. Concerning particularly the case of Smyrna, John's influence on the community seems to be attested by the fact that his pupil Polycarp became the bishop of Smyrna's community, which seems to support the supposition that he could possibly be the founder of the community⁹.

Nevertheless, John was not one of the first missionaries operating in the region of Anatolia in order to establish the community to follow the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Based on the information provided by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, at least two other candidates can be proposed due to their connection to the Christian community in Ephesus, although this connection may be the result of their activity in other regions of Anatolia. These are the Apostle Paul (Ac 19: 1–20: 38) and Apollos (Ac 18: 23–19: 1), who are to some extent indirectly connected in the narrative of the Acts with the city of Ephesus (Ac 19: 1). Concerning Apollos, the Alexandrian Jew, little information is provided by Luke who concentrated more on Apollos' rhetorical skills and his teaching impact, rather than on the record of his mission. He was probably actively involved in spreading the teaching in his hometown Alexandria before he decided to spread the *kerygma* among the diaspora Jews dwelling in many places of the Roman Empire. According to Luke's narrative, Apollos was interested in spreading the new religion in the western part of the empire, which naturally led him to the lands along the Aegean Sea,

⁸ It is significant that among the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor, only the letter to the Church in Smyrna does not contain any rebuke against the community.

⁹ Polycarp in his Letter to Philipppians (Phil 5: 3) wrote that at the time when Paul was writing his Letter to Philipppians (Ephesus imprisonment -AD 53–55 or Caesarea imprisonment - AD 56–58), the city of Smyrna had not yet been exposed to the Christ's *kerygma*. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Thomas Nelson, Mexico City 1997, p. Iviii.

including the region of Anatolia as well as the region of Achaia¹⁰. Luke's narrative connects Apollos with Ephesus where he was corrected about his teaching (Ac 18: 26), and also with the city of Corinth to which he was recommended by Priscilla and Aquila, due to his advanced rhetorical skills. However, there is no direct or indirect connection in the New Testament between Apollos and the city of Smyrna, which reduces greatly the possibility that he was the founder of the community in Smyrna¹¹.

The second candidate is Saul of Tarsus, known commonly as the Apostle Paul. Paul is the main concern of Luke's narrative regarding the third mission journey (Ac 18: 23–20: 21), as well as the author of the Letter to Ephesians, but most scholars strongly doubt the attribution of this letter to Paul. Although Paul spent almost three years in Ephesus, no mention is made of his activities in the region of Anatolia either by Luke or by Paul himself. Luke's account mostly concentrated on Paul's stand against idolatry, witchcraft and (most important for the Ephesians) the cult of Artemis (Ac 19: 11–40). Concerning the mission activities in Ephesus, Luke provides a simple and short conclusion that concerns Paul's activities exclusively limited to the city of Ephesus (Ac 19: 1–10). The short conclusion ends with information that "*all people living in the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.*" Obviously, this general conclusion derives more from literary style and the author's private wishes, than from a concern with historical accuracy. The statement claims that the *kerygma* was proclaimed to all people of Asia, and Ac 19: 9–10 even suggests strongly that Paul's spreading of *kerygma* took place in the school of Tyrannus and lasted for two years. This gives the impression that people went to the school of Tyrannus to hear Paul's preaching, rather than that Paul went from Ephesus to every corner of Asia Minor in order to proclaim the *kerygma* throughout the region¹². It would be impossible to claim, on the basis of Ac 19: 9–10, that Paul went to Smyrna, or that he established the Christian community in this city. There are two convincing arguments that support this conclusion of excluding Paul as the founder of Smyrna's Christian community.

The first one is from the Acts of the Apostles. After his general conclusion about the work in Ephesus (Ac 19: 8–10), Luke goes on directly to give an extended narrative regarding trouble and turbulent period for Paul due to his successful challenging of Ephesus' religious world (Ac 19: 11–40). The second argument comes from a non-biblical source, and its author is Polycarp of Smyrna who was a disciple of the Apostle John. In his Letter to the Philippians (Phil 5: 3) that was written before AD 155, just before his martyrdom, Polycarp mentions that Smyrna was not evangelized by Christian missionaries before Paul wrote his Letter to the Philippians. Paul's Letter to Philippians is recognized by scholars as being one of the "imprisonment letter" due to the fact that it was written during the time of Paul's imprisonment.

¹⁰ Even it is not possible to attest it, Apollos probably visited and spread the Christian teaching in many other places that are not mentioned by Luke.

¹¹ Apollos is also mentioned several times in Paul's First Letter to Corinthians (1 Cor 1: 12; 3: 4–6. 22; 1 Cor 4: 6; 16: 12) in contexts of comparison between him and Paul. However, Apollos is also mentioned in Paul's Letter to Titus (Tit 3: 13) and the context implies that there was some degree of cooperation with Paul.

¹² E. J. Schnabel, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Acts*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2012, pp. 791–794.

Concerning the place and date of writing the Letter to Philippians there are three possibilities, where each of which is still far from to be convincing.

The first concerns a possible imprisonment in Ephesus, which could have taken place during the third mission journey, probably during AD 53–55. This imprisonment is not explicitly mentioned by Luke in his the Acts of the Apostles, and the only one indirect account that may suggest Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus comes from 1 Cor 15: 32, where he says, "*If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me?*"¹³. The expression "*I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus*" should be taken as a metaphorical expression, rather than in its literal meaning¹⁴. However, several references concerning opposition to Paul and his struggle to survive persecution in 1&2 Corinthians show how dangerous his two years' work in Ephesus was, and how strong was the opposition to the teaching proclaimed by him. Despite the hardship of Paul's mission work in Ephesus, there is no information, direct or indirect, concerning Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus, which makes it unlikely that Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians in Ephesus during AD 53–55. This allows us to conclude that Paul during time in Ephesus was not involved in mission activities in Smyrna, thus excluding the possibility that he was directly the founder of the Christian community in the city of Smyrna.

The second possibility lies in Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (56–58 AD), which is directly attested and extensively elaborated in Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 21: 27–26: 32). This imprisonment took place in AD 56–58, and it was a time of Paul struggled for his life due to harsh the Jewish opposition to the *kerygma* proclaimed by Paul (Ac 21: 27–40; Ac 23: 12–22), as well as the unjust treatment by the Roman juridical system (Ac 23: 23–35; Ac 24: 1–26: 32). His writing of the Letter to the Philippians during the imprisonment in Caesarea is very likely, not only due to the span of two years that Paul spent in prison, but also to his fair treatment by prefect Felix (Ac 24: 23), which made it possible for Paul to communicate with his friends from outside of prison, and possibly write the Letter to the Philippians. Judging from the content of the letter, Paul seems to be at ease, offering important teaching cornering several aspects of the faith. He very gently presents the reality of persecution in terms of understanding and accepting, rather than struggling against it. Despite the harsh reality of the imprisonment, the letter contains a considerable level of personal composure on the part of Paul.

Concerning the problem of the founder of the Smyrna Christian community, this account is of little help, and the only useful information that concerns the fact that Paul could not have been the founder of the Smyrna community before AD 58.

The third possibility is Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Ac 28: 11–31) during AD 59–60/61¹⁵. The most important information concerning this imprisonment is mentioned by Luke at the end of the Acts of the Apostles (Ac 28: 28–31). The first information regards the span of Paul's

¹³ D. W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Colossians & Philemon*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2012, pp. 791–794. G. W. Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2009, p. 23.

¹⁴ P. Gardner, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. 1 Corinthians*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2018, pp. 695–696.

¹⁵ Although Paul was sent to Rome during Autumn AD 58, however due to the shipwrecking (Ac 27: 1–28: 10), he and his companions had to spend the winter on Malta, and reach Rome during the Spring of AD 59.

imprisonment in Rome (2 years), as well as the kind of imprisonment, which was a kind of “house arrest” where Paul as a person possessing Roman citizenship, must himself rent the house during the period of waiting for his trial (Ac 28: 30). This status obliged him to stay permanently at home, but at the same time it also allowed him to receive visitors, which made it possible for him to communicate with outside world through his friends and coworkers. The last information provided by Luke concerns his considerable freedom for spreading the *kerygma* to those who visited him (Ac 28: 31). Based on the information provided by Luke (Ac 28: 28–31), it is possible that the Letter to the Philippians could have been written during the Roman imprisonment¹⁶. One of the stronger arguments comes from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians where he explicitly mentions financial assistance to him provided by the Christian community of Philippi (Ph 4: 16).

Concerning the possibility that Paul could have been the founder of the Christian community of Smyrna, our conclusion is negative, namely it is not possible that Paul was the founder of the community based on the information provided by Polycarp, and the date of writing by Paul the Letter to the Philippians.

Conclusion: Based on the outcome of the analysis undertaken in this study we prefer the possibility that the Christian community of Smyrna was established by John Evangelist, probably in the AD 60s¹⁷.

3. Analyses of the Letter to the Church in Smyrna (Rev 2: 8–11)

After presenting some issues regarding the Christian community and the founder of the community in Smyrna, now we turn to an analysis of Rev 2: 8–11, which is the account of the Letter to the Church in Smyrna. We will provide four analyses; the first will be a structural analysis of the text, the second will be analysis of the text itself, the third will be an interpretation of the text, and the fourth will be an analysis of the function of the text.

3.1 Text of Rev 2: 8–11

⁸ Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σμύρνῃ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ

¹⁶ This was an opinion that was widespread from the Patristic period (cf. Jerome) until the twentieth century. However, modern scholars are in favor of Ephesus as the place of writing of the Letter to the Philippians, and they date the Letter to AD 52–56.

However, we do not accept Ephesus as the place of writing the Letter to the Philippians for the following reasons:

1. Paul’s imprisonment in Ephesus is not well attested.
2. There is no information about Paul’s financial problems during his mission work in Ephesus.
3. The period of Paul’s mission in Ephesus is characterized as being a constant struggle against idolatry, which does not fit well with the topic and atmosphere of the Letter to the Philippians.
4. The Letter to the Philippians contains references to Paul’s doubt about the outcome of this trial (Ph 1: 20).

¹⁷ However, despite this conclusion, there is still some degree of uncertainty, which makes it possible that the Smyrna community was established by someone else, not known to us.

ἔζησεν.⁹ οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πλούσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγὴ τοῦ σατανᾶ.¹⁰ μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε καὶ ἔξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς.¹¹ Ὁ ἔχων οὐς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου. (Rev. 2: 8–11 BNT)

⁸And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: ⁹I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the slander by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. I tell you; the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful as far as to death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Anyone who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death. (Kucicki: Rev 2: 8–11)

3.2. Structure of the text of Rev 2: 8–11

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna like the Letter to the Church in Ephesus and other letters in Rev 2–3 follows a standard structure that shows the main problem of each of the churches that must be solved by the letters. For this reason, the structure of the Letter to Church in Smyrna has three sections, which is a pattern applying also to other letters. The structure begins with an introduction (v. 8), which can be coupled with the ending of the letter (v. 11), the second section contains a prophesy concerning harsh future for the community (vv. 9–10), and the third section contains a promise for those who overcome persecutions. The structure of the letter to Church in Smyrna is chiasmic (A-B-A¹):

A-⁸ Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σμύρνῃ ἐκκλησίας γράψον· Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν·

B-⁹ οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πλούσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγὴ τοῦ σατανᾶ.¹⁰ μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε καὶ ἔξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς.

A¹- Ὁ ἔχων οὐς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου.

Based on the results of the structural analysis of Rev 2: 9–11, the main topic of the letter is presented in verses 9–10, which concern the coming persecution against the members of the Church in Smyrna.

3.3 Analyses of the text (Rev 2: 8–11)

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna has the same beginning as the Letter to the Church of Ephesus except for the name of the city (v. 8a - *And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write*). The Church in Smyrna has its own angel, who looks over them and communicates a message sent by Jesus Himself. Then in the letter to Church in Ephesus, Jesus is presented as “*the One*

holding seven stars in His right hand, the One walking in the middle of seven gold lampstands”, in this letter He is presented as *“the first and the last, who was dead and came to life again”* (v. 8b), which is a significant change in the presentation of Jesus from the One who fully controls the Church in Ephesus, into the One, who has experienced things which will also be experienced by some of the members of the Church in Smyrna¹⁸. The second expression *“who was dead and came to life again”* will play a significant role in encouraging the members of the Church in Smyrna during the coming time of persecution: Jesus himself was rejected as the Messiah by the authorities of the Jerusalem Temple and sent to death on the cross. However, despite the fact that Jesus was crucified by the will of humans, He was justified by God Himself by being raised from the dead. The case of Jesus will serve as one of the most critical arguments for encouraging His followers to stay faithful until the end.

After the presentation of the source of the revelation, the author briefly presents the socio-political background of the Christian community in Smyrna (Rev 2: 9–10). Despite the fact that Smyrna was a prosperous city, the Christian community suffered tribulation and poverty, which was the result of their ostracism by the inhabitants of the city, who did not accept this religious minority. Smyrna as a Roman city accepted automatically Roman culture including the polytheistic religious system of the Roman Empire, where even humans could become gods and be worshipped¹⁹. It was the daily custom for the population to offer incense, prayers, and other acts of devotion to show their loyalty to local deities and also to Rome. Jews living in Smyrna was exempt from this obligation, based on *politeuma* (civic group) which was accompanied by several privileges. This allowed them to live according to their religious, cultural, and traditional heritage and conviction, without being marginalized or robbed of their civil rights. The Christian community in Smyrna, which consisted of Jews and Gentiles believing in Jesus the Son of God, did not possess such privileges. For this reason, Christians in Smyrna had to decide, whether to be faithful to the Lord and face several inconveniences that significantly reduced their possibility to avoid poverty and social criticism, or to abandon the Lord and live a life of prosperity befitting the society of Smyrna. According to Rev 2: 9, the community choose serving the Lord, even it meant poverty for their daily life. However, surprisingly Jesus is referred to the community of Smyrna as being “rich,” which contrasts with the first statement concerning their tribulation and poverty. While the tribulation and poverty have a very literal meaning, the expression “rich” has a figurative meaning referring to the spiritual gift that is the faith²⁰. That means the faith of the members of the Smyrna community remains strong, for which they are praised by the Lord. This naturally indicates that there is

¹⁸ The expression *“the first and the last”*, rooted in the Old Testament tradition (Is 44: 6; 44: 6; 48: 12) was already used by the author in Rev 1: 8 in order to strongly amplify the divine eternity of Jesus, which de facto presents Him as God, as contrary to gods made by human hands. P. S. Williamson, *Revelation*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2015, pp. 64–65.

¹⁹ B. E. Fanning, *Revelation*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2020, p. 127.

²⁰ In the Letter to the Church in Smyrna the author of the Book of Revelation frequently uses contrasting extremes: *first and last* (Rev 2: 8); *became dead but came to life* (Rev 2: 8); *poverty but rich* (Rev. 2: 9); *say they are Jews but are Satan’s Synagogue* (Rev 2: 9); *unto death and crown of life* (Rev 2: 10). J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, Doubleday & Company, Garden City 1975, p. 395.

nothing wrong with the faith or behavior of the Smyrna community, which leads us to conclude that problem of the community has its source from the outside world. The tribulation and poverty of the Christians in Smyrna seems to be directly connected with the Jewish Synagogue in Smyrna which is accused of slander towards the members of the Christian Church in the city. Based on this information it is clear that between the Jewish community (the Synagogue) and the Christian community there was antagonism, and the blame lay with the Jews. The level of antagonism is best expressed by the extremely strong expression used by the author, who calls the Jewish community "Satan's Synagogue"²¹. Almost nothing is written about the reason for labeling the Jewish community with such an extremely derogatory nickname, which forces us to attempt to reconstruct the background that led the author to make such a choice.

The first question which must be answered concerns the reason for the hostility between these two communities. We can safely assume that the Jewish community in Smyrna had a longer history than the community of Christians, which would naturally play in favor of the Jewish diaspora in the conflict with the Christians²². Jews in Smyrna possessed *politeuma*, which despite the differences in culture, tradition and religion between them and the Gentiles allowed them to be tolerated and respected by the inhabitants of Smyrna, based on their earned rights, and not just on social sentiment. They also possessed a synagogue which played a critical role not only in preserving their heritage but also in integrating the whole community. These two factors formed a critical difference in the social status between them and the Christians. The author strongly suggests that the Jewish community took full advantage of their social status during the conflict with the Christians. Concerning the reason for the conflict the author says almost nothing, leaving us with no choice other than to use the general perspective regarding the relations between Jews and Christians available to us from other sources. One of the most useful sources is Luke's Acts of the Apostles in which several aspects that caused differences and hostility between Christians and Jews are presented. Although between the time of writing of the Acts of the Apostles and of the Book of Revelation there is a gap of twenty or thirty years, both writings show that the main reason for differences between these two communities concerned the evaluation of Jesus of Nazareth, who for the majority of Jews, including the authorities of the Jerusalem Temple, was a false Messiah and self-styled Redeemer, claiming to be the son of God, which the claim, in the eyes of the authorities of Judaism was blasphemy. For this He was condemned and put to death, and in their understanding, He was never raised from the dead. From the perspective of Christians, Jesus of Nazareth was the true Messiah expected for centuries by the Jews. They accepted him as the Lord and the Son of God, who by his death and resurrection made peace between humankind and God, not only for Israel but also for the Gentiles. Despite the fact that during the time of Jesus' activities in Galilee and Judea several disagreements took place between Jesus and the establishment of the Jerusalem Temple, as well as local leaders, who were mostly Pharisees. It was clear that Jesus of Nazareth did not follow the mainstream of Judaism of the

²¹ B. K. Blount, *Revelation. A Commentary*, pp. 53–54.

²² The author directly shows the advantage of the Jewish community when he accuses the Jews for acting against the Christians (Rev 2: 9).

second Temple, but rather He expressed His radical criticism towards the present state of Palestinian Judaism. It naturally led to his condemnation and death, which however, did not bring an end to the Way established by Him. This Way was continued after Him by the simple fishermen and other followers of Jesus even when they had to face severe persecution by the Jewish authorities. The most critical act done by the followers of the Way (Christians) that broke the relationship between Judaism and the Christians was their accepting Gentiles among the Christians on the basis of their faith in Jesus the Son of God, and without conversion to Judaism (Ac 15: 5–29). The communities of Christians soon became very active in mission propaganda, which earned them considerable attention in societies that on the side of the establishment were usually rather suspicious of such movements but were gladly accepted by people from the lower social levels (Ac 11: 25–26). In the communities of Diaspora Jews living outside Palestine, the activities of the new Christian movement were extremely disturbing because the Christian propaganda was addressed to Jews in order to encourage some of them to become Judeo-Christian, despite the fact that Christians also addressed their *kerygma* to Gentiles (Ac 10: 1–11: 18).

Diaspora Jews following the Law of Moses were for long time making efforts to establish a proper relationship with Gentile society in order to live peacefully according to their culture and religious conviction, but the appearance of a new Jewish sect called Christians drastically challenged the status quo they had established. It seems reasonable to assume that also between the Diaspora Jews and the Christians in Smyrna there was an ongoing dispute concerning relation between the Mosaic Law and the claims of Christians that Jesus is the Messiah for Jews and Gentiles, which quite often ended with a split in the community or the expelling of Christians from the Synagogues (Ac 17: 1–9; 17: 13–15). In general, Christians faced strong opposition from both Palestinian and Diaspora Jews, which in some cases turned into spontaneous persecution or even systematic killing (Ac 7: 55–60; 8: 1–3; 14: 1–7). Between the time of the Acts and the Book Revelation there is a considerable lapse of time, but the basic problem (Jesus as the resurrected Messiah for Jews and Gentiles) between Diaspora Jews and Christians remained unresolved, and the relation between these two groups become even more complicated after the Roman-Jewish War. It was a time which saw persecution of Christians in Rome, and ultimately the exclusion of Christians from Judaism.

All these factors allow us to think that of the time of writing the Letter to the Church in Smyrna there was already a keen sense of separation between the Christians and Diaspora Jews despite their common roots, which probably led to their considering each no longer as brothers but as betrayers. The phrase “*those who say they are Jews (and are not)*” indicates that the author even doubts the Jewishness of the Jews, probably assuming that their behavior contradicts their claim to be real Jews in terms of Judaism, and possibly also because of their rejection of Christians²³.

The second question concerns the involvement of the Jewish community in anti-Christian

²³ It does not indicate that Christians, who sometimes claimed to be “the new Israel” replaced the Smyrna Jews. However, it strongly suggests that the author sees Christians to be more truly faithful to God than the Smyrna Jews were. W. J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2008, pp. 58–59.

propaganda. This issue is clear in the light of Rev 2: 9, where the author directly, and very negatively accuses the Jews of Smyrna for spreading slander about Christians throughout the society of the city. The real question concerns the content of this slander. Did it concern spreading information that the Christian teaching is contrary to the Mosaic Law and because of that is it, *de facto* blasphemy against the Only God? Or was it some kind of several malign accusation consciously forged by the Jews to discredit the Christians and their teaching as something improper for the society of Smyrna²⁴. The second possibility seems to be appropriate due to the content of the Letter. Among the Christians there were Jews and Gentiles, which opened the possibility that all Smyrna's Jews might be associated with the Christians by the inhabitants of Smyrna, something that was not acceptable to the Diaspora Jews. It is possible that at the beginning of the spreading of slander about the Christians, the aim was to make the Gentile society of Smyrna understand the distinction between the Diaspora Jews following Judaism, and those Jews who joined the Christian community following Jesus as the Messiah²⁵. However, the fact that the author labels the Diaspora Jews with the extremely derogatory nickname "*Satan's Synagogue*" indicates something stronger than just an explanation concerning the difference between these two communities²⁶. Probably the author had more than sufficient reason to refer to the Jewish Synagogue in such strong terms, and among them obviously were also slanders being spread by the Jews about the Christians²⁷. It seems that these slanders caused great harm to the group of Christians that drastically reduced the standard of their lives as well as their good name. It is possible to assume that the Diaspora Jews were spreading a negative image about Christians that was far from the truth²⁸. Another kind of the slander may refer to the fact that the Smyrna Jews refused to include even the Jewish Christians in their community, which resulted in their losing the privileges obtained by Jews in Smyrna based on their having *politeuma*. This last conduct by the Smyrna Jews leads us directly to another question.

The third question concerns cooperation between the Jewish community and the Roman officials. Considering the fact that Jews of Smyrna participated in spreading slander about the Christians, it seems to be more than possible that they were also involved in some kind of collaboration with the Roman citizens of Smyrna as well as with the authorities of the city. Concerning indirect cooperation, Jews from Smyrna possibly tried to destroy the good name of Christians among the citizens by slander, calling for ostracism and boycott, as well as

²⁴ B. E. Fanning, *Revelation*, pp. 127–128.

²⁵ There are several Christian sources attesting that the local Jewish community associated with the Synagogue persecuted Jewish Christians and expelled them from the Synagogue. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 163.

²⁶ This expression "*Satan's Synagogue*" is used twice (Rev 2: 8; 3: 9) in the Bible as well as in non-biblical sources. J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, pp. 392–393.

²⁷ By using the expression "*Satan's Synagogue*," the author expresses his disappointment about the behavior of a particular group of Jews belonging to the Synagogue of Smyrna which openly acted to the disadvantage of Christians, but it is not used in general terms as referring to the Jewish nation. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 162.

²⁸ Possibly it included obvious lies, fake news, information about Christians modified in order to present them in a negative light, spreading misinformation without proper contexts.

marginalizing them in order to separate them from society. In so doing, Smyrna's Jews put the Christians in kind of "invisible ghetto," where they became some extent "social lepers." Concerning direct cooperation of Smyrna's Jews with officials of the Roman administration, it is possible to say that at least some of them were a source of information about Christians, which greatly contributed to the Romans' investigation concerning Christians. It is possible also that some Jews directly denounced Christians because of their uncompromising rejection of the imperial cult and the worship of local deities. This kind of information allowed Roman officials to confiscate Christians' property and to exclude them from social life and free trade²⁹. In extreme cases, some of Smyrna's Jews were directly involved in the process that led to the condemnation and death of Polycarp, one of the most esteemed figures among Christians in Smyrna. Plausibly, this fate was shared also by many other Christians from Smyrna, as well as in other places³⁰. All these factors allow us to conclude that at least some of Smyrna's Jews participated in cooperation with the Roman authorities in their persecution of Christians. This conclusion leads us to the last question, concerning the ultimate aim of the persecution of Christian in Smyrna.

Concerning the ultimate aim of the persecution of the Christians by Smyrna's Jews, the most extreme solution, such as the extermination of all Christians living in Smyrna must be excluded, due to the social consequences that such an action would have created for the Jews living in the city³¹. The more probable aim seems to have been to make the lives of the Christians miserable to such degree that they would have to decide to leave the city. This case was common in the past as well as in the present world, especially towards new and not yet well-established minority groups. Based on the information in Rev 2: 10, where the author speaks about tribulations and persecution for a brief time, this option as the ultimate aim, although possible, is unlikely. Another possible aim of the Jews of Smyrna was to portray the teaching and behavior of Smyrna's Christians as anti-social and offensive towards the culture and religion of the city. It seems that this was one of the most desired aims of the Smyrna's Jews, however, due to the general policy of religious tolerance as well as a general policy concerning avoiding involvement in cases of a strictly religious character, it is unlikely that Roman officials would be willing to interfere in strictly religious problem. The last possible ultimate aim of Smyrna's Jews was to discredit Christians in the eyes of Smyrna's society and also in the eyes of the Roman officials. Probably, instead of involving themselves in polemic with Christians, Smyrna's Jews made the case that Christian were "a real problem" for society of the city, which must be resolved by the authorities. In our opinion this last possibility is the most convincing since Rev 2: 10 suggests that the city's authorities were about to take some action against the Christians.

²⁹ This kind of oppression is also indicated in other New Testament writings (Ac 13: 43-45; 14: 1-7; 17: 13; 18: 5-17; Gal 1: 1-13; 14: 23; 1Thess 2: 14-16).

³⁰ This possibility is mentioned because of Rev 2: 10, where the possibility of persecution is directly presented.

³¹ There were cases where conflict within the Jewish community caused social disturbance in the whole city, and because of that the whole Jewish community was banished from the city for a determined time. One such case was the banishing of the Jewish community from Rome (AD 49-53).

Rev 2: 9 presents the tribulation the Christian community in Smyrna had to suffer from the side of Diaspora Jews living in Smyrna. Rev 2: 10 progresses the main theme of this letter by relating the tribulations that are about to affect the Christians in Smyrna from the side of the city's authorities. Concerning the time of the tribulations for the Christians of Smyrna there are three levels: fear of persecution, imprisonment, and finally death (Rev 2: 10). The phrase "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer*" (Rev 2: 10a) directly indicates that the community was deeply shocked by the news concerning persecution being launched against them, which naturally requires some kind of consolation from the Lord in order to prevent panic and despair. The Lord's consolation contains information regarding imprisonment, which *de facto* was *cognitio* - "judicial inquiry" that was the prerogative of a Roman magistrate with power to examine and reach a decision in a judicial case³². In this context, the Lord's words "I tell you; *the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days*" means that "devil", who should be identified as a private persecutor (Jewish persecutor or a professional accuser representing the Jewish community, called *delator*, who worked for financial reward), is about to bring some Christians from Smyrna to trial before the Roman authorities³³. It was the result of action taken by an "*index*" - *informer*, who made an official accusation about some Christians from Smyrna. Based on Rev 2: 9, the *informer*, without any doubt can be identified as a Jew or a group of Jews. Rev 2: 10b (*that you may be tested*) shows that the aim of the *informer* was to make some Christians from Smyrna to deny their faith in Christ. Another piece of information provided by Rev 2: 10c (*and you will have tribulation for ten days*) seems to indicate that the tribulation and the trial will not last for any considerably long time, which seems to suggest that this persecution of Smyrna's Christians is a private initiative of Smyrna's Jews rather than a persecution launched by the Roman magistrate. The short duration of tribulation (which should be taken figuratively rather than literally) may suggest that there is hope for the accused Christians to survive the trial, which does not in any way make the tribulation to be a less traumatic experience. The last information shows how serious the situation was, especially in the context of the Lord's words "*Be faithful as far as to death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rev 2: 10d), where directly it is shown that each Christians will have to make a decision on whether to deny faith in Jesus and in this way save one's life, or stay faithful to Jesus and consequently be executed because of his or her religious convictions³⁴. To stay faithful and as a result lose one's life is not an easy choice for any generation of Christian that is exposed to persecution because of the faith, especially in the case that the faith of believers is not yet firmly connected with the Lord's promises. As encouragement Lord make a promise "*I will give you the crown of life,*" which refers to the reward for each Christians who will value faith in Christ more than life³⁵. The

³² D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 163.

³³ Persson is strongly convinced that the phrase "*the devil is about to cast some of you into prison*" has a literal meaning here. A. Persson, *A Semantic and Structural Analysis of Revelation*, SIL International, Dallas 2016, pp. 52-53.

³⁴ With a similar meaning the phrase "*the crown of life*" is used by Paul in 1 Cor 9: pp. 24-27.

³⁵ The theme of preserving the faith by God's people in time of persecution is one of the central and critical topics in the Book of Revelation (Rev 13: 10; 14: 11-12), which is founded on the suffering and death of Jesus (Rev 1: 5; 3: 14). B. E.

wreath, which originally was made of leaves and was used to reward the winner for various occasions such as great achievements during a war or in the Olympic games, was a well-known symbol in the ancient world³⁶. Despite the obvious symbolic connection between the Olympic wreath and the Lord's wreath, the Lord's wreath is not made of plants, but it is made of life, which here means the eternal life, instead of earthly life³⁷.

The "wreath of life" is not the only reward for those Christians who in time of persecution stay firm in their faith that Jesus is the Lord, since in Rev 2: 11, the Lord promises to each believer in Jesus, who proves to be victorious, being saved from the "second death", which means "eternal condemnation"³⁸. Putting this promise in a negative way, it became a kind of warning for those Christian who fail to preserve faith in Christ during the time of tribulation, because it contains the possibility of being condemned for eternity. This interpretation is based on the phrase "*anyone who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*" that precedes the promise (Rev 2: 11a), which is a phrase that appears at the end of all the Letters to the Churches, in order to underline the most crucial message that is given to each of the Churches. The message for the Christian in Smyrna is that they have to preserve their faith in time of tribulation, in order to receive "eternal life."

3.4 Interpretation of text of Rev 2: 8-11

The Letter to the Church in Smyrna seems to be an exception among the Letters to the Churches in Asia Minor, since it is the only letter that does not contain the Lord's rebuke towards the Church. In other letters there are always some issues which is not only extensively presented but also connected with some grave consequences, if the Church dose not overcome its own weakness, however, in the case of the community in Smyrna, such a problem does not appear. The community in Smyrna seems to live exemplary Christian lives, where Jesus Christ is the main focus. The author does not present any kind of problems that are present in the letters to the other Churches in Asia Minor. It is possible to say that the reason for writing the Letter to the Church in Smyrna differs from problems concerning the faith or the behavior of Smyrna's Christians. It is also possible to say that the Church in Smyrna was consolidated and strong, despite unfavorable social circumstances, which made their lives to be under constant intense pressure, as well as bringing them to a miserable state of poverty. In terms of socio-political relations, the Smyrna Christians were outcasts from society, however in socio-religious perspective they were really strong in their Christian faith. Although from the perspective of the Lord, their strong faith in Him is highly praised, however, their faithfulness to the Lord is a direct reason for ostracism and hatred from some sectors of Smyrna's society, which directly led to open hostility and persecution. This leads us to conclude that the past and present of the Christians from Smyrna is not the main concern of the Lord. The real problem and at the same

Fanning, *Revelation*, p. 130.

³⁶ D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 167.

³⁷ Another possible connection regarding "crown" can be the term "glory," which like the term "life" also presents the difference between "earthly glory" and "heavenly glory."

³⁸ In Rev 20: 6 and Rev 21: 8 "second death" is explained as eternal separation from God.

time the concern of the Lord is the near future when the Christian community in Smyrna will have to choose between faithfulness to the Lord or preserving their own earthly life. Cooperation of some Jews from Smyrna with the Roman administration resulted in official action against the Christians undertaken by the Roman magistrate. The faith in Jesus practiced by Christians was not recognized either by the Diaspora Jews from Smyrna nor by the Roman officials. From the side of the Jews, the Christian teaching and their claim concerning Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and the Son of God were not acceptable and were considered to be blasphemy. From the side of the Roman magistrate, Christian's faith and their style of life were seen as being contrary to a society based on cosmopolitical and polytheistic principles, which naturally saw Christians to be "a public enemy." In conclusion, it must be recognized that the Christians from Smyrna stood alone, without any hope of help from the society of Smyrna, or from other Churches in Asia Minor. This situation is a direct reason for the Lord's words spoken to the Church in Smyrna, which makes the Lord their only "helper" who can to some degree comfort the community, and more importantly it is only the Lord who can assist the community during the time of percussion. According to the Lord's words, the persecution of Christians is at hand, and the purpose of the Lord's consolation was encouragement.

The Christian community in Smyrna learns that Jews of the city and the Roman officials will put them on trial in order to reject their faith, which directly means to make an act of apostasy. According to the Lord's words, there is the possibility that even those who do not commit apostasy will be executed, which is news that brings even more increased pressure on the Christians. Information about the coming tribulation, imprisonment and the limited duration of persecution is valuable information sustaining them during the trial. To maintain faith in Jesus Christ is a direct order of the Lord which has to be followed by the faithful Christians. Although it is not directly expressed, indirectly the structure of Rev 2: 10–11 seems to intend that those who fail to defend the faith in Jesus in order to preserve their lives will be subject to the "second death", which means eternal condemnation. Since the Lord's words are intended to encourage, Jesus' focus is fixed on the positive side of the trial, which is to defend the faith in Jesus, even if it would mean earthly death. Those who prevail are honored with two promises: reward with the crown of life, which is praise for the winner that has little in common with earthly success but is related to eternal life. It is directly related to the second promise "*He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death,*" which in a direct way assures Christians who, in order to preserve faith in Jesus, had to pay with their lives are assured that condemnation (the second death) is not their fate³⁹.

3.5 Function of the text (Rev 2: 8–11)

The author of the Book of Revelation first presents the situation within the community of the Church in Ephesus where the most critical problem concerns the loss of their original zeal, which in the context of Rev 2: 1–7 refers to love. Directly the letter to the Church of Ephesus presents the problems of stagnation and routine in their relationship with Jesus, which may

³⁹ Fulgentius of Ruspe, *The Grace of Justification is Completed in the Glorification*, in: *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture Vol. 12*, W. C. Weinrich (ed), InterVarsity Press, Downer Grove 2005, pp. 27–28.

negatively determine the ability of the Church in Ephesus to provide the leadership for churches in Asia Minor.

In the second letter addressed to the Church in Smyrna (Rev 2: 8–11), the author presents another problem in the Churches in Asia Minor, which concerns hostility and persecutions that may lead some Christians to deny their faith in Jesus. In the face of socio-economical ostracism and poverty, the Christian community of Smyrna stands firm, which is a direct reason for being praised by Lord Jesus. However, another tribulation is at hand. The Lord Jesus seems to recognize a limitation among the Christians in Smyrna and took an action to preserve the faith of the Church in Smyrna. Although each of Smyrna's Christians must face the tribulation alone, the Lord is assisting them by information about the tribulation and by a promise of reward. This help seems to present some anxiety from the side of the Lord about the decision that will be made by each of Smyrna's Christians during the time of trial. A possible denial of the faith in Jesus by one or more members of Smyrna's community would be the very first stone that potentially begins the destruction of the community, which in the end could result in the nihilation of Christians in the city, and even to destabilizing other Churches in Asia Minor. It is possible that the Church in Smyrna should give an example to other churches in the region of Anatolia on how to deal with persecution and the possibility of martyrdom. The last statement of the Lord "*the one, who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death*" directly indicates that some of Smyrna's Christians will die during this persecution, but they will not taste the eternal condemnation (the second death), which will be the fate of those who do not want to taste the "first death" (the death of the body). This led us to see the purpose of this letter as being to prevent possible acts of apostasy.

Conclusion

During the time of writing the Letter to Church in Smyrna, the community of Christians in the city already was under forceful pressure from the side of the inhabitants of Smyrna, who by social-cultural ostracism and economic exclusion, made the life of Smyrna's Christians miserable in poverty and their social status was reduced to a marginalized minority.

The direct reason for writing the letter was another act of the hostility performed by the society of Smyrna towards Christians that involved trial for some Christians in order to test their faith in Jesus the Lord. The author of the letter directly accused the Jews of Smyrna as the initiators of the persecution who cooperated with the Roman administration in order to destroy the Christian community in the city. The letter's intent is to prevent possible apostasy of the members of Smyrna's community, which could be beginning of the end for the existence of the Christians in the city. The main strategy of Jesus the Lord is to choose the "first death" (the death of the earthly body) rather than to taste the "second death," which is eternal condemnation. The message addressed to Smyrna's Christians concerns choosing martyrdom rather than apostasy.

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