

The Importance of Being Faithful:
An Historical Analysis of Revelation 1:9 – 3:22

by

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Comment [MSOffice1]: An original title that identifies the theme of the analysis and the primary source.

Primary Source Assignment
Hist. 288
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Due: 3 September 2013
Word Count: 682

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An Historical Analysis of Revelation 1:9 – 3:22

After declaring his solidarity with fellow persecuted Christians (1: 9), John writes of what he heard and saw on a Sunday, the “Lord’s day” (1: 10). A voice that sounded like a trumpet made him turn to behold a resplendent and formidable figure surrounded by seven golden lampstands. This “one like the Son of Man” (1: 13) must be the resurrected Jesus Christ, for he tells John: “I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever” (1: 18). He commissions John to write out and deliver letters to the seven churches symbolized by the lampstands. These are seven Christian communities in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The letters offer a glimpse into the spiritual life of these communities. Not only must Christians in Asia Minor endure persecution, but, as the letters reveal, they must also correct their faults in order to demonstrate their fidelity to Christ so as to attain an everlasting reward.

The seven letters have the same basic tripartite structure. They begin with assertions of knowledge about the seven churches. Christ is aware of their works (2: 2, 19; 3: 1, 8, 15), which in Ephesus and Thyatira are pledges of “patient endurance” and fidelity (2: 2, 19). He knows the affliction and poverty of the Christians in Smyrna (2: 9) and the spiritually dangerous location of the Christians in Pergamum (2: 13). Second, Christ proceeds to praise the churches’ strengths and to exhort them to combat their deficiencies. Finally, he offers rewards to those who “conquer,” that is to those who persevere in loyalty to him.

Christ identifies various problems. Despite their endurance “for the sake of my name,” Ephesian Christians have abandoned their initial love for him (2: 3, 4). In Sardis, spiritual torpor has rendered imperfect the works of too many Christians (3: 1-2). The spiritual malaise seems to be worse in Laodicea, where Christians are afflicted with indifference and delusion. Christ has nothing good to say about them. They are “neither cold nor hot” and mistake their wretchedness

Comment [MSOffice2]: The topic sentence introduces the material covered in the paragraph and introduces the concept of persecution, which appears in the last sentence of the paragraph. References to the primary source appear in parentheses for the sake of simplicity because the source is biblical. 1: 9 means Revelation 1: 9, of course.

Comment [MSOffice3]: The final quotation in this sentence supplies evidence from the primary source in support of an important claim.

Comment [MSOffice4]: This is the thesis of the analysis. The reference to “the letters” links the last sentence of the second paragraph to the first sentence of the third paragraph.

Comment [MSOffice5]: The topic sentence introduces the material covered in the paragraph. This paragraph provides a basic analytical summary of the source and echoes the essential components of the thesis: the hardships that Christians must endure, their own failings, and the necessity of fidelity.

Comment [MSOffice6]: A concise topic sentence introduces the material covered in the paragraph. Christ is the common element in the last sentence of the third paragraph and the first sentence of the fourth paragraph. In identifying the various problems of the churches, this paragraph develops the thesis principally by addressing the faults that require correction. Succinct paraphrase outweighs direct quotation in the analysis of the primary source.

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for prosperity (3: 15, 17). The churches of Pergamum and Thyatira tolerate false teaching and worship (2: 14-15, 20). Only in Smyrna and Philadelphia are Christians without blemish. The threat to the Smyrnans is external, arising from the “slander” of false Jews and the impending trials and affliction that the devil will bring (2: 9-10). False Jews are also at work in Philadelphia, but Christ promises to subject them to his faithful adherents (3: 9).

Christ’s solutions to the problems of the churches require a strengthening in their commitment to him, which he duly rewards. To the persecuted in Smyrna his message is simple: “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life” (2: 10). Christ’s exhortations of repentance aimed at the delinquent Christian communities (2: 5, 16, 22; 3: 3, 19) also represent calls to faithfulness, for he asks them to correct the faults of which he has accused them. Correcting faults and persevering in the face of persecution both count as conquests, and Christ promises conquerors eschatological rewards. The Ephesians learn: “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (2: 7). Christ assures the lackluster Laodiceans: “To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3: 21).

The seven letters at the beginning of Revelation represent a remarkable form of internal Christian scrutiny. Too few Christians need worry only about external threats to their welfare. Too many have endangered their Christian identity by allowing their dedication to Christ to diminish. Underlying the frank evaluation of the seven churches is the key ingredient of earliest Christianity: unflinching fidelity to Christ. This faithfulness is important not only to situating Christians in historical time but also, as befits an apocalyptic mentality, to directing them to their supernatural reward beyond time.

Comment [MSOffice7]: A topic sentence introduces the material covered in the paragraph. The idea of solutions to problems marks the transition from the previous to the present paragraph. All three components of the thesis—persecution, correction of faults, and rewards—appear in this paragraph.

Comment [MSOffice8]: This is the third direct quotation from the primary source that illustrates the concept of reward in this paragraph.

Comment [MSOffice9]: The concluding paragraph weaves together several elements: the title, the opening paragraph, and the thesis. It does not simply restate the thesis *verbatim* but develops it by characterizing the primary source as “a remarkable form of internal Christian scrutiny” and by identifying “the key ingredient of earliest Christianity.” These two observations are perfectly historical. They consolidate the historical character of the analysis.

Pabel, The Importance of Being Faithful, Hist. 288

Bibliography

Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Comment [MSOffice10]: The bibliography follows the directions on pp. 9-10 of the syllabus.