

1. PROLOGUE (1:1–20)

a. Introduction (1:1–3)

1. The very first word of this book, *apokalypsis* (translated *The revelation*), sets the stage. The word means the uncovering of something hidden, the making known of what we could not find out for ourselves. It makes plain that the book it introduces is not a book of human wisdom, nor for that matter a discussion of philosophical or theological problems. It is revelation. It is a setting forth of what God has made known. This revelation is the revelation of *Jesus Christ*, which could mean either that the revelation was made by Jesus Christ or that it was made about him or that it belongs to him. In one way or another all three are true. But in view of the following *which God gave him* we should probably understand it to mean possession. It is his revelation and that of no-one else that we are to read. And it came from God the Father. It is not a human, or even an angelic production.

This revelation is concerned with prediction. It is expressly said that it is to show God's servants things that must happen soon. *Soon* is not defined. The exact expression occurs again in 22:6, and a similar one in 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20. This could mean that the fulfilment is expected in the very near future. But we must also bear in mind that in the prophetic perspective the future is sometimes foreshortened. In other words the term may refer to the certainty of the events in question. The Lord God has determined them and he will speedily bring them to pass. But this refers to his time, not ours, to the quality of the time rather than the quantity. With him one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2 Pet. 3:8). It is also possible that we should see the meaning as 'suddenly', i.e. 'without delay when the time comes'. The revelation was not made directly by God to John. God 'sent' it through his angel and *made it known*, 'signified' it, where the verb is cognate with 'sign'. We must not press the point, but it is natural to associate this with the many 'signs' narrated in the book. John calls himself God's *servant*, i.e. 'slave', a designation Paul uses quite often (Rom. 1:1; etc.).

2. John bore witness to *the word of God*. This may be a reference to some past occasion (the aorist indicates a specific occasion and not the general practice), but it is more likely to be something akin to an epistolary aorist and refer to this book. John is saying then that this book is his testimony to the word of God. With this he links *the testimony of Jesus Christ* (*testimony, martyria*, is cognate with *testifies, emartyrēsen*). This could mean 'the testimony about Jesus Christ', or, more probably, 'the testimony borne by Jesus Christ'. Revelation is the record of what God has said to John through his angel and of what Jesus Christ has said to him. John *saw* the word and the testimony, a most appropriate way of putting it in a book like this where there are so many visions.

3. This is the first of seven beatitudes scattered through the book (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). *Reads* here means 'reads aloud', and in view of the context there is no real doubt but that reading in church is meant. This implies that John regards his book as holy Scripture. This is all the more likely in that he proceeds to call it a *prophecy* (even if we omit *this*, with some good MSS there is no doubt that it is this book to which he is referring). This will also be the significance of the warning against meddling with its contents which he places at the end (22:18–19). It is for this reason that a blessing can be called down on those who read and who hear the book. If it were a merely human product this would be incongruous. As a divine revelation it is most natural.

We should not understand *prophecy* to mean 'prediction'. The word does allow for prediction (and there is certainly a liberal element of prediction in this book), but basically it points to divine origin. The prophet was a man who could say, 'Thus says the Lord.' This book is from God. John proceeds to call not only for a hearing of it but for an observing of what is written in it. He does not wish merely to stimulate interest but to influence action. Scripture is a guide to conduct as well as the source of

doctrine. For *near* cf. 22:10 and the note on verse 1.

b. Salutation (1:4–8)

The book of Revelation is cast into the form of a letter. Some have felt that this is artificial, but there is no real reason for doubt. It is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor, and, while clearly it was meant from the beginning for a wider circle, it is equally clear that it was meant as a serious communication to these churches. For the usual epistolary form in the first century see the note on 1 Thessalonians 1:1 (TNTC).

4. The address is *To the seven churches in the province of Asia*, the western part of what we call Asia Minor. We do not know on what principle the seven were selected. There were certainly more than seven churches in the region by the time this book was written (Acts 20:5ff.; Col. 1:2; 4:13). John may have had a special relationship with these seven. Again, if the seven named in verse 11 were visited in order, one would traverse a rough circle. This is a figure of completeness, and seven (a number of which John is fond) is the number of perfection. For one so fond of symbolism this can scarcely be without significance.

In the greeting, *grace and peace* (see the note on 1 Thess. 1:1) are said to be from *him who is, and who was, and who is to come* (cf. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). This most unusual expression clearly refers to God the Father. The Greek is not grammatical (*apo* is followed by nominatives, and *ēn* is preceded by an article), but it is an arresting way of stressing the changelessness and the eternity of God. The whole expression seems intended as a title. It is a name which expresses something of the character of God. Barclay comments: 'In the terrible days in which he was writing John stayed his heart on the changelessness of God, and used the defiance of grammar to underline his faith.'

The *seven spirits* might conceivably refer to a group of angelic beings. But coming between references to the Father and the Son it is more probable that this is an unusual way of designating the Holy Spirit ('the sevenfold Spirit', mg.). John never uses the expression 'the Holy Spirit' in this book, but he uses the word 'Spirit' in a variety of ways; 'the Spirit' is found in 2:7, 17, etc., so he clearly knows of the Holy Spirit. *Seven spirits* recurs in 3:1; 4:5; 5:6. On the whole it seems most probable that we should see *seven* as signifying perfection or the like, and the whole expression as pointing to the Holy Spirit. The number may derive from Isaiah 11:2–3, and be meant to remind us of the seven modes of operation of the Spirit.

5. The third source of grace and peace is *Jesus Christ*, mentioned for the third time in the prologue (and not again throughout the book; John prefers simply 'Jesus'). He is *the faithful witness* (cf. 3:14; Ps. 89:37). John put emphasis on witness in verse 2 and this hammers his point home. He leaves us in no doubt that what he reports is well attested. He goes on to speak of Jesus as *the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth* (cf. Ps. 89:29). Jesus is a figure of majesty. But he is also revered for what he has done for sinners and John goes off into a doxology. He begins with Christ's love and goes on to his redeeming activity. *Freed* is more literally 'loosed'; Christ has redeemed us from our sins and he did it at the cost of his own blood.

6. He has made us *a kingdom*. The kingdom of God was the main topic in the teaching of Jesus and we find here that it is those who are Christ's who constitute the kingdom. It is not like earthly kingdoms, a realm with known boundaries, population, etc. It consists of those who have been loosed from their sins through Christ and who now live to do his service. The order is important. First comes the reference to his redeeming work and only then that to the kingdom. As a result of what Christ has done for them, believers become other than they were. They are made into the very kingdom of God. In apposition with 'kingdom' is the further expression, *priests to serve his God and Father*. The kingdom consists of *priests*. Notice that it is ordinary Christians who are called *priests*, not some privileged hierarchy. Now a priest speaks to God on behalf of men and to men on behalf of God. Believers are assigned this responsible task by their God. They are to pray to God for the world and they are to

witness to the world of what God has done. In God's name they are to speak the message of reconciliation to the world (2 Cor. 5:20). There may also be the thought that priests offer sacrifice, for Christ's people make the sacrifice of themselves (Rom. 12:1). Notice that God is characterized by his relationship to Christ (*his Father*), rather than to us (not 'our Father'). To Christ, who has done so much for us, is ascribed *glory and power for ever and ever!* There are many such expressions of praise in Revelation. John delights in his Lord, and loves to bring this out in doxologies and songs.

7. After the doxology comes a piece of eager looking forward to the coming of the Lord (cf. 22:20). John thinks of him as coming *with the clouds*, a description which recalls what is said of 'one like a son of man' (Dan. 7:13). Clouds are often mentioned in the Old Testament in connection with divine activity (e.g. Num. 11:25; Ps. 104:3; Isa. 19:1), and we are to think here of a scene of divine majesty as the Lord Jesus returns to earth in triumph. This triumph will be open for all to see, and it is this reversal of things at the first coming on which John seizes. In language reminiscent of Zechariah 12:10 he depicts the manifestation of the Lord to his foes, who will be disconcerted at this unexpected reversal of roles.

John's *So shall it be! Amen* (which combines the Greek and Hebrew forms of assent in a vigorous expression of approval) causes difficulty to some, coming as it does after *all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him*. It is felt that this enthusiastic approval is rather less than Christian (and similar expressions recur throughout the book). But John is not being vindictive. When Christians suffer persecution the name of their God is reviled and their cause is despised. But this is not final. John records in vivid symbol the overthrow of the wicked and the vindication of God and of good. And this he does not as a mildly interested spectator. He is wholeheartedly committed to the cause of God and he is eager that that cause be seen to prosper. So he does not simply record that the wicked will in fact be overthrown. Their overthrow means the triumph of good and the vindication of Christians who had suffered so much. John exults in it.

8. *The Lord* is most often used in the New Testament of Jesus, a usage found in Revelation (11:8; 22:20; etc.). But in this book it more often refers to the Father, as here. Revelation is concerned with the problems of power and this verse gives expression early in the book to the conviction that God is sovereign. *Alpha* and *Omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet (cf. 21:6; 22:13); God was before all things and he outlasts all things. His eternity is brought out also in *who is, and who was, and who is to come* (see on v. 4). Nine times in this book God is called *the Almighty* (and once in all the rest of the New Testament). None can resist the power of God. The word denotes not so much the exercise of naked power as the all-embracing sovereignty that God exercises.

c. The first vision (1:9–20)

We may profitably consider the opening vision in two stages, the first telling of the command to John to write (he did not write of his own volition), and the second of how he saw the glorious Lord.

i. The command to write (1:9–11)

John begins by disclaiming any place of eminence. He is writing not because he is some superior person but because 'in the Spirit' he received a command to write.

9. John first underlines his lowliness, speaking of himself as *your brother*, and going on to remind his readers that he shared with them in *suffering*. This word means sore trouble and in the Greek it is linked under one article with *kingdom and patient endurance* (this last means an active and manly endurance not a negative resignation; it is translated 'perseverance' in 2:2 where see note). The three in some sense are linked: the trials and the kingdom go together. John's further statement that he *was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God* ... probably means banishment and, in the case of one so insignificant as a Christian preacher, that would have meant hard labour in quarries or the like. *Was* may mean that he was no longer there. Patmos is one of the Dodecanese Islands off the coast of Asia

Minor. It is crescent-shaped and about 8 miles by 4 miles.

10. *I was (egenomēn)* means 'I came to be' (as also in the previous verse). *In the Spirit* is an expression not uncommon in the New Testament, though elsewhere it is used of such things as prayer, love, or even baptism. The use here is peculiar to Revelation and is found again in 4:2; 17:3; 21:10. It may denote something like a trance. It is certainly a state in which the Seer is specially open to the Holy Spirit and ready to see visions.

This vision took place *on the Lord's Day*. This is the only use of the expression in the New Testament and John does not explain it. Some see a reference to the day of judgment or to Easter, but the best suggestion is that this is the first use of the term for a day of worship, a weekly commemoration of the resurrection. (For the first day of the week as a day for Christian assembly and worship cf. John 20:19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2.) Some think that John means that he was at worship, but he gives no indication that he was with a company of worshippers. But on this day and in this state he first heard a voice, coming from behind him, *a loud voice like a trumpet*. Trumpets are mentioned more often in Revelation than in all the rest of the New Testament put together, and they are usually associated with the last things.

11. John records the command to write what he sees and to send the resulting scroll to the seven churches. These are now named, probably in the order in which they would be visited by a messenger taking the letters to them.

ii. The vision of the glorious Lord (1:12–20)

The placing of this vision of Christ right at the beginning of the book is significant. This book is an unveiling or revealing (see on v. 1). The Christians were a pitifully small group, persecuted by mighty foes. To all outward appearance their situation was hopeless. But it is only as Christ is seen for what he really is that anything else can be seen for what it really is. So for these persecuted ones it was important that first of all the glory and the majesty of the risen Lord be made clear. In doing this John persistently makes use of words and concepts associated in the Old Testament with God. He does not hesitate to employ divine attributes to describe the glorious Christ. And he does not do this and then forget it. The titles used of Christ in this vision are taken up and used elsewhere, notably in the addresses to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 (only that to the church of Laodicea is not drawn from this chapter).

12. The voice had come from behind the Seer so he turned to see who it was that spoke (*to see the voice* is a most unusual expression and does not appear to be paralleled, but the meaning is not in doubt). He saw *seven golden lampstands*. Some have seen the origin of this in the Old Testament (Exod. 25:31 or 1 Kgs 7:49 or Zech. 4:2), but none of these passages speaks of seven separate lampstands. John's language has coincidences with such passages, but his thought is his own.

13. *The lampstands* are the seven churches (v. 20); Christ is in the middle of his people (cf. Matt. 28:20; John 14:18). John says he is '*like a son of man*', which is not exactly the same as Jesus' expression 'the Son of man' (in Greek this has two articles, 'the Son of the man'; here there are none). It seems to be taken directly from Daniel 7:13 where we read of a heavenly Being coming with the clouds and receiving a mighty dominion. Clearly John ascribed the highest place to Christ. The *robe reaching down to his feet* is the mark of a person of distinction. Some argue from this robe and the *golden sash round his chest* that John sees Jesus in priestly dress. Against this, others than priests wore long robes. Further, though priests did wear the girdle higher than others, in their case it was a woven sash (Exod. 39:29) and not a golden one. John speaks of angels (who were not priests) as girded in this way (15:6). And he does not refer to Christ's priestly office throughout his book.

14. Like 'the Ancient of Days' (i.e. God himself, Dan. 7:9) his hair is likened to white wool. White hair conveys ideas like wisdom and the dignity of age (Stoffel sees it as 'the symbol of holiness' and Ladd as representing deity). Wool, of course, is not necessarily white, but when pure wool is white it is very white, and this is reinforced by adding the comparison to *snow*. White hair by itself might leave

the impression of calmness and dignity, but not of energy and spiritedness. This is rectified by the information that *his eyes were like blazing fire* (cf. 2:18; 19:12; Dan. 10:6).

15. The *feet* are likened to *chalkolibanon*. This word is not found anywhere before this book, and neither here nor in its other occurrence (2:18) does the context make clear what it means. *Bronze glowing in a furnace* may be right but we have no way of knowing. The *chalko*-points to an alloy of copper (*chalkos* = copper), but the evidence does not permit us to say with any certainty which alloy. The reference to the *furnace* strengthens the conviction that something metallic is in mind. John next says that his voice was *like the sound of rushing waters*, a description applied by Ezekiel to the voice of God (Ezek. 43:2). Incidentally, this description is singularly appropriate for one living on the small island of Patmos and never far from the sound of the breakers.

16. The *seven stars* are explained as ‘the angels of the seven churches’ (v. 20). Their situation *in his right hand* indicates favour and protection. This is all the more interesting in view of the strong criticisms to be urged in the next couple of chapters against some of them. They have their defects, but the strong Son of God has not abandoned them. Rather he holds them still in his hand. But the *sharp double-edged sword* that went *out of his mouth* is a reminder of sterner things. The sword is a weapon of offence and points to decisive action against those who oppose his will. This imagery ‘is not so strange as appears at first sight, for the short Roman sword was tongue-like in shape’ (*HDB*, art. ‘Sword’; cf. also Isa. 49:2; Heb. 4:12). John now goes on to the face, which he likens to the shining of the sun (cf. 10:1; Matt. 13:43). *Brilliance* is really ‘strength’ (*dynamis*), a distinctly unusual expression (but cf. Judg. 5:31). The appearance of the Lord, then, is dazzling, and terrible for his foes.

17. Indeed, John, his servant, could not stand the sight, but *fell at his feet as though dead*. ‘As dead’ shows that this is not an oriental prostration designed to show respect, but the physical effects of the tremendous vision. John was comforted by Christ himself, who put *his right hand* on him. We have already been told that Christ held the stars in his hand (v. 16) and we are told so again (v. 20). We should not preoccupy ourselves with the question of how he could do both these things with the one hand. John is talking in symbols and it is the symbolism that is important, not the possibility of our reconstructing the picture. At one and the same time Christ has the whole church in his hand and he takes action for the needs of the individual. Both truths are important. John often uses pieces of imagery difficult to reconcile with one another (e.g. 6:8; 8:7 with 9:4; 8:12; 14:4; 17:1 with 3; 20:3; 20:13).

The words *Do not be afraid* (‘Stop fearing’) are familiar from the Gospels, where Jesus spoke to several people in this way. *The First and the Last* (again in 2:8; 22:13) means very much the same as ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ used of God in verse 8 (cf. Isa. 44:6; 48:12). It is another application of divine terms to Christ.

18. The bearing of the resurrection is now brought out. Christ’s victory over death meant a great deal to the early Christians as we see from Acts, and the stress on the resurrection thus early in Revelation is quite in character. In this verse there is the thought of Christ’s continuing life (cf. John 1:4; 14:6; etc.). The same expression is used of the Father in 4:10; 10:6 (cf. Dan. 12:7), so that we have another example of the use of identical qualities of the Father and the Son.

Hades is the place of departed spirits as in Acts 2:27, 31 (where NIV translates as ‘the grave’). It is not the place of torment (‘Gehenna’), but in this book it is always linked with *death* and regarded as something of an enemy. But *keys* symbolize authority and Christ holds *the keys of death and Hades*. He has the power to send people to death and to Hades or to deliver them from them. He is supreme, and a supremacy over the spirit world and over death itself is a supremacy such as the tyrants who persecuted John’s readers never dreamed of.

19. The command to *write* (v. 11) is repeated and enlarged. John is to include *what you have seen* (the vision of Christ), *what is now* (the true state of present events; we see this especially, though not exclusively, in the next two chapters where the condition of the seven churches is ruthlessly exposed), and *what will take place later* (it was important that some indication of future events be given to the

suffering saints; a good deal of this book looks to the days ahead).

20. *Mystery* does not mean what is 'mysterious' in our sense of the term, but something that people could never work out for themselves but which has now been made known by God (see the notes on 1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Thess. 2:7, TNTC). It is often used of the content of the gospel message. Here it means that Christ makes known the meaning of certain symbols which we could not have guessed.

The *seven stars* are first explained as *the angels of the seven churches*. The word *angel* means 'messenger' and can be used of human messengers (Luke 7:24; 9:52). But it is much more often used of heavenly beings, God's 'messengers'. Indeed in Revelation, apart from the references in the first three chapters to the angels of the churches, there is no place where it does not refer to heavenly beings, and as the term is found sixty-seven times this consideration is important. Some suggest that it means something like 'guardian angels' of the churches (cf. Matt. 18:10), but there is no evidence that churches have heavenly beings associated with them in this way. Moreover, in the next couple of chapters the letters to the churches are in each case addressed to 'the angel' of the particular church, which is a strange way to treat a guardian angel. So it is suggested that the expression may point to the essential 'spirit' of the churches. Thus Swete can say: 'In this symbolical book the angel of a Church may be simply an expression for its prevailing spirit, and thus be identified with the Church itself', and Sweet: 'the churches seen as spiritual entities'.

Others prefer to think of some earthly representative of the churches. The great advantage of this view is that such a person is a much more natural recipient of a letter to the church than is any heavenly being. The disadvantage is in seeing who it can be. The messengers who took the letters are mentioned, but there seems no reason for addressing the letters to these 'postmen'. There is more to be said for the view that the *angels* are the bishops or pastors of the churches (Hoeksema, 'the overseer or elder'; LB, 'leader'). This would be a good solution except that we do not know whether the churches had bishops or individual pastors as early as this. And if they did, why call them *angels*? There are difficulties in the way of all views, but perhaps fewest in that of seeing the *angels* as the spirits of the churches, standing for and symbolizing the churches. The *seven lampstands* are *the seven churches*, the actual existent churches. The churches are no more than *lampstands*. The light is Christ, and they are to show him forth.

2. THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES (2:1–3:22)

Some interpreters (e.g. Kiddle) take the seven letters to the churches as purely a literary device. They see the message as addressed to the church at large, with the division into seven as purely artificial. Others take the churches to stand for periods in history, Ephesus representing the first century, Smyrna the period of persecution, Pergamum the age of Constantine, Thyatira the Middle Ages, Sardis the Reformation era, Philadelphia the time of the modern missionary movement, and Laodicea the apostasy of the last days (see Smith). Such views are unlikely. It seems much more probable that the letters are letters to real churches, all the more so since each of the messages has relevance to what we know of conditions in the city named. This does not mean that the letters originally circulated as individual units (though Charles takes this view). None is a complete letter. They were probably in this book from the first, and were intended to be read by others than members of the churches named. John has addressed himself to the needs of the little churches, but has dealt with topics which have relevance to God's people at all times and in all places. He is writing to the churches, but he is also addressing the church as a whole.

There is a general pattern to the letters which we may set out as follows:

1. A greeting: 'To the angel of the church in ...'.
2. A title of the risen Christ, usually taken from the description in chapter 1.
3. A section headed 'I know', introducing praise for what is good in the church's record (not in the case of Laodicea).
4. A criticism of the church (not in the case of Smyrna nor Philadelphia).
5. A warning.
6. An exhortation beginning, 'He who has an ear ...'.
7. A promise beginning with something like 'To him who overcomes I will give ...'. In the last four letters the order of 6 and 7 is reversed.

A further pattern is to be discerned in the sevenfold arrangement. Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger, churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4 and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad.

a. To the church of Ephesus (2:1–7)

Ephesus was the most important of the seven cities. Though Pergamum was apparently the official capital of the province of Asia, Ephesus was its greatest city. It was an assize town and a seat of proconsular government (Acts 19:38). When a proconsul took up his appointment he had to enter his province at Ephesus. Situated near the mouth of the river Cayster, it was a great commercial centre (despite problems posed by the silting up of its harbour which persisted so that the site is now several miles inland). Much of the trade of the East came to the Aegean via the port of Ephesus. The great road from the Euphrates terminated there, as did roads from the Cayster valley and the Maeander valley to the south.

Ephesus was an outstanding religious centre, the chief cult being that of Artemis (cf. Acts 19:24ff.). The city had the prized status of *neōkoros* (lit. 'temple-sweeper'!) in connection with the great temple which was one of the seven wonders of the world. But religion and magic were hopelessly intermingled, and magical arts were popular (cf. Acts 19:19). 'Ephesian letters' were charms widely supposed to cure sickness and to bring luck. Paul spent over two years in Ephesus establishing the church (Acts 19:8, 10), to which the important Epistle to the Ephesians was later sent. Timothy was there for a time (1 Tim. 1:3), and tradition says that John lived there in his old age.

1. The greeting is to *the angel of the church in Ephesus* (for *angel* see on 1:20), but there is no doubt that the message is to the church. It comes from the risen Christ, described as holding *the seven stars in his right hand* (cf. 1:16; the verb here is rather stronger than 'had' in that passage and denotes a firm grip). He is also said to be walking among the lampstands (in 1:13 there was no mention of walking, but cf. Lev. 26:12; Dan. 3:25). The effect of this salutation is to give a picture of Christ as present in the very midst of the churches, a Christ who is intimately concerned with them and cares for them.

2. The exalted Christ knows what goes on among his people. He selects three things (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3): *your deeds* (the general term), *your hard work* (*kopos* means labour to the point of weariness), and *your perseverance* (Barclay, 'the courageous gallantry which accepts suffering and hardship and loss and turns them into grace and glory').

The Ephesians' zeal for the right comes out further in their inability to *tolerate wicked men*. They have also tested out men who claimed to be *apostles* and shown them up for what they were. *Found them false* shows that these men were not merely deluded; they were deceivers. The term *apostle* is not used here of the Twelve, but in the wider sense (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13). Paul had foretold that 'savage wolves' would trouble the Ephesian church (Acts 20:29), and we see the fulfilment here. Clearly the Ephesians did not take their faith lightly. They quite understood that it made demands on them, and they worked hard at being Christians. And they were not credulous. They tested and rejected false

claims among professing Christians.

3. The verb *endured* is that used in verse 2 of their inability to ‘tolerate’ evil men. But for Christ’s sake they have *endured*. *Have not grown weary* likewise takes up the word ‘hard work’ of the previous verse, being the verb from the same root (‘you have not grown weary of labour’). In these letters praise is regularly given where it fairly can to those churches which are to be rebuked for some failure. Thus there is more praise for Ephesus and Thyatira which are rebuked, than for Smyrna and Philadelphia which are not.

4. The condemnation of this church is expressed in one memorable phrase, *You have forsaken your first love*. It is not clear whether this is love for Christ (‘you do not love me now as you did at first’, GNB), or for one another (‘you have given up loving one another’, Moffatt), or for mankind at large. It may be that a general attitude is meant which included all three (‘you do not love as you did at first’, Phillips). *Forsaken* (*aphēkes*) is a strong term; they had completely abandoned their first fine flush of enthusiastic love. They had yielded to the temptation, ever present to Christians, to put all their emphasis on sound teaching. In the process they lost love, without which all else is nothing.

5. There is nothing more to the accusation. But it is damning enough in all conscience. So Christ calls on them to come back. There are three steps. First they should *remember* their first state (there is a tragic air of completeness about the perfect, *peptōkas, fallen*). It is possible to slip away gradually without realizing what is happening. A useful counter is to go back in thought to the first days. The Greek imperative is present, with a meaning like ‘keep on remembering’, ‘hold in memory’. They had enjoyed a close walk with God. Let their minds dwell on that. The second step is *repent* (the aorist points to a sharp break with evil). Christians can never dally with wrong. There must be a sharp break with it. But Christianity is not basically negative and the third step is *do the things you did at first*, i.e. the works that had issued from their first love.

If they do not heed, dire consequences are sure and swift. *I will come* is in fact in the present tense ‘I am coming’. John sees it before his eyes. If the church does not heed the injunction Christ will remove its lampstand, which appears to signify the total destruction of the church. A church can continue only for so long on a loveless course. Without love it ceases to be a church. Its lampstand is removed. *If you do not repent* shows that the judgment is not irrevocable. If they repent they may yet be saved. But if not, there is no hope.

6. *But you have this in your favour*, says Christ: *You hate the practices of Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. While love is the typical Christian attitude, love for the good carries with it a corresponding hatred for what is wrong. ‘Neither doth he abhor any thing that is evil’ (Ps. 36:4, Prayer Book version) is a terrible condemnation. Notice that it is *the practices* and not the persons which are the objects of hatred.

Nothing is known about the *Nicolaitans* other than what is recorded in Revelation. Irenaeus says that they owed their origin to Nicolas, who was one of the Seven (Acts 6:5; *Adv. Haer.* i.26.3; iii.10.7). Clement of Alexandria defends Nicolas saying that he was misunderstood (*Strom.* iii. 4.25). All here is conjecture. Victorinus of Pettau, the first commentator on Revelation, refers to them as ‘false and troublesome men, who, as ministers under the name of Nicolaus, had made for themselves a heresy, to the effect that what had been offered to idols might be exorcised and eaten, and that whoever should have committed fornication might receive peace on the eighth day’ (*ANF*, VII, p. 346). But this, too, looks like speculation. Etymologically the name combines ‘victory’ and ‘people’ and one could get roughly the same meaning from Balaam, from which it has been concluded that the Balaamites (v. 14) were at least similar. Since the practices of the Balaamites and the followers of Jezebel (v. 20) are much the same, it appears that this group was akin. It cannot be proved but it seems the most reasonable reading of the evidence that all three were connected, though not identical. This is not the enemy from outside openly seeking to destroy the faith. The false teachers claimed ‘not that they were destroying Christianity, but that they were presenting an improved and modernized version of it’ (Barclay). This is the insidious fifth column, destroying from within.

7. *He who has an ear ...* occurs in each of the letters. It stresses the continuous activity of the Spirit and is a call to attention. There is a similarity in our Lord's formula (Mark 4:9; etc.) though he uses the plural, while the singular is found in Revelation. The expression is a personal challenge. The plural *churches* shows that the message is not only for those Asian Christians so long ago but for every one who 'has an ear'. In each letter Christ is the speaker but we are told what the Spirit says: 'the word of Christ is the word of the Spirit' (Beasley-Murray).

There is a little message to *him who overcomes* in each of the letters. Some see a reference to the Nicolaitans ('overcome' is *nikō*). But John is fond of this verb (he uses it seventeen times) and the connection is not necessary, though it may not be out of mind in this particular instance. Swete aptly says, 'The note of victory is dominant in St John, as that of faith in St Paul; or rather, faith presents itself to St John in the light of a victory.' To the man who perseveres through to final victory Christ says that he will give to eat of the tree of life (cf. 22:2, 14, 19). After Adam's sin the way to the tree of life was cut off and guarded by cherubim (Gen. 3:24). Now it is given by Christ to his triumphant follower. But it is not to be taken for granted. Only some have the right to it (22:14), and it may be taken away (22:19). *The paradise of God* points to bliss in the presence of God himself. *Paradise* is from the Persian, with a meaning like 'park' (NEB, 'Garden of God'). It is used of bliss in the world to come.

b. To the church of Smyrna (2:8–11)

Smyrna was one of the greatest cities of the region, and indeed disputed with Ephesus for the title 'First (city) of Asia'. It enjoyed great natural advantages, including an excellent harbour at the head of a well-protected gulf. It was thus the natural outlet for the trade of the rich valley of the Hermus and regions beyond. Smyrna was destroyed c. 580 BC, but c. 290 BC Lysimachus rebuilt it to a comprehensive plan. It was thus one of the very few planned cities of antiquity. Many writers comment on its beauty. It was one of the first cities to worship the Roman emperor and it won the honour of erecting a temple to him in the reign of Tiberius. Indeed there was a temple to the goddess of Rome as early as 195 BC (Tacitus, *Ann.* iv.56; Barclay says this was the first in the world). Smyrna was a faithful ally of Rome in the days before Rome was acknowledged in the region, so its loyalty meant something.

8. The message is from *the First and the Last* (cf. 1:17). As in 1:18 this is linked with a reference to the resurrection, very appropriate in a city which had died and now lived once more. In 1:18 the tense denotes continuity ('I am living'), whereas here the aorist tenses put the stress on the actual happenings: 'he became dead, and sprang to life again.'

9. Christ's knowledge of this church is concerned with the various kinds of trouble its members were undergoing. First is *afflictions* (actually *thlipsis* is singular), which means serious trouble, the burden that crushes. Kiddle says, 'From this letter we can gain some idea of the unbounded fortitude of these early Christians. John assumes that the people of Smyrna (as typical of faithful Christians everywhere) share his own attitude to physical suffering: he speaks lightly of it, as one speaks of familiar things. Words so brief, spoken to men who might at any time go to their death, have in them a heroism which even now has power to stir the blood.'

Next comes *poverty*. John uses the strong word *ptōcheia*, which Trench distinguishes from *penia*: 'The *penēs* has nothing superfluous, the *ptochos* nothing at all.' The poverty of the Smyrneans was extreme. Yet Christ can say *you are rich* (contrast 3:17). There is a richness in spiritual things which has nothing to do with this world's wealth. Many think that the Smyrneans' poverty was in part due to pillage of their goods by the Jews. Christianity was not legally permitted, which made it easy for Jews or pagans to take action against believers. When Polycarp was martyred at Smyrna somewhat later, the hostility of the Jews toward the Christians came out in their zeal in setting forward the execution. Though it was the sabbath, they gathered wood for the fire in which the martyr was burnt. Such hostility may well go back to the time when John wrote.

He goes on to refer to *the slander (blasphēmia) of those who say they are Jews and are not* (cf. Rom. 2:25, 28–29). To be a Jew means more than to possess outward membership of the race. These men *are a synagogue of Satan*. Their assembly for worship did not gather together God’s people, but Satan’s, who is ‘the accuser of our brothers’ (12:10).

10. The Smyrneans are not to be afraid, though suffering is certain. Some will be imprisoned, and this is ascribed to *the devil*. But God is supreme. Even through the devil and evil men he works out his purposes. The imprisonment will be *to test you*. The clear implication is that God will see them through the test. This is so even if, as a number of commentators think, prison was simply a place of confinement while awaiting execution (against this view are passages like Acts 16:23; 2 Cor. 11:23).

Ten days (the time of Daniel’s testing, Dan. 1:12–15) may well point to the completion of their suffering: ‘It is only for a limited time that you will have to endure, even though endurance will be tested to the limit’ (Niles). It certainly points to something more than three and a half days, which is John’s usual expression for a trial of limited duration. Yet even ten has its limit. Not Satan but God has the last word. In a memorable expression the church is exhorted, *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life* (cf. Jas 1:12). Death, which people fear so much, is set in sharp antithesis to life, which alone matters. There is an article with *life* (though not with *death*). It is ‘the’ life, eternal life, that is in mind. *Crown (stephanos)* means a wreath or chaplet, and is to be distinguished from the royal crown (*diadēma*). The *stephanos* was the trophy awarded to the victor at the games, and the same word was used of the festive garland worn at banquets by all the guests. Here it is plainly the victory wreath, which would be specially appropriate in Smyrna, a city famous for its Games. The believer who remains faithful even when it means death will receive the trophy of victory. His *crown is life*.

11. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on verse 7. The overcomer will not be harmed by *the second death* (explained in 20:6, 14; 21:8 in terms of the lake of fire; it seems to mean eternal punishment, the negation of eternal life). *Not* is an emphatic double negative. The overcomer will certainly not be harmed. The emphasis would be welcome to those who faced the prospect of martyrdom.

c. To the church of Pergamum (2:12–17)

Pergamum was never important until it became the capital of the independent kingdom of the Attalids after Alexander the Great. Its last king willed it to Rome in 133 BC, when it apparently became the capital of the Roman province of Asia. About 15 miles inland, it did not have a good trading position. But, apart from its administrative importance, it was significant for its great library, said to have contained more than 200,000 parchment scrolls. Indeed, our word ‘parchment’ is derived from this name ‘Pergamum’. It was an important religious centre. People came from all over the world to be healed by the god Asclepius, and Pergamum has been described as ‘the Lourdes of the ancient world’. Zeus, Dionysos and Athene also had notable temples in the city. Pergamum was a centre of Caesar-worship, and it had a temple dedicated to Rome as early as 29 BC. It attained the coveted title *neōkoros*, ‘temple-sweeper’, before either Smyrna or Ephesus, and took its devotion to emperor worship seriously. In due course it added a second and a third temple in honour of the emperor. It was the principal centre of the imperial cult in this part of the world. But emperor-worship was not its sole religious activity. Behind the city was a great conical hill, the site of a multitude of heathen temples.

12. The greeting is from him *who has the sharp, double-edged sword* (cf. 1:16), a sword which will be used (v. 6). In a city as devoted to the Romans as Pergamum, and the place of residence of the proconsul who possessed the power to put people to death and whose very symbol may be taken to be a sword (Rom. 13:4), it was a salutary reminder that there is a power greater than that of any earthly governor.

13. The verb *live (katoikeis)* means that the Christians were not simply passing through Pergamum.

It was their home and they had to face their difficulties to the end. Satan exercised sway there (he had a *throne*). Some see an allusion to the serpent, the symbol of Asclepius, which was everywhere in Pergamum. While this emblem symbolized healing to the Pergamenes, it stood for evil for biblically instructed Christians (cf. 12:9; 20:2). But Beckwith objects that this kind of worship was very prominent in centres like Epidaurus; Pergamum had no mortgage on it. A similar objection is urged against the suggestion that the great altar to Zeus is meant. This stood high on the Acropolis and dominated the city. But Zeus too was highly honoured elsewhere. We have, however, already noticed that Pergamum did have pre-eminence in emperor-worship. Charles cites an inscription from Mytilene which shows that the city was the centre of the emperor cult for the whole province. And, as this was a constant source of persecution to the Christians, we need not doubt that it was primarily in mind.

But the opposition had not led to any slackening of Christian zeal, and the exalted Lord can say, *you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me.* The reference to one martyrdom, that of *Antipas*, and the aorist tense in the verb *renounce* point to one definite crisis rather than a continuing persecution. Nothing more is known of Antipas (though legend has it that he was roasted in a brazen bull). But clearly he had remained firm; he was *my faithful witness* (in time this term came to mean ‘martyr’, one who witnessed by his death). The addition *where Satan lives* stresses the significance of the activity of the evil one. Persecution does not take place simply at the behest of wicked people.

14. We come now to *a few things* that were wrong. They refer to false teaching, the enemy within. We cannot identify the error with certainty, but Balaam (see on v. 6) was the man who, after being prevented from cursing Israel, apparently advised Balak, king of Moab that the Israelites would forfeit God’s protection if he could induce them to worship idols (Num. 31:16).

The incident at Baal-peor made a deep impression on subsequent generations. It became proverbial for spiritual declension. The allusion here is spelled out with the reference to Balaam’s teaching of Balak to *entice the Israelites to sin*. JB has ‘set a trap for’, which preserves something of the original reference to the bait stick which triggered off the trapping mechanism when a bird perched on it. It is a vivid metaphor for what entraps or troubles. Two points are singled out, the eating of *food sacrificed to idols* and *sexual immorality*. It is possible that the former refers to meat which had first been offered to idols and was then sold on the open market (see TNTC on 1 Cor. 8), and the latter to sexual sin in general. But it is more likely that both refer to idolatrous practices. Feasting on sacrificial meat and licentious conduct were usual accompaniments of the worship of idols, both in Old and New Testament times.

15. *Likewise* means ‘like that in verse 14’. *You also* is emphatic (*kai sy*). In addition to other things *you* have these false teachers. For the Nicolaitans see note on verse 6. From the way this verse is connected with the preceding we should probably draw the inference that the Balaamite error was akin to that of the Nicolaitans. But the language shows that they were not identical.

16. *Repent* is a sharp command and *therefore* means this should be done because of God’s hatred for this kind of practice. Evil must not be countenanced. *I will come* is another of John’s vivid present tenses. He sees it happening. The alternative to repentance is to have Christ *fight against them*. The verb is confined to Revelation in the New Testament (apart from Jas 4:2). *The sword of my mouth* clearly means the words Christ speaks. This saying is either a comfort and a strength, or else it destroys us.

17. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on verse 7. He who overcomes is this time promised as food *the hidden manna*. There may be an allusion to the Jewish idea that when the temple was destroyed the prophet Jeremiah hid the pot with the manna that was in the Holy of Holies, and that when the Messiah came it would reappear. But more probably the meaning is simply that the believer who overcomes will receive celestial food not available to the world (cf. John 4:31–34).

With this is linked *a white stone* inscribed with *a new name*. This has puzzled commentators for centuries. At least seven suggestions have been made with some confidence. One arises from legal

practice, where a member of a jury who was for acquittal handed in a white stone. A second view sees a reference to reckoning, since white stones were often used in calculations. A third idea is that the white stone is the symbol of a happy day (like our 'red-letter day'). Along somewhat the same lines is that which sees the stone as an amulet bringing good luck. A more prosaic suggestion is that the white stone represented a ticket to bread and circuses. A sixth suggestion arises from a rabbinic speculation that when the manna fell from heaven it was accompanied by precious stones (note that *manna* has just been mentioned). The seventh view is that the reference is to a stone in the breastplate of the high priest with the name of one of the tribes written on it. A variant sees a reference to the Urim (Exod. 28:30). Some of these may legitimately be criticized on the ground that either the stone is not white or it has no inscription. But none of them carries complete conviction. We simply do not know what the white stone signified, though clearly it did convey some assurance of blessing.

On the stone will be *a new name written, known only to him who receives it*. For *new (kainon)* see note on 5:9. Some have thought that the *new name* is that of God or Christ. And indeed there is a reference to Christ as having a new name (3:12). But there is no indication that his name is secret and it is the secret that is distinctive here. This must be understood in the light of ideas held in antiquity about the function of a name. With us a name is no more than a distinguishing mark, a label. But in antiquity the name was widely held to sum up what the man stood for. It represented his character. It stood for the whole man. Here then the new name represents a new character. The fact that no-one knows it would be a crippling disadvantage for us. In the modern world what is the use of a name that nobody knows? But for people of antiquity the hidden name was precious. It meant that God had given the overcomer a new character which no-one knew except himself. It was not public property. It was a little secret between him and his God.

d. To the church of Thyatira (2:18–29)

The longest of the seven letters is written to the church in the smallest and least important town! The values of God are not the values of men. Thyatira was situated between the Caicus and Hermus valleys. This was a good position for trading and the city appears to have been quite a commercial centre. There appear to have been a large number of trade guilds in Thyatira. In fact Sir William Ramsay says 'more trade-guilds are known in Thyatira than in any other Asian city. The inscriptions, though not specially numerous, mention the following: wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths.' Over in Philippi we read of Lydia that she came from this city and was a 'dealer in purple cloth' (Acts 16:14). The town was famous for its wool dyeing, which may well explain this lady's occupation.

Unfortunately not very much is known about Thyatira, not nearly as much, for example, as is known about the other cities. This makes it difficult to be certain on some points and we must interpret this letter with due caution. The Christian church may have been small. At any rate no great record of achievement appears to be attributed to it.

18. This is the one letter to use the title *the Son of God*, indeed the one place where it occurs in Revelation. The description emphasizes the majesty of his Person (cf. Ps. 2:6–9, cited in v. 27). His eyes and feet are as described in 1:14–15. The eyes indicate that he sees all and the feet that he will certainly and swiftly pursue all that is evil, possibly also that he will tread it down.

19. *Your deeds* are explained as a series of praiseworthy Christian qualities: *love*, than which nothing is greater; *faith*, for continuing trustful reliance on Christ is basic; *service*, for this is what the Master expects to find his servants doing; and *perseverance*, for steady progress is more important than a bright beginning. This list ends as it began with deeds and it is good to read *you are now doing more than you did at first*. There is progress in the life of this church, which forms a contrast to Ephesus where the church has just been blamed for having slipped back (v. 4). There is much to commend at Thyatira.

20. But there is a *Nevertheless*; defects offset the virtues. Some relate to a woman called *Jezebel*, which we may assume to be a symbolic name. Certainly no Jew would have borne it in view of the evils done by Ahab's wife. 'Jezebel' had become proverbial for wickedness. Some MSS prefix 'your' to *woman*, which gives the meaning 'your wife'. This leads to the suggestion that *Jezebel* was the wife of the bishop of the church. If the reading is correct the translation is in order. But it is difficult to see a bishop as early as the writing of this letter (see on 1:20), and in any case the reading should probably be rejected. Another suggestion is the oracle Sambethe, a female fortune-teller located at Thyatira. A strong objection to any such view is that *Jezebel* clearly professes the Christian faith.

She *calls herself a prophetess*, but her teaching is false. Specifically she seduces the servants of God to immoral conduct and to the eating of idol meats (cf. v. 14). It seems that we have here the same kind of problem as that with which Paul deals in 1 Corinthians 8, though the pressure on the Thyatiran Christians to conform would have been greater. The powerful trade guilds in this city would have made it very difficult for any Christian to earn a living without belonging to a guild. But membership involved attendance at guild banquets, and this in turn meant eating meat which had first been sacrificed to an idol. What was the Christian to do? If he did not conform he was out of a job. *Jezebel* apparently reasoned that an idol was of no consequence (cf. 1 Cor. 8:4), and advised Christians to eat such meals. That these meals all too readily degenerated into sexual looseness made matters worse. But we can understand that some Christians would welcome a heresy of this kind. It enabled them to maintain a Christian profession while countenancing and even engaging in immoral heathen revels. That *Jezebel* was a prophetess gave their course some standing.

We should not minimize the importance of the question at issue, nor the difficulty some first-century Christians must have had in seeing the right course. Nor should we dismiss the problem as only of academic interest since it does not concern us. Every generation of Christians must face the question, 'How far should I accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices?' On the one hand, Christians must not deny the faith. On the other, they must not deny their membership of society. The cause of Christ is not served if Christians appear as a group of old-fashioned people always trying to retreat from the real world. Christians live in the same world as their neighbours and face the same problems. They must find Christian solutions. The prophetess and her followers had been so ready to conform to the practices of their heathen neighbours that they had lost sight of the essential Christian position. They had exalted expediency over principle. Had Christianity taken this way it must surely have become just another of the eastern cults which had their little day and perished. The risen Lord points to the very essence of Christian living when he urges high standards of moral conduct.

21. The Lord's judgments are not hasty. He gives time for repentance. But *she is unwilling*. She persisted in her wrongdoing and ignored the invitation to repent.

22. The punishment scene is vivid, with its 'Behold' (RSV), and its present tense 'I cast' (so, rather than *I will cast*). The *bed (klinē)* may be a 'sickbed' (RSV) or one *of suffering* (NIV). Farrer comments, 'The punishment fits the crime—she who profaned the bed of love is pinned to the bed of sickness.' This is probably the way to take it, though some have thought that the *klinē* was the couch on which she reclined at a meal (she would be smitten as she engaged in idol worship), and others that it is a funeral bier. *Those who commit adultery with her* will refer primarily to those who accepted her teaching, though since this involved sexual looseness the literal meaning is not far away. *Unless they repent* still holds out the prospect of mercy. This is to be noted throughout this book. It is full of severe judgments, but always there is the prospect of deliverance for those who repent. Here they are called to repent of *her* (not their) *ways*. More literally this is 'her works' and the same word occurs in verse 26 (translated 'will'). They should do Christ's works, not Jezebel's works.

23. We would naturally take *her children* to mean 'her followers' (GNB), except that they seem to have been dealt with already. Perhaps it means her most intimate disciples as against those whose adherence is not firm (Sweet, 'the totally converted'; he sees those who 'commit adultery with her' as those who 'flirt with her teaching'). Hoeksema and others see a reference to her literal children, but this

seems less likely. They will be 'killed with death' which probably means 'with pestilence' (as often in LXX). This will have its effect on *all the churches*. They will know that Christ *searches hearts and minds* (lit. 'kidneys and hearts'; cf. Jer. 11:20). The implication of *searches* is that nothing can be hidden from him. With an understanding of the function of the organs different from ours, the kidneys are seen as the seat of the emotions and the heart as the intellect. *Each of you* (where we might have expected the singular 'you' in conformity with the address to 'the angel of the church', 18) makes it very personal; each will receive a recompense proportionate to his deeds.

24. There is a message for true believers, those who have not been led astray by this *teaching*. These *have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets*. *So-called* is 'what some call' (RSV), but it is not certain who are doing the calling. It may be true believers who see the claim of the heretics to knowledge of the deep things of God (which makes them superior to others) as false. Their 'deep' teaching is satanic, not heavenly; the deep things they really know are the depths of Satan.

But it is more likely that the false teachers themselves made this claim. They may have meant something like Paul's 'we are not unaware of his schemes' (2 Cor. 2:11), and have claimed superior power to overcome temptation. They seem to have held that to triumph over Satan it is necessary to know Satan's works. Curious as it seems to us, there were some (so far known to us at a rather later time than this) who held that the important thing is to keep the soul pure whatever the body may do. They did not hesitate to engage in grossly sensual practices, maintaining that these concerned only their bodies but that their souls were pure. It could well be that we have here an early representative of this kind of teaching.

For those who have repudiated the false teaching there is a promise, *I will not impose any other burden on you*. This raises the question, 'Other than what?' The answer may be, 'Other than the burden of Christian service already assumed'; nothing is to be added to the revelation given in Scripture. The words remind us of Acts 15:28–29, and Alford says, 'To my mind the allusion to the apostolic decree is too clear and prominent to allow of any other meaning coming into question.'

25. This does not mean that life is easy. There is a necessary task to be done. They are to *hold on to* ('take a firm grip on') the thing (singular) that they already have, i.e. 'the sum total of Christian doctrine and hope and privilege' (Alford). *Until I come* turns their gaze to the glorious day when their Lord will appear.

26–27. To the usual *him who overcomes* there is linked *and does my will to the end*. *My will* is really 'my works' and contrasts with 'her works' (v. 22, where see note). It is a different quality of life that is demanded from the Christian. *To the end*, for the Christian life is not a battle but a campaign. Perseverance is important.

The reward for the overcomer is *authority over the nations* (cf. Ps. 2:8–9), a dazzling prospect but one that demanded great faith from a tiny church. With it is linked *He will rule them with an iron sceptre* (presumably a staff tipped with iron). The verb rendered *rule* literally means 'shepherd'. We usually think of the shepherd in terms of kindness and tender care. But the shepherd was an autocrat. His power over his flock was absolute, and it is this aspect of the shepherd's life that is in view. Shepherding with an iron rod might denote no more than strength or firmness were it not linked with breaking to pieces like clay vessels (cf. Ps. 2:9; Jer. 51:20). Further, it is likened to the gift the Father gave the Son. This seems to show that the overcomer will have a place in the final decisive victory of Christ over the world forces opposed to God.

28. The gift of *the morning star* might be a further token of triumph (so Beasley-Murray). Or it may be a symbol of the Christian's resurrection. But as Christ is himself referred to as 'the bright Morning Star' (22:16) it is likely that it is the presence of the Lord that is meant. Even though this is an unusual way for Christ to refer to himself this seems the best way of taking the words. The ultimate reward of the Christian is to be with his Lord.

29. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on verse 7.

e. To the church of Sardis (3:1–6)

Situated at the junction of five roads, and commanding the Hermus valley, Sardis was an active commercial city and very wealthy. It had been the capital of Croesus who was proverbial for his riches. The city's easy wealth seems to have made for slackness. It was captured by Cyrus the Persian (549 BC) and by Antiochus (218 BC), both times because of its slackness. The city was built on a hill so steep that its defences seemed impregnable. On both occasions enemy troops scaled the precipice by night and found that the overconfident Sardians had set no guard. A great earthquake in AD 17 made a profound impression. But the city was soon rebuilt, partly owing to generous aid from the emperor Tiberius.

The most important religion at Sardis was the worship of Cybele. John does not mention anything like the persecutions at Smyrna and Pergamum or the heresies of the Nicolaitans. It may be that this church had not suffered disturbance from without and that its troubles stemmed from its comparatively sheltered existence. The temptation for the sheltered is always to take things easy, and they readily become slack. Like the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira this one has a mixed membership. But in those the faulty members are a minority. At Sardis they predominate. Only 'a few people' have not 'soiled their clothes'.

1. *The seven spirits of God* may denote the Holy Spirit (see on 1:4), and the form of expression seems to show that Christ gives the Spirit. *The seven stars* are the 'angels' of the churches (1:20) and they appear here in Christ's control. After this reminder of the dignity of the risen Christ there is a sharp condemnation of the church at Sardis. It has a good reputation, *a reputation of being alive*, but in fact it is *dead* (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5; Jas 2:17). No condemnation could be sharper. Paul speaks of a very different attitude, 'dying, and yet we live on' (2 Cor. 6:9).

2. *Wake up!* (cf. Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 16:13) is rather 'Be watchful' (AV; the tense indicates a continuing state). This must have come home with peculiar force to the church in a city which had twice been captured owing to its failure to watch. Lack of spiritual vigilance may likewise be costly. All was not yet lost, for there are things that remain. But even these are *about to die*. Unless an ember is fanned into flames it is lost. This church may have pleased men but it did not please God. Nothing it did was *complete in the sight of my God*; its works were not brought to fulfilment. Why did both Jews and Romans leave this church undisturbed (unlike some of its neighbours)? The answer may well be its lack of aggressive and positive Christianity. 'Content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance, it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting' (Caird).

3. *Remember (mnēmoneue)* is a present imperative with the meaning 'bear in mind' (rather than 'recall'). *What* is rather 'how' and refers to the manner of their hearing of the gospel, while *received* and *heard* point to its derivative nature. *Obey* (better 'keep', as RSV) is present imperative and enjoins a continuing activity, while *repent* (aorist) is urgent. If the church does not watch, Christ will come to it *like a thief*. This proverbial expression for unexpectedness (Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10) is further emphasized with *you will not know at what time I will come to you*. This is not a reference to the second coming, which will take place whether the Sardians are watchful or not. But Christ comes in many ways and this is clearly a limited coming in judgment on unrepentant sinners. Their fate is none the less fearsome because left undefined.

4. John speaks of a few 'names' which NIV renders *people* (cf. 11:13; Acts 1:15). Defiled clothing is a piece of imagery whose general significance is plain but whose detailed meaning is not quite so clear. Moffatt, however, speaks of votive inscriptions in Asia Minor which show that dirty clothing was held to dishonour the deity, so that those who wore soiled garments were debarred from worshipping.

Walking with Christ *in white* has been understood by some as a reference to purity, by others to festivity, by others to victory. Beckwith sees it as 'a standing characteristic of the blessed and of heavenly beings'. All these views are possible, and examples can be adduced to support each. But, as

Farrer points out, the parallel with the name left in the book of life in the next verse ‘strongly suggests that the white robes signify justification’. Those who have not defiled their garments, then, walk with Christ (contrast John 6:66, where ‘followed’ is really ‘walked with’) in accordance with their status as justified persons. *For they are worthy* does not mean that they have merited their justification, but that they have done nothing to forfeit it.

5. Again we have a reference to being *dressed in white*, this time to say that one so clothed will not have his name removed from *the book of life*. Christ will confess him before the Father and the angels. All these expressions help bring out the heavenly standing of those who belong to Christ. In highest heaven they have nothing to fear. When Jesus Christ vouches for anyone that person is accepted. Jesus said he would confess before the angels anyone who confesses him (Luke 12:8–9; he will also deny one who denies him). The final chord struck in this message to the needy church of Sardis is one of hope and encouragement.

6. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on 2:7.

f. To the church of Philadelphia (3:7–13)

Philadelphia was founded c.140 BC at the junction of the approaches to Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia. It was not unjustly called ‘the gateway to the East’. Its founder, Attalus II Philadelphus of Pergamum, from whom the city derived its name, intended it to be a centre of missionary activity for the Hellenistic way of life. The city was prosperous, partly from its strategic situation, partly from the grape growing that flourished in the vicinity. It was a centre of worship of the god Dionysos, but contained also temples to many other gods. Volcanic activity caused hot springs in the vicinity, but also earthquakes from time to time. Philadelphia suffered from the earthquake of AD 17 and received imperial assistance for rebuilding. The church was evidently small (v. 8), but of good quality. Its enemies came from outside, not inside, for there is no mention of heresy or factiousness. It had a good deal in common with that at Smyrna. Both receive no blame, only praise. Both suffered from those who called themselves Jews and were not, both were persecuted it would seem by the Romans, both are assured that the opposition is satanic, and both are promised a crown.

7. The church is greeted by one who is *holy* and *true* (epithets applied to God in 6:10). *Holy* denotes connection with deity (cf. Isa. 40:25; Hab. 3:3). It is used widely throughout the New Testament. *True* (*alēthinos*) is not often applied to people, either in the New Testament or elsewhere. It indicates that Christ is completely reliable.

This is the thought also in the rest of the verse. Christ has *the key of David* (cf. Isa. 22:22). *What he opens, no-one can shut; and what he shuts, no-one can open* (cf. Job 12:14). This is the very opposite of caprice. He acts firmly and none can interfere. He does what he wills. Our writer does not tell us what it is that he shuts and opens. Some connect it with the Jews, who, they think, had excluded the Christians from their synagogues. But when Christ opens, the Jews cannot reverse it. More probably it is admission to the city of David, the heavenly Jerusalem, that is in mind, and this Christ alone gives or withholds.

8. The words *See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut* are best taken as a parenthesis. The main thought is then ‘I know your works, for you have little power and yet you have kept my word ...’. This church had not embraced heretical teaching, nor had it denied Christ’s name. Evidently there had been persecution of some sort, but the people of Philadelphia had stood firm. For those with little strength they had had a noteworthy achievement.

In keeping with the description of Christ in verse 7 there is set before the church *an open door* (cf. Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12), a door which *no-one can shut*. This may be a door of missionary opportunity (Orr notices no other possibility). The thought would then be that the reward of faithful service is greater opportunity for service. It is objected that this book does not elsewhere commend missionary activity and that the context requires the thought of reward. Accordingly some suggest that

the open door leads into the messianic glory or perhaps the messianic community. Others think of the door as Christ himself (as in John 10:7, 9), others again of an opened door in contrast to the closed door of the synagogue, and yet others of the door of prayer. There is no lack of suggestions and a decision is not easy. Perhaps there is most to be said for the thought of entrance into the messianic glory (in line with v. 7).

9. Instead of *I will make*, the best MSS read 'I give', but the thought is apparently not completed. Instead we are told that those who belong to Satan's synagogue (see on 2:9) are *liars* when they *claim to be Jews*. Christians are the true Jews (cf. Rom. 2:28–29) and Jewish persecutors of the church are not. In contrast to a Jewish expectation that the Gentiles would eventually submit to them (derived from Isa. 60:14) Christ says that these Jews will be made *to fall down at your feet*. It is to the church that all, Jews included, must ultimately make their submission, for Christ is in it. They will also come to know *that I have loved you*. The love of Christ for his own must not be overlooked.

10. *Since* introduces the reason, but grammatically it might be the reason for the preceding (the triumph of the Philadelphians over them of Satan's synagogue), or the following (Christ's keeping them in the hour of temptation). There seems no way of deciding the point. *My command to endure patiently* is more literally 'the word of my steadfastness' (see on 'perseverance', 2:2). It is a curious expression and seems to mean 'the teaching which was exemplified in my steadfastness' (so Swete; cf. 2 Thess. 3:5; Heb. 12:1–2). The same verb (*tēreō*) is used of Christ's keeping the Philadelphians as of their keeping his word. There is a justice about it all. He does what is right.

Keep you from (ek) the hour of trial might mean 'keep you from undergoing the trial' or 'keep you right through the trial'. The Greek is capable of either meaning. The trial is a very thoroughgoing test, for it will *come upon the whole world*, and test *those who live on the earth*. John usually uses this expression to mean the heathen world (see note on 6:10). Its use here accordingly may be another indication of compassion. The heathen are not simply judged and punished, but tested. God is giving them another opportunity.

11. The risen Lord speaks of his *coming* again. The present tense is vivid. *Hold on* is a present imperative with the force 'keep a firm grip on'. No one, of course, can steal their crown. But they themselves can forfeit it, as Esau forfeited his place to Jacob, Reuben to Judah, Saul to David. To serve God is a high privilege, but it is withdrawn and given to another when anyone fails to fulfil his task. *Crown* is *stephanos*, a 'garland' or 'wreath' (see note on 2:10). It was often used of victory and clearly this is the allusion here.

12. The reward for *him who overcomes* is to be *a pillar* (cf. Jer. 1:18; Gal. 2:9; 1 Tim. 3:15) *in the temple of my God* (the last two words receive emphasis from being repeated four times in this verse). This is, of course, symbolical and there is no contradiction with 21:22, which tells us that there will be no temple in heaven. John is not in the slightest concerned to keep the details of one vision consistent with those of another. In each he is making a point with emphasis, and we should not try to dovetail one vision into the details of another. Here his point is that the believer who overcomes will be permanently in the presence of God. There is a solidity about a pillar which may be meant in contrast to a mere 'peg' (Isa. 22:22–25).

Charles sees as part of the background to this saying a custom whereby 'the provincial priest of the imperial cultus at the close of his year of office' used 'to erect his statue in the confines of the temple, inscribing on it his own name and his father's'. This may be so if *ep' auton, on him* (the believer), is understood instead to mean 'on it' (the pillar). This is possible grammatically, but not necessary. In other parts of this book we have the name written on the head of the faithful (14:1; 22:4).

The triple name that follows is not that of the Trinity, as we might expect, but that of the Father, the new Jerusalem and the Son. *The name of my God* indicates that the overcomer belongs to God. That of *the city of my God* signifies that he has citizenship rights in the *new Jerusalem* (cf. Gal. 4:26; Heb. 11:10; 12:22; 13:14). *My new name* possibly refers to the new state of affairs brought about by the consummation of redemption. Then Christ appears in a character in which he could not appear until

this consummation was reached. The people of Philadelphia would appreciate references to a new name more than most. While the name Philadelphia persisted, twice the city had received a new name: that of Neocaesarea, as a sign of gratitude for Tiberius's help in rebuilding after the earthquake, and later Flavia, after the family name of the emperor Vespasian.

13. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on 2:7.

g. To the church of Laodicea (3:14–22)

Laodicea, at the junction of the valley of the Lycus and the Maeander and at the intersection of three important roads, commanded the approaches to Phrygia. It was one of the richest commercial centres in the world, so that we have here a picture of the church in an affluent society. Laodicea was noted for its banking and for its manufacture of clothing from the local black wool. It was an assize town and boasted a famous medical school.

An interesting feature of the city's religious life was a colony of over 7,000 adult male Jews. They had been granted the right to preserve their own customs. The Christian church had apparently been established by the preaching of Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12–13). Paul wrote it a letter (Col. 4:16) which has been lost (unless, as some hold, it is our Ephesians). In John's day the condition of the church in this city had deteriorated sadly. This church receives the severest condemnation of all the seven to whom letters are sent.

14. This is the one letter in which the titles of Christ are not drawn from the description in chapter 1. They stress his faithfulness and his authority. *The Amen* reflects 'the God of truth' (lit. 'the God of Amen', Isa. 65:16) and is reinforced with *the faithful and true witness* (cf. 1:5). This reliability stands in sharp contrast to the unfaithfulness of the Christians in this city.

Ruler (archē) combines the thoughts that Christ has the supreme authority over creation and that he is the origin of created being (cf. John 1:3; Col. 1:15–18). There are a number of resemblances in Colossians (which Paul had directed to be read in Laodicea, Col. 4:16) to expressions in this letter. It is a reasonable conclusion that the Laodicean church had copied and treasured Colossians and that John is appealing to their knowledge of it.

15. The *deeds* of this church are summed up in the accusation *you are neither cold nor hot*. The imagery may be derived from the water-supply of the city which appears to have been drawn from hot springs at some distance, so that it arrived at the city lukewarm. This forms a contrast with the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis and the cold, refreshing water at Colosse. 'Hot water heals, cold water refreshes, but lukewarm water is useless for either purpose, and can serve only as an emetic.' Alternatively the words may mean that the Christianity of this church was lukewarm, when the meaning would be 'outright denial is better than phoney piety' (Orr). To prefer a rejection of the faith to the way the Laodiceans professed it is startling to say the least (cf. 2 Pet. 2:21). But to profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic than for the coolly indifferent. 'There is no one farther from the truth in Christ than the one who makes an idle profession without real faith' (Walvoord). Their coolness was a denial of all that Christ stands for.

16. *Lukewarm (chliaros)*, here only in biblical Greek) underlines the trouble, which is spelt out in the repetition of *neither hot nor cold*. On *I am about to (mellō)* Simcox comments, 'The word used does not necessarily imply that the intention is final, and v. 19 shews that it is not.' A very strong warning has been given, but it is still a warning. *To spit you out of my mouth* expresses in the strongest way a vigorous repudiation of the Laodiceans. Lukewarmness is not to be endured. The Ephesians were condemned for too great a zeal, coupled as it was with lovelessness, the Laodiceans for too little.

17. This church says (habitually, present tense), *I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing* (contrast Smyrna, where the church was poor materially but rich spiritually, 2:9). Laodicea was a self-reliant city. It did indeed receive help from the government in AD 17, but when it was destroyed

by the earthquake in AD 60, Tacitus could say the city ‘without any relief from us, recovered itself by its own resources’.

But this commendable attitude in material things can be a disaster if carried over into the spiritual realm. The Laodicean church saw itself as wealthy and there is an article before *wretched* which yields the sense ‘You are *the* wretched one’, ‘the wretched one *par excellence*’ (Charles). Where an unsatisfactory state of affairs is concerned this church leads all the rest. It is *pitiful* (*eleeinos*, ‘in need of mercy’); it is *poor, blind and naked*, which is surely a hit at Laodicea’s banking, medical school, and clothing manufacturers. For *poor* (*ptōchos*) see note on 2:9.

18. For this threefold deficiency the remedy is in Christ. From him they should buy *gold refined in the fire* (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7), real wealth. *White clothes* should be seen against the city’s reputation for making clothing from black wool. *Nakedness* was in the ancient world the ultimate humiliation (cf. 2 Sam. 10:4; Isa. 20:4; Ezek. 16:37–39; Nah. 3:5; etc.), while contrariwise to be clothed in fine clothing was to receive honour (Gen. 41:42; Esth. 6:6–11; Dan. 5:29). The putting of *salve* on the *eyes* may allude to the fact that there was a world-famous remedy for sore eyes which came from Phrygia and may have been especially associated with Laodicea. Christ alone gives real sight (cf. John 9:39).

19. *Those* (*hosous*, ‘as many as’) makes no exceptions. Chastening is the lot of all whom God loves (cf. Prov. 3:12). On *love* Charles comments, ‘It is a touching and unexpected manifestation of love to those who deserve it least among the Seven Churches.’ The *I* is emphatic; chastening comes not from hostile forces but from the Lord of the church himself. This is the basis of an exhortation to a continuing state of zeal (*be earnest, zēleue*, is present continuous) and a decisive act of repentance (*repent* is aorist of once-for-all repentance).

20. *Here I am!* (paraphrase for ‘Behold’) is vivid. John sees it before his eyes. Christ is there, standing at the door. He is knocking, where the tense signifies not a perfunctory rap, but a knocking continued in the hope of a response. Up till this point the letter has been addressed to the church as a whole, but now there is a change. *If anyone* is an appeal to the individual. Even if the church as a whole does not heed the warning, some individuals may. There is a note of tender pleading and probably also that of love (cf. Song 5:2). Christ promises to enter in to anyone who opens the door. More than that: *I will ... eat* (*deipnēso*) conveys the thought of familiar intercourse. The *deipnon* was the main meal of the day and was a leisurely affair, not a hurried snack (cf. John 14:23). *And he with me* brings the believer into active fellowship. It is not necessary for the sense, but it emphasizes the continuing fellowship. It all forms a remarkably tender appeal to a church far gone from its rightful state.

21. The *throne* signifies royal honour, and a place with Christ is the highest honour conceivable for a Christian. This is emphasized by likening it to the way Christ is enthroned with the Father (cf. 22:1, 3). *Just as I overcame* is important. Christ overcame by the way of the cross and this set the pattern for his followers (cf. 12:11). They face grim days. But let them never forget that what seemed Christ’s defeat was in fact his victory over the world. They need not fear if they are called upon to suffer, for in that way they too will conquer.

22. For *He who has an ear ...*, see note on 2:7.¹

¹ Morris, L. (1987). *Vol. 20: Revelation: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (51–86). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.