

# HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

NEARLY HALF A CENTURY AGO, Sir William Ramsay published a treatise on *The Letters to the Seven Churches*. Valuable suggestions from ancient writers were gathered in this book from the work of excavations in these cities of Asia Minor, and from observation of the present sites of the old cities, all throwing light on the second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation. In addition to gleanings from Ramsay's pioneer volume, we need to take into account some more recent excavations in the cities under consideration.

*Ephesus and its church.* The city of Ephesus was in ancient times a city of great changes. Ramsay refers to it as "the place that had experienced more vicissitudes than any other city of Asia." 1

He adds: "In Ephesus even Nature has changed in a surprising degree." 1

Ephesus was once a seaport but when the sea receded, a new city arose on another site. As has already been seen, Ephesus was a great center for the worship of Diana (Artemis) at the time when Paul visited there. But between those days and the time when the apostle John wrote to the churches of Asia, the worship of the Roman emperor had appeared on the scene. The criticism of the Saviour against the church at Ephesus was that like the city in its history, she had changed. Concerning this church, he said: "**I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love**" (Revelation 2:4). 2

*Smyrna and its church.* According to Ramsay, the city of Smyrna was often likened in ancient times to a crown in appearance. The "**crown of life**" is referred to in the letter to this church (Revelation 2:10). Visitors to Smyrna are shown the traditional site where Polycarp was martyred in the year A.D. 155. He died saying: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I speak evil of my King who saved me!" 3

It was predicted that *this* church should suffer tribulation but Christ's encouragement was, "**Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life**" (Revelation 2:10). Smyrna had many Jews living in it, and there was a strong anti-Christian feeling among them.

Especially did they hate Jews who were converted to Christianity. This helps to explain the statement, “**Them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan**” (Revelation 2:9). 4

*Pergamum and its church.* Excavations in this city were begun in the year 1878 by the Imperial German Institute of Archaeology. In the second century B.C. there was instituted here a school of sculpture, and the excavators have uncovered many treasures of art, but for the most part the discoveries are all pagan. The great altar of the god Zeus was found. This altar very much resembles a throne, and Ramsay believed that this was what was referred to in Revelation 2:13, “**I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is**” (A.S.V., “Satan’s throne”).

The princes of the city of Pergamum had served as kings of Asia, but fearing trouble ahead, the last king whose name was Attalus gave his kingdom to the Romans. Following this, the worship of the emperor became a prominent religion of the city. Some scholars have thought that “**Satan’s seat**” or “throne” refers to the headquarters of this emperor worship. 5

*Thyatira and its church.* This city in old times was noted for its trade guilds or labor unions. The inscriptions mention guilds of woolworkers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leatherworkers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronzesmiths. A tradesman could scarcely maintain his business without belonging to a trade union or guild. Guild meetings often concluded with banquets where there was revelry and sin. It was not easy for a Christian to stand true to Christ and live in such a city. Compromise with heathen customs and standards was represented by “**that woman Jezebel**” and her followers (Revelation 2:20). 6

*Sardis and its church.* This old city was considered to be an impregnable fortress against enemy attack, yet it was conquered by the Persians, simply because of neglect to keep proper watch over the city. The Saviour used this as an illustration, no doubt, of warning about His coming and finding them unprepared: “**If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I shall come upon thee**” (Revelation 3:3).

Excavations at Sardis began in 1910 by Professor Howard C. Butler, of Princeton. A Temple of Diana was discovered. The worship of this goddess here was much like it was at Ephesus. This temple suffered great damage in the earthquake of A.D. 17, but continued to be in use as late as the second century. At the southeast corner of the temple the remains of a little brick church building were found dating probably to the fourth century A.D. This would demonstrate that the name of the church was not entirely blotted out (cf. Revelation 3:5). 7

*Philadelphia and its church.* This city was originally founded for the “missionary” purpose of spreading Greek culture in its surrounding district. The Saviour intended its church to be a missionary church for Christianity because he wrote to her, “**I have set before thee an open door**” (Revelation 3:8).

A severe earthquake struck the city in A.D. 17. For some time the shocks kept recurring and the inhabitants spent much of their time outside the city. Perhaps reference was made to this in the words written: “**He shall go no more out**” (Revelation 3:12).

The name of the city was changed several times. Christ said to the overcomer from this church: **“I will write upon him my new name”** (Revelation 3:12). 8

*Laodicea and its church.* Like Philadelphia, the city of Laodicea was intended to be a “missionary” city to spread Greek culture, but it was situated at the crossroads, and the city was guilty of compromise for commercial reasons. It was a rich city and a banking center. The church there was **“rich and increased with goods”** (Revelation 3:17). The city was noted for its glossy black cloth. Jesus urged the church to secure **“white raiment”** (see Revelation 3:18).

A noted medical school was located in the city, and it was famous for its ear ointment and “Phrygian powder” made for the cure of weak eyes.

How appropriate then were the words to the Laodicean church: **“Anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see”** (Revelation 3:18)! 9

1. W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 210.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 210-236; Camden Cobern, *The New Archeological Discoveries and Their Bearing upon the New Testament*, pp. 461-482; George A. Barton, *Archaeology and the Bible* (ed. 1937), pp. 264-267; W. H. Boulton, *Archaeology Explains*, p. 90.
3. Cobern, *op. cit.*, p. 561.
4. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-280; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 561, 562; Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 272, 273; Boulton, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
5. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-315; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 563-564; Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 267, 268; Boulton, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 91.
6. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-353; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 564, 565; Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 268, 269; Boulton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
7. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-390; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 565-568; Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 269-271; Boulton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
8. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 391-412; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 569, 570; Barton, *op. cit.*, pp. 271, 272; Boulton, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 92.
9. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 413-430; Cobern, *op. cit.*, pp. 570, 571; Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 273; Boulton, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

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