

# Jot & Tittle

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## **Thyatira in History and Prophecy**

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Thyatira, the location of the fourth church addressed by Jesus in the book of Revelation, was by comparison to the others a less significant city, even though it receives the lengthiest message to the seven churches (Revelation 2:18-29). Still, the message Jesus sent to the church in this city hints at some of the activities that were a part of the culture of Thyatira with a warning against spiritual compromise.

### ***Geographical Setting***

Thyatira was located on the road passing from Pergamum to Sardis. It was situated in a valley, “lying in a vale between the Hermus and the Caicus rivers.”<sup>1</sup> Its geographic location made Thyatira a corridor of commerce in spite of its less defensible position. “The city lay on a gentle rise open to determined assault, and fitted only for the role of outpost, able to check and delay the drive of an invading army while defence in depth was organised behind.”<sup>2</sup>

### ***Political Background***

Following the conquests and death of Alexander the Great, one of his generals, Seleucus I, took control of Asia Minor. He established the city of Thyatira and colonized it with Macedonians who had served in Alexander’s army. Political instability put Thyatira in the middle of conflicts until the Romans established peace in the region. After that, Thyatira blossomed economically.

### ***Socio-Economic Significance***

Those who settled Thyatira set up a number of trade guilds which became the economic heart of the city. “More trade guilds, those ubiquitous associations of businessmen and craftsmen, have been identified in Thyatira than in any other Asian city. Inscriptions mention workers in wool, linen, leather, and bronze; plus dyers, tanners, potters, and bakers.”<sup>3</sup> Acts 16:14 mentions a woman from Thyatira named Lydia, a convert of Paul, who was involved in selling purple cloth. “The purple or crimson material in which Lydia dealt, was made from the local madder-root, a cheap and effective substitute for the expensive product of the murex shell found chiefly on the Phoenician coast.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to their commercial influence, the trade guilds in Thyatira likely controlled much of the religious culture of the city.

### ***Religious Influences***

“Religiously, the city was unimportant, though worship of Apollo and Artemis (Diana) was prominent.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, religion would have played an important role in commerce and within the trade guilds. Each guild would have had its own patron gods and goddesses and likely included a number of pagan rites and practices that would have been offensive to Christianity. “The guilds were

integrated into the structure of pagan society and involved idolatry and immorality, but it may have seemed impossible to practice a trade without belonging to a guild.”<sup>6</sup> The pressure on Christians to conform to the pagan practices of the trade guilds must have been intense.

### ***Biblical References***

During his ministry in Philippi, Paul led Lydia, a business woman from Thyatira who was involved in the purple cloth industry, to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Lydia had apparently become a proselyte to the Jewish faith, hinting that Thyatira was home to a measurable Jewish population. Lydia used her financial means to support Paul and the work of the church in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15).

The only other references to Thyatira in the New Testament are found in the book of Revelation (1:11; 2:18, 24). The church in Thyatira probably came into existence as an extension of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. “It has been suggested that some of Paul’s converts at Ephesus went out and evangelized Thyatira (Acts 19:10).”<sup>7</sup> However, by the end of the first century the church at Thyatira had absorbed some of the pagan practices associated with the city’s culture. In addressing this church, Jesus described Himself as having feet “like burnished bronze” (Revelation 2:18), possibly challenging the influence of the bronze guild in Thyatira.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus’ words of warning to the church at Thyatira included a harsh rebuke for their toleration of an influential female member of the congregation. Jesus referred to her as “Jezebel,” a name that reminded His listeners of the pagan queen of Israel who practiced Baal worship and resisted the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 21:17-26). The “Jezebel” in Thyatira apparently led many of the members of that church into sexual immorality and spiritual compromise. Very possibly she taught that involvement in the pagan practices associated with Thyatira’s trade guilds were acceptable for

Christians. “The trade guilds must have been an anxious problem to the Christian craftsman. He hardly could have attended the formal meetings and banquets without witnessing licentiousness and implicitly condoning pagan rites.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus warned that He would punish “Jezebel” and her “children,” probably a reference to her followers in the church. Jesus did, however, encourage the faithful Christians in Thyatira to hold on to their faith even in the face of opposition both inside and outside the church. The lesson of the church at Thyatira is one of resisting creeping compromise in the church. Jesus’ followers must refrain from immoral practices and stand firm for righteousness, even when such a stand puts us at social and economic risk. We must hold firm to our faith in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p 107.

<sup>2</sup> Blaiklock, p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Alan F. “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 443.

<sup>6</sup> 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. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, p. 443.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, p. 444.

<sup>9</sup> Blaiklock, R. M. and Harrison, R. K., Editors. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 450.