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Philadelphia in History and Prophecy

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Jesus directed a message to the church in Philadelphia, a message of comfort and encouragement to this persecuted church (Revelation 3:7-13). Understanding the historical background to the city of Philadelphia sheds light on some of the words of Jesus' message to this church.

Geographical Setting

The city of Philadelphia in southwest Asia Minor rested on a high plateau consisting of volcanic soil. "Philadelphia was a small town, sloping down from a low, three-peaked hill to the level plain."¹ It lay along the Hermus River valley and was prone to earthquake activity.

The city seems to have been nearest to the faultline. It stands at the edge of an old volcanic district, named in ancient times 'the Burntland' . . . and proximity to this area of disturbance seems to have rendered the city for a long time subject to earth tremors of a demoralizing nature. . . . Escape to the surrounding countryside was a common experience, and many would live for long periods in tents on the safer ground.²

In spite of the risk of earthquakes, Philadelphia's location was strategic for commerce and communication.

A main highway that ran through the city connected Smyrna (about a hundred miles west) to northwest Asia, Phrygia, and the east. Furthermore, the imperial post road of the first century A.D., which came from Rome via Troas, Adramyttium, Pergamum, and Sardis, passed through this valley and Philadelphia on the way to the east. So situated, Philadelphia became a strong fortress city.³

Philadelphia, therefore, was a worthy recipient of the circulating book of Revelation.

Political Background

Philadelphia was founded in 159 B.C. by Attalus Philadelphus.

. . . its name commemorated the "brotherly love" of the brothers Eumenes II and Attalus II. When Eumenes offended the Romans, they transferred their favor to Attalus, and they would have installed him as king in his brother's place if not frustrated by his loyal refusal. Attalus won the title "Philadelphus" (loving his brother), and the city was named after him.⁴

In A.D. 17 an earthquake destroyed Philadelphia. The Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar funded the rebuilding of the city. Consequently, the city renamed itself in his honor.

Numismatics contains some evidence of a change of name in gratitude for the relief given by imperial bounty after the great earthquake of A.D. 17 (Tac. *Ann.* 2.47). The name given was Neocaesarea and appears on a few coins but did not survive. The "new name" of Rev 3:12 no doubt refers to this.⁵

The name change did not have staying power, but the city of Philadelphia attempted another change several decades later to honor

the Flavian family of Emperor Vespasian. “Philadelphia again made the attempt and called itself Flavia after the ruler’s family.”⁶ Again, this name never really replaced the original name of the city, Philadelphia.

Socio-Economic Significance

Because of its location on a major road into the heartland of Asia Minor, Philadelphia became a passageway for Greek culture to infiltrate the region. Its location also provided economic opportunity. “The Roman post-road in the first century passed through Troas, Pergamum and Sardis to Philadelphia, making that city a stage on the main line of Imperial communication.”⁷ In addition, local resources provided an economic base for Philadelphia. “To the northeast was a great vine-growing district, which, along with textile and leather industries, contributed greatly to the city’s prosperity.”⁸

Religious Influences

Philadelphia was home to both a pagan culture and a Jewish presence in the first century. As in many Roman cities, emperor worship would have been expected. In addition, the pagan population doubtless worshipped other gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon.

In the fifth century, it was nicknamed “Little Athens” because of its proliferation of festivals and pagan cults. Whether this indicates something of its early period is uncertain. Since wine was one of the city’s important industries, some have assumed that the worship of Dionysus was a chief pagan cult in it.⁹

The Jewish population would have had a significant presence in Philadelphia and became the primary source of persecution for the church in that city (Revelation 9). “Ignatius, in his letter to the same

church, speaks of the persecuting activities of the Jews of Philadelphia.”¹⁰

Biblical References

Philadelphia is mentioned only twice in the New Testament and only in the book of Revelation (1:11; 3:7). The church in that city may have had its beginning as at outgrowth of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. The reference to a key that opens and shuts (Revelation 3:7) may hint at Philadelphia’s position as a gateway into the interior of Asia Minor. The reference to a “pillar” may refer to the stability of God’s people in contrast to the instability of the earthquake prone city (Revelation 3:12). The fact that God’s people will never have to leave the city of God (Revelation 3:12) contrasts nicely with the practice of leaving Philadelphia during its many earthquakes. Jesus also promised to write God’s name on the New Jerusalem, a contrast to Philadelphia’s propensity to rename itself after Roman Emperors. History once again sheds light on the New Testament.

¹ Hemer, C. J. “Seven Cities of Asia Minor.” In *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, R. K. Harrison, Editor. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985, p. 245.

² Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p. 120.

³ Johnson, Alan F. “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 451.

⁴ Hemer, p. 245.

⁵ Blaiklock, E. M., “Philadelphian” in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. E. M. Blaiklock and R.K. Harrison, Editors. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 360.

⁶ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 121.

⁷ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 121

⁸ Johnson, p. 451.

⁹ Johnson, p. 451.

¹⁰ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 121.