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Laodicea in History and Prophecy

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The church at Laodicea was the last of the seven churches addressed by Jesus Christ in Revelation 2-3. As the location of the “lukewarm” church, this city holds historical, biblical, and spiritual significance. It forever stands as a reminder to Christians to be fervent in their faith.

Geographical Setting

Laodicea was strategically located in Asia Minor where two river valleys joined—the Lycus River and the Maeander River.¹ Sister cities in the Lycus River valley included Colossae and Hierapolis. Paul wrote a New Testament letter to the church at Colossae in which he refers to believers living in Hierapolis and Laodicea (Colossians 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). “Located about ninety miles east of Ephesus, it stood on a flat-topped hill six miles south of Hierapolis and ten miles west northwest of Colossae.”²

Due to its location along these river valleys, Laodicea influenced the trade routes between eastern cities and Ephesus.³ Unfortunately, Laodicea had no adequate supply of drinking water of its own and had to transport water via aqueduct from the direction of

Hierapolis’ six mile away.⁴ Hierapolis was noted for its hot springs, but the water would have become tepid by the time it reached Laodicea.

Political Background

“Laodicea was founded by the Seleucids of Syria in the third century BC . . .”⁵ Originally called Diospolis, Laodicea “was renamed by the Syrian king, Seleucus II, in honor of his wife, Laodice.”⁶ Eventually Laodicea came under Roman rule. During the first century A.D. a gate and a stadium in Laodicea were dedicated to Vespasian.⁷ “Just before Revelation was written a great gate was erected at Laodicea and dedicated to Domitian, whose name was later chiseled off.”⁸ Apparently the city leaders could exclude anyone from passing through this or other gates into the city.⁹ The city didn’t reach its peak of influence until the second century A.D. under Roman rule.¹⁰

Socio-Economic Significance

Because of its location as a commercial crossroad Laodicea became a wealthy city with a strong banking industry. “Cicero travelled that way in 51 B.C. on his way to the provincial governorship of Cilicia, and the fact that he cashed drafts in Laodicea shows that the city was already a place of financial importance and considerable wealth.”¹¹ Laodicea also developed a trade in high quality black wool from a strain of sheep bred in the region.¹² “Another source of wealth was a well-known eye remedy popularly known as ‘Phrygian powder’ which apparently was compounded at Laodicea.”¹³ This eye salve was connected with a school of medicine in Laodicea.

Significant economically is the fact that Laodicea refused financial assistance after sustaining a devastating earthquake.

In A.D. 60 a terrible earthquake, of the sort to which Asia Minor has been perennially subject, 'prostrated the city'. The phrase is that of the historian Tacitus, who wrote of it fifty years later. The Roman Senate at the time gave vast sums to devastated Asian cities in earthquake relief, but the historian records with surprise that Laodicea refused all such aid. She rose again, writes Tacitus, 'with no help from us'.¹⁴

Religious Influences

Laodicea seems to have been a city that "did not zealously stand for anything."¹⁵ It was content in its wealth and self-sufficiency. The medical school at Laodicea was located in the temple of Asklepios, the god of healing who may have had some prominence in the region.

Biblical References

Christianity made its way to the Lycus River valley and Laodicea in the second half of the first century A.D., most likely as an outgrowth of Paul's evangelistic efforts. Epaphras, a coworker of Paul from Colossae, may have been influential in establishing the churches in that region (Colossians 1:7; 4:12). Paul referred to Laodicea in Colossians 2:1 and 4:13-16.

The church at Laodicea was the subject of Jesus' final message to the seven churches of Revelation (3:14-22). There He refers to the Laodiceans as "lukewarm," much like the tepid water that came to their city from the hot springs of Hierapolis. He accused them of being spiritually impoverished in contrast to their financial wealth. Jesus challenged these Christians to buy "white" clothes to wear in contrast to the black wool industry, referring to their need for spiritual purity. He also instructed them to buy spiritual eye salve, in contrast to the eye salve industry in Laodicea. Jesus also reminded

the Laodiceans that He stands at the door and knocks, awaiting their invitation for Him to enter. The city gates around Laodicea served to keep unwanted people out of the city. Jesus offered to enter the church, but only by invitation. The historical background to the city of Laodicea helps underscore the spiritual lessons of Jesus' prophetic warnings in Revelation 3:14-22. Christians today should likewise be fervent for the Lord, not lukewarm in their faith.

¹ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p. 124.

² Vos, Howard F. *Archaeology in Bible Lands*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1977, p. 324.

³ Pfeiffer, Charles F. *Baker's Bible Atlas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973, p. 235.

⁴ Blaiklock, *Cities*, p. 124.

⁵ Harrison, p. 246.

⁶ Pfeiffer, p. 235.

⁷ Blaiklock, R. M. and Harrison, R. K., Editors. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.

⁸ Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, p. 133.

⁹ Harrison, p. 248.

¹⁰ Vos, p. 324.

¹¹ Blaiklock, *Cities*, p. 125.

¹² Johnson, Alan F. "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelein, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 456.

¹³ Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, p. 267.

¹⁴ Blaiklock, *Cities*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Johnson, p. 456.