

**Encouragement in Foresight:
An Ideological Texture Analysis of Philadelphia and Revelation 3:7-13**

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Introduction

Will your church still be talked about 2000 years from now? If so, will it be remembered for fulfilling or detracting from the fulfillment of the Great Commission? The church in Philadelphia was located in a city with a tumultuous history of oppression and natural disasters. It was not a thriving metropolis like Rome or Antioch. Rather, it was struggling with its entire existence and was an unlikely target of John's letter. It was a city in desperate need of encouragement and most of all, a savior.

Ideological texture focuses on the relationship of the reader to the text being analyzed. It focuses on the beliefs and systems readers use to interpret texts and the potential beliefs and systems the writers of a text wrote from (Robbins, 1996). This paper describes the historical and ideological texture of Revelation 3:7-13 as a backdrop to an essential, but sometimes forgotten, element of Christian foresight: encouragement of those journeying into the future.

Background of Philadelphia

Very little is known about Philadelphia through Biblical sources, as Revelation 3 is the only place Philadelphia is mentioned in Scripture. This may simply be because John carried the gospel there after the death of Paul and the other apostles (deSilva, 2004). John probably lived in Asia for some period of time and frequented these cities as part of his missionary travels (deSilva, 2004). He formed a direct relationship with these churches but was especially enamored with the Philadelphian church.

Philadelphia is now the modern city of Alasehir, in modern day Turkey. It was founded in approximately 140 BC by Attalus Philadelphus, the king of Perganum. Attalus earned the epithet Philadelphus by his truth and loyalty to his brother Eumenes (Ramsay, 1904). Attalus founded

the city to spread Greek language and customs to eastern Asia, including Lydia and Phrygia, through its strategic location along a great trade-route between Ephesus and the East (Ramsay, 1904; Barclay, 1976). It was a city perfectly situated and equipped to become a missionary city for another, more worthwhile cause.

The Seven Cities listed in Revelation 2-3 formed a horseshoe shaped circuit that provided access to the bulk of Asia minor, with each city situated one or two days walk away from the other (deSilva, 2004). It is the only one of the Seven Cities that is still partially erect today. Verse 12 indicates that “I will make you a pillar”. Interestingly, four marble pillars still remain in the ruins of Philadelphia (Smith, 1901). Each of the Seven Cities had a geographical “door” of influence before it, because of its geographical location. They bridged the East and West trading markets, and become hubs of culture and language sharing.

In approximately 17 A.D., a substantial earthquake destroyed much of Philadelphia and the surrounding area. Philadelphia was so badly damaged that Emperor Tiberius relieved it from having to pay taxes. At least eleven cities were also devastated by the earthquake, but for unknown reasons, they managed to rebuild much faster than Philadelphia (Ramsay, 1904). The aftershocks of the earthquake continued for some time, and Philadelphia’s residents lived in constant apprehension of another disaster wiping it out. Many left the city itself and lived in the fields surrounding it out of fear (Tait, 1884). Those who remained spent much time inventing ways to protect themselves from future disasters. They developed an elaborate system to protect themselves from falling walls by propping them up and rebuilding them. Strabo, a first century writer, indicated that surrounding cities thought that Philadelphia was unsafe to even enter, and that only fools would choose to live there (Ramsay, 1904). Thus, there was a derogatory stigma attached to being a Philadelphian.

This stigma was exasperated for Philadelphian Christians amidst the rule of the Roman Empire. Living the Christian life limited a person’s social, economic, and political participation, since many of these participations involved idol worship (deSilva, 2004). Rome was attractive

because of its lure of prosperity and severely persecuted any dissenters. Christians would have very few friends outside of their church, because being associated with Christians could result in severe repercussions. In addition to Roman persecution, Jewish leaders condemned and persecuted Christians as well. John addresses this in using the scathing description of the “synagogue of Satan” (3:9). He uses similar language in his letter to Smyrna (2:8-11), but does not mention it in the other five letters. This could indicate that the Jewish militancy was especially prevalent in Smyrna and Philadelphia (Ramsay, 1904). Philadelphian Christians were probably poor, disheartened, homeless, persecuted, and longsuffering people.

Ideological Background

John wrote that “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut” (3:8). John also quotes directly from Isaiah 22 (3:7). He indicates that only the Messiah will have the key of David to open the door, and that no one will shut this door to the new Jerusalem (also in Revelation 21:25). John quotes this intentionally as part of his argument that Jesus is the Messiah, and that the Messiah has now permanently opened the previously closed door to salvation. This open door was also used as a metaphor by Paul in describing increased opportunities for missionary work (see 1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, and Colossians 4:3).

When a city’s door is open, it indicates there is no threat to the city. The Philadelphians had lived for so many years in fear, that this was welcome news to them. They were under a constant barrage of threats that hiding away from them was normal. But John was giving them a commission they could not hide from. This commission was a gift from God and John wanted the Philadelphians to understand that their future was to be considered a gift, not a punishment.

John created a distinction between those in the New Jerusalem and those out of it. He created dichotomous “stark alternatives” rather than potential compromises (deSilva, 2004). He

included more promises (six) than commands (two) in this letter. To a Philadelphian, these promises would be welcome words to hear after their decades of living in fear and apprehension.

Verse 12 indicates that “you will never go out of it”, a reference to the Philadelphians’ practice of camping in the open fields because they feared their city falling apart. They protected themselves by staying away from the city. This phrase implies that they would not need to leave their city again, which was a foreign concept to most Philadelphians. John knew that the Philadelphian Christians faced death or tragedy daily. If another earthquake did not kill them, the Romans or militant Jews might. There was little on this earth to look forward to but much to look forward to in the new Jerusalem (3:13).

Implications of this Passage

It is easy for leaders to forget that followers have a desperate need to be encouraged. Of the 61 words in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-19), 13 of them (21%) are direct reassurances and encouragement of the followers. A Christian model of foresight must include encouragement of the believers in the future. It must not naively ignore the future, or paint a rose-colored picture amidst thorny persecution. It must encourage those about to embark into it. It is not hard to paint a future picture of dysfunction. It is hard to paint that picture and still encourage people to embark into it. John understood all of this and tailored his letter to what the Philadelphian Christians needed: encouragement.

Robbins (1996) writes that “the beginning place for ideological analysis and interpretation...is me, the writer of this sentence, and you the reader of this sentence” (p.95). A reader may read the other six letters and think, “I hope that does not describe me and my church” and then read the letter to the Philadelphian church and think “I hope that does describe me and my church.” Readers are simply unable to separate themselves ideologically from John’s letters. The criticisms and contrasting encouragement are just too personal. I hope and pray that if were possible for John to analyze my church and me that he would write that “you

have kept my word of patient endurance” (3:10) and not what he wrote to the church of Laodicea, “I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (3:16). This personal connection and desire must be included in any honest analysis of this passage.

Conclusion

A Philadelphian reading John’s letter would have seen the direct allusions to the city’s tumultuous history. However, he would have also been encouraged by God’s sovereignty and that God had given them an opportunity to fulfill His mission. This was greater than any imperial ruler would ever do. No past ruler had given this city complete peace; God promised to do that and that made all their struggles as Christians worth the effort. Hostetler (1988) notes that “even martyrs, prisoners, and persecuted believers have experienced his presence, his peace and assurance in their most severe trials and experiences” (p.175). Those persecuted for carrying out the Great Commission have felt reassured that Jesus was always at their side (consider Stephen’s story in Acts 6-7). Many Christians have never experienced the level of tragedy and persecution the Philadelphians did. Others have experienced worse. No matter what external circumstances dictate to churches, John’s letter to the Philadelphians provides inescapable hope and encouragement for all Christians to always strive to fulfill the Great Commission.

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