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Smyrna in History and Prophecy

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Mentioned only in the book of Revelation, the city of Smyrna possessed economic influence and wielded political clout in the region of western Turkey in the first century. The church in Smyrna gained a reputation for resisting persecution. Jesus addressed this church as one of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, offering encouragement to the believers in that city without expressing any words of rebuke. The Christians in Smyrna were upright and faithful.

Geographical Setting

The ancient city of Smyrna, known today as Izmir, was located about forty miles north of Ephesus. Its extensive harbor made it an important seaport along the coast of the Aegean Sea. Smyrna was located at the mouth of the Hermus River, and this river valley provided trade routes into the interior regions of Asia Minor. The city of Smyrna was built along the harbor and stretched up along the hills surrounding the harbor. “It was a handsome city, and the buildings climbed the hill-slopes and topped its summit like a splendid crown.”¹ Even ancient writers referred to Smyrna’s natural

setting as appearing like a “crown.” In the second century Aelius Aristides described Smyrna as “the crown of Ariadne, shining in the heavens.”² Even earlier, during the lifetime of the apostle John who penned the book of Revelation, Appollonius of Tyana made mention of Smyrna’s reputation as a crown city.³

Political Background

Smyrna has an ancient history, with evidence of settlement over two thousand years before Christ. Greek colonization was present by 1,000 B.C., and Smyrna eventually reached economic and political prominence.⁴ But around 600 B.C. King Alyattes of Lydia captured and destroyed Smyrna. “In his determination to prevent the resurgence of this troublesome city Alyattes, according to the geographer Strabo, destroyed its civic identity by dispersing its surviving inhabitants to live in small villages.”⁵

After Alexander the Great’s conquest of his vast empire one of his generals, Lysimachus, rebuilt Smyrna in 290 B.C.⁶ Smyrna had once been dead but was alive once again. As Rome’s influence grew in the Mediterranean world Smyrna early on expressed allegiance to this new political power. In A.D. 26 the city of Smyrna cited this early commitment to Rome as a basis for building a temple in honor of the deified Tiberius Caesar. Of the eleven cities that requested to do so, Smyrna was granted this privilege.⁷ As a result, emperor worship became a strong feature of life in Smyrna, and to resist honoring the Roman emperor brought on persecution.

Socio-Economic Significance

Smyrna is known as the birthplace of the iconic Greek poet, Homer. It also had a reputation for education and schools of medicine.⁸ Economically, Smyrna prospered largely because of its location as a seaport with access to the interior of Asia Minor. Trade

flourished in Smyrna. “It was a major city in John’s day with over a hundred thousand citizens.”⁹ It “ranked with Ephesus and Pergamum as ‘First of Asia.’”¹⁰

Religious Influences

Like other ancient Greek cities, Smyrna boasted temples to various gods and goddesses. “Among the beautiful paved streets traversing it from east to west was the ‘Golden Street,’ with the temples to Cybele and Zeus at either end and along which were temples to Apollo, Asclepius, and Aphrodite.”¹¹ Significant in the first century A.D. was the rise of emperor worship. Smyrna’s temple to Emperor Tiberius catapulted the city to prominence in this form of worship. “Under Domitian (A.D. 81-96) emperor worship became compulsory for every Roman citizen on threat of death. Once a year a citizen had to burn incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar, after which he was issued a certificate.”¹² Martyrdom for Christians became a reality in Smyrna. The Roman authorities demanded that a man named Polycarp, who would have been a young man at the time John wrote Revelation, reject Jesus Christ. Polycarp refused, saying, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?”¹³ Polycarp was then burned at the stake for his faith. For Christians, Smyrna was certainly a city of suffering and persecution.

Biblical References

Only the book of Revelation mentions the city of Smyrna (Revelation 1:11; 2:8). It’s proximity to Ephesus makes it likely that Paul’s influence in the region was largely responsible for the beginnings of a Christian church in Smyrna (compare Acts 19:8-10). This church remained strong in its commitment to Christ, as evidenced in the fact that Jesus presented no rebuke in His message to Smyrna in Revelation 2:8-11. In that message Jesus does refer to

Himself as the One who “died and came to life again” (verse 8). The city of Smyrna had once been destroyed and reestablished, so the Christians in Smyrna would have caught this connection. Jesus also warned the Christians in Smyrna about further suffering (verse 10), which was a reality due to the prominence of emperor worship in that city. But Jesus also promised His people a “crown.” Smyrna sat like a crown on the hilltops surrounding the harbor. But Christians would receive a “crown of life” for their faithful endurance (verse 10). Smyrna’s example teaches Christians today to stay strong in their faith, never wavering in their commitment to Christ.

¹ Blaiklock, E. M. *Cities of the New Testament*. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1965, p. 101.

² Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 101.

³ Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 101.

⁴ Blaiklock, R. M. and Harrison, R. K., Editors. *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, p. 418.

⁵ Hemer, C. J. “Seven Cities of Asia Minor.” In *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, R. K. Harrison, Editor. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985, pp. 239-240.

⁶ Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 99.

⁷ Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 100.

⁸ Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962, p. 281.

⁹ Blaiklock, E. M. *The Archaeology of the New Testament*. New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984, p. 125.

¹⁰ Johnson, Alan F. “Revelation,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 436.

¹¹ Johnson, p. 437.

¹² Johnson, p. 437.

¹³ Blaiklock, *Cities of the New Testament*, p. 101.