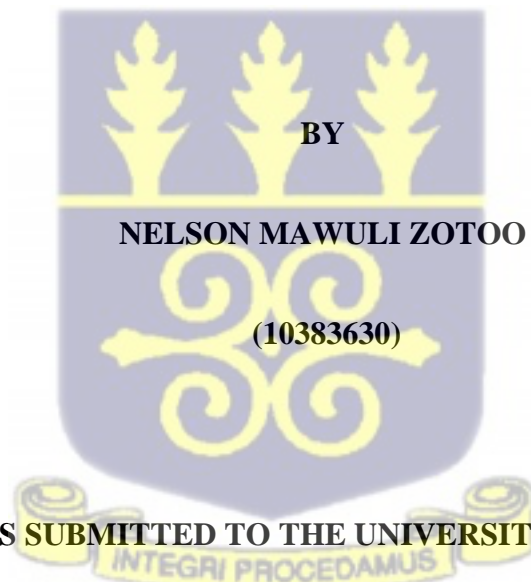


UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

**‘BEING *EKKLĒSIA*’ ACCORDING TO REVELATION 2:1–3:22:
AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**



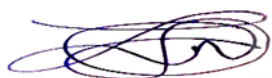
**THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF
MPHIL FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS DEGREE**

DEPARTMENT FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

JULY 2023

DECLARATION

This is to certify that this thesis is the result of research undertaken by Nelson Mawuli Zotoo under the supervision of Prof. Nicoletta Gatti and Rev. Dr. Alexander Salakpi towards the award of M. Phil Degree in the Study of Religions in the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana (Legon).



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ABSTRACT

The Greek word ἐκκλησία (congregation, assembly, gathering, ‘church’) designates the community of the followers of Jesus, the extension of his humanity, the *locus* where it is possible to experience his presence (cf. Matt. 18:20). Christian communities in Ghana have experienced an exponential growth, but they are besieged with two main challenges namely, diversity and fragmentation, and apparent low impact on the Ghanaian society. Their diversity and fragmentation raised a hermeneutic challenge because all appeal to the New Testament to define their identity and mission. Furthermore, their apparent low impact on the morality of Ghanaian society questions their authenticity and relevance.

Against this backdrop, the research examined the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία through an exegetical and theological analysis of Rev. 2—3. Holladay’s Theological Conversation Model was the theoretical framework that guided the study. The literary unit was analysed using Rhetorical Criticism, following Kennedy’s Rhetorical Criticism model, to discover how the literary unit portrays the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία, the rhetorical devices the author used to describe the features of the seven communities, and the perlocutionary effect of the text on its original readers.

The research revealed that Rev. 2—3 portrayed the church as a spiritual entity created by God’s love (cf. 1:5; cf. Eph. 5:25) and designed to love God as well as love their fellow humans. She participates in the ‘world to come,’ lives in the horizon of the kingdom of God, and should embody its values, principles, and objectives. The ἐκκλησία as a ‘human’ entity is on a journey of continuous conversion (*semper reformanda*), to testify and imitate

the Risen Lord, who is the faithful witness (cf. 1:5) and the Lamb who was slain (5:6). Conforming to her Lord, the church will be also persecuted.

To impact his readers, the author employed several rhetorical devices such as: recipient formula, *graphon* imperative, *tade legei* formula, descriptive phrases about Jesus Christ, knowledge formula, indictment formula, exhortative formula, proclamation formula, promise of victory formula.

The perlocutionary effect of the literary unit on the original readers was to offer comfort, and encouragement in time of crisis; to exhort them to persevere during persecution (cf. 2:10; 3:10-12). It urges them to pursue brotherly love, as a defining characteristic of the community of Jesus (cf. 2:5) and resist false teaching (cf. 2:2-3, 14-16, 20-23). It enjoins the churches to live a Christ-centered life and spirituality (cf. 2:20).

The study recommends further research to contextualize the findings of this research in specific Christian communities in Ghana; furthermore, there is the need to study the theme of the identity and mission in the entire book of Revelation. Finally, the Christian communities in Ghana should commit to effective Bible training of their leaders and membership, to refocus their identity and mission on what is essential, discipleship of Jesus (Matt. 28:18-20), instead of popularized doctrines that are not biblically founded.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father, Mr. Vincent Yao Zotoo and my mother, Mrs. Philothea Mansa Soglo, both of blessed memory for giving birth to me and taking care of me. I am eternally grateful to the two of you and may God continue to give you peaceful rest in His bosom.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the grace of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 8-9). As a result, I am extremely thankful to the Lord Jesus for enabling me by his grace and strength to start and complete this work. All the glory and praise to his name alone! I would also like to acknowledge some key people who have offered support, guidance and help at various stages of the thesis.

My sincere gratitude and appreciation to my supervisors, Prof. Nicoletta Gatti and Rev. Dr. Alexander Salakpi, for their motherly and fatherly concern, and mentoring, along with their professionalism and guidance for the study. This work would not have been possible without your comments, corrections, guidance, and suggestions. I am also grateful to Rev. Prof. George Ossom-Batsa and Rev. Dr. Godfred Nsiah for their contribution to this research and my academic journey.

My heartfelt thanks to the entire faculty and the administrative staff of the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana (Legon), for their varied contributions and help. I also thank my colleagues for their encouragement, support, and companionship throughout the period of the program.

Finally, I want to thank my best friend, Abigail Esinam Adade, for being with me throughout the time of this programme. Your encouragement, reminders, and prayers have brought me this far. God bless you richly for me.

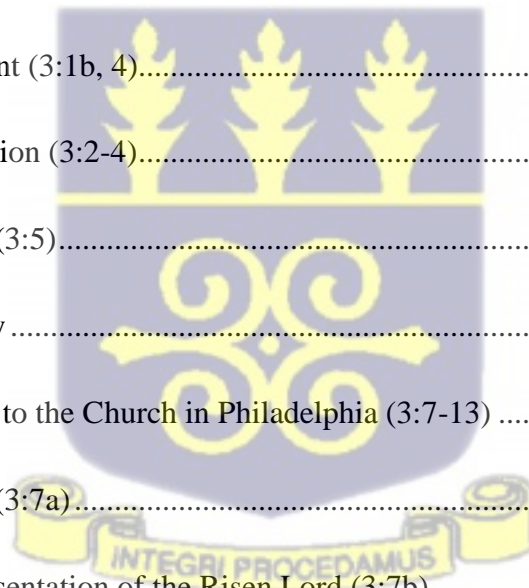
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

1.1 Background to the Study

The Greek term ἐκκλησία (congregation, assembly, gathering, ‘church’) occurs 114 times in the New Testament. It is derived from the compound verb ἐκκαλέω (to call out) and hence generally used to indicate a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly, etc.¹ However, in the New Testament, it is used to designate the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ,² the extension of his humanity, the *locus* where it is possible to experience his presence (cf. Matt. 18:20).³ For this reason, Grudem defines the ἐκκλησία as a group of believers at all levels, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home to the community of all true believers in the world.⁴ As the community of Jesus, she regards the Scripture, the Old Testament and the New Testament, as the standard of doctrine and practice.

Following the mandate of the Risen Lord (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8), the disciples of Jesus preached the gospel and found communities, which have spread to all the continents of the world today. Currently, Africa is one of the continents where these ‘churches’ are growing rapidly.⁵ In Ghana, for example, the 2021 Population and Housing

¹ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1975), 1: 291.

² Ralph J. Korner, *The Origin and Meaning of Ekklesia in the Early Jesus Movement* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1.

³ Nicoletta Gatti, *...perché il «piccolo» diventi «fratello». La pedagogia del dialogo nel cap. 18 di Matteo* (TG.T 146; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2007), 189-191.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 857.

⁵ Douglas Jacobsen, *The World's Christians: Who They Are, Where They Are, and How They Got There* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 174.

Census reveals that 71.3% of Ghanaians are Christians, belonging to specific denominations.⁶ Also, the total number of churches registered by the Registrar General's Department is sixteen thousand seven hundred and nineteen (16,719).⁷ It is evident from the information stated above that Ghana is repleted with many entities that are designated as churches and perceive themselves as communities of Jesus.

The Ghanaian congregations, like any other entity, are besieged with many challenges. However, two of these problems are pressing; they include the diversity and fragmentation of the communities and their apparent low impact on the Ghanaian society.

The diversity of the churches in Ghana is obvious in the striking differences in their orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Christian denominations differ in their history, the number and the definition of their sacraments, their days of worship, their organizational structures, and their perspective on morality. They have different approaches to biblical interpretation and, therefore, hold unique views on doctrines like baptism, salvation, eschatology, etc. Furthermore, they place different emphasis on apocalypticism, prophetism, Pentecostalism and prosperity preaching. Two specific examples of doctrinal diversity concerning the important issues of 'salvation' and 'baptism' are discussed below.

The doctrine of salvation is one conflicting doctrinal area within the Ghanaian churches. On the one hand, some churches hold a universal view of salvation; they believe that the whole world will be saved⁸ because Jesus reconciled the whole world to God through the

⁶ Ghana Statistical Service, "Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census: General Report 3C," November 2021; <https://www.statsghana.gov.gh/> (Accessed 5th February 2022).

⁷ Miss Evelyn Koko, The Principal Company Inspector at the Registrar Generals Department, provided the information to the researcher, Thursday, 3rd February 2022.

⁸ John R. Sachs, "Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 4.

cross (cf. Col. 1:20). Christ Cosmopolitan Incorporated (CCI) is one of such churches. On the other hand, there are churches who hold an exclusive view of salvation. Christian exclusivism means that salvation from sin and eternal damnation is only possible for Christians, and therefore those outside Christianity are excluded from salvation.⁹ Thus, these churches maintain that the only way to be saved is through trust in Jesus and his death on the cross (cf. John 14:6). In addition, non-members of their specific denominations are often perceived as ‘unbelievers,’ depraved, lost, and headed for destruction.¹⁰ The Lighthouse Church, Legon Interdenominational Church, and Action Chapel International are examples of churches who hold this view. Finally, there are churches who hold an inclusive view of salvation. This perspective maintains that salvation is possible outside the church even though it is mainly experienced through faith in Christ Jesus.¹¹ Accordingly, people in other religions can be saved if they live by the standards of Jesus (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). A proponent of this position is the Roman Catholic Church.¹²

Another doctrine on which these communities differ significantly is baptism. Some of the churches practise the baptism of infants. They believe that baptism is a means to bestow saving grace on people¹³ and it is necessary for salvation; therefore, it should be available to all.¹⁴ They believe that baptism, like the other sacraments, works apart from the faith of the participants and incorporates the person into “the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic

⁹ Woodbridge O. Johnson, “Non-Christian Salvation,” *Journal of Bible and Religion* 31, no. 3 (July 1963): 216; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1460115>.

¹⁰ Jacobsen, *The World's Christians*, 57.

¹¹ Johnson, “Non-Christian Salvation,” 217.

¹² John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1992), 847-848; Vatican Council II, “*Ad gentes*; Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” in *Vatican Concil II*, ed. A. Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1992), no. 7; Cf. the concept of ‘Anonymous Christian’; Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons (eds.) *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982* (Trans. by Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 207.

¹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 971.

¹⁴ Grudem, *System Theology*, 971.

Church.”¹⁵ Churches that hold this view include the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church.

However, some hold a different view. They argue that the baptism of infants is not supported by Scripture and contend that faith in Jesus Christ is a precondition for baptism. For this reason, they construe water baptism as a public testimony of one’s prior faith in Jesus Christ,¹⁶ and insist that candidates for ‘water baptism’ must have already experienced spiritual regeneration. Accordingly, children who are not matured enough to believe, cannot be baptized. They do not consider water baptism as a sacrament, and therefore refer to it as ‘ordinance.’¹⁷ These Christian communities include Legon Interdenominational Church, The Great Commission Church, Action Chapel International, Charismatic Evangelistic Ministry, Royal House Chapel, and Perez Chapel.

This grave diversity among the Christian communities coupled with their fragmentation (16,719) breeds the problem of classification. Tsekpoe argues:

that the problem of classification associated with Christian communities in Ghana stems from the fact that the Pentecostal-Charismatic scene has been changing constantly from its inception to the extent that many of the headings used to describe the phenomenon at a particular time become inapplicable due to the emergence of new Pentecostal waves.¹⁸

In addition, the emergence of Charismatic Renewal in some of the mainline churches makes it difficult to determine the specific category they belong. Because of this, it is

¹⁵ Grudem, *System Theology*, 971.

¹⁶ Koo Dong Yun, “Water Baptism and Spirit Baptism: Pentecostals and Lutherans in Dialogue,” *Dialog* 43, no. 4 (2004): 346; <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0012-2033.2004.00226>.

¹⁷ Yun, “Water Baptism,” 346.

¹⁸ Christian Tsekpoe, “Navigating the Shades and Nexus of Ghanaian Pentecostalism(s): A Search for an Appropriate Metaphor,” *Ghana Journal of Religion and Theology* 10, no. 1 (2020): 12.

difficult to categorize these communities as the different classifications proposed by scholars testify.

Omenyo and Atiemo propose a historical typology: Mainline Churches, African Independent Churches, Classical Pentecostal Churches, Neo-Pentecostal Churches/Charismatic Churches, Prophetic Churches.¹⁹

Larbi holds a different view and classifies them into six groups, namely African Independent Churches (Spiritual Churches), Classical Pentecostal Churches, Para-Church Movements, Charismatic Movements in the mainline Churches, Neo-Pentecostal Movements and Pentecostalist Prayer Camps or Prophet Healing Prayer Camps.²⁰

Furthermore, Asamoah-Gyadu's classification differs from that of Omenyo and Larbi. He classifies them into three categories: Spiritual Churches, Western Mission Related Pentecostal Denominations and Neo-Pentecostal Movement or Charismatic Churches.²¹

The diversity and fragmentation of the churches, with its resultant problem of classification, brings into sharp focus the issue of the precise identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία. Since all these churches claim to be followers of the Jesus, why are they so diverse and fragmented? Do all these churches in Ghana mirror the identity and mission of the biblical ἐκκλησία? If not, which of these churches embody the true identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία according to the Bible?

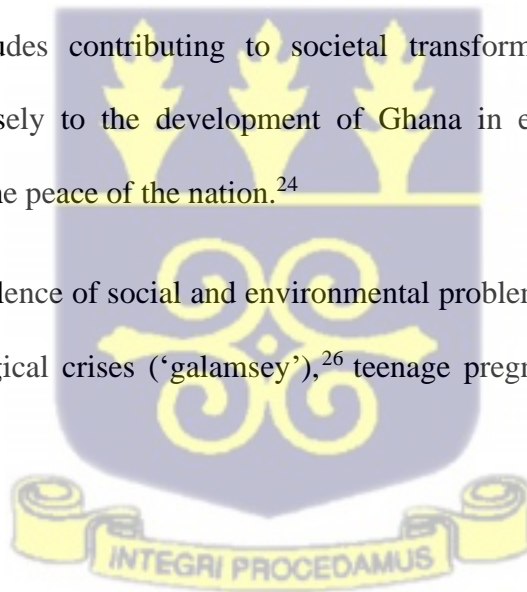
¹⁹ Cephas N. Omenyo and Abamfo O. Atiemo, "Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Propheticism in Ghana," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* 1 (2006): 55-68.

²⁰ Emmanuel K. Larbi, *Pentecostalism: The Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity* (Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies, 2001), 66-87.

²¹ J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 18-29.

Besides, Ghanaian Christian communities are not only confronted with the problem of diversity and fragmentation but also the challenge of its apparent low impact on the society. It is important to note that the impact of a Christian community on society depends to a very large extent on her perspective on salvation. Churches that perceive salvation solely in terms of ‘saving the soul’ do not deem the transformation of society important.²² For this reason, they argue the church’s mission in the world is primarily eschatological. On the other hand, there are churches that consider salvation in terms of the transformation of each person and the whole person, as well as their society.²³ As a consequence, they believe their mission includes contributing to societal transformation and have, therefore, contributed immensely to the development of Ghana in education, healthcare, moral development, and the peace of the nation.²⁴

However, the prevalence of social and environmental problems in Ghana like bribery and corruption,²⁵ ecological crises (‘galamsey’),²⁶ teenage pregnancy,²⁷ and apathy towards



²² Ben-Willie Kwaku Golo, “Redeemed from the Earth? Environmental Change and Salvation Theology in African Christianity,” *Scriptura* 111, no. 3 (2012): 350.

²³ Golo, “Redeemed from the Earth?,” 350; Emmanuel K.E. Antwi, “Development of the ‘Whole’ Person and ‘for Every’ Person? *Populorum Progressio* and Development in Ghana,” in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, ed. G. Ossom-Batsa, N. Gatti and R. D. Ammah (Collana Grandi Opere; Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 193-210.

²⁴ John Kwaku Opoku, Eric Manu, and Frimpong Wiafe, “Religion, Development and Development in Ghana: A Historical Perspective,” *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, no. 12 (December 2015): 6.

²⁵ A. Q. Q. Aboagye, “Corruption in Ghana: Evidence, Analysis of Corporate Procedures and Suggestions to Minimize its Incidence,” *Review of Human Factor Studies Special Edition* 11, no. 1 (June 2005): 35.

²⁶ Kwame Ameyaw Domfeh, Albert Ahenkan and Justice Nyigmah Bawole, “Is Sustainable Development Achievable in Ghana? An Analysis of Ghana’s Development Policy Achievements and Challenges,” *Int. J. Environment and Sustainable Development* 11, no. 3 (2012): 306.

²⁷ B. O. Ahinkorah, J. E. Hagan Jr., A-A Seidu, T. Hormenu, J. E. Otoo, E. Budu, and T. Schack, “Linking Female Adolescents’ Knowledge, Attitudes and Use of Contraceptives to Adolescent Pregnancy in Ghana: A Baseline Data for Developing Sexuality Education Programmes,” *Healthcare* 9, no. 272 (2021): 2; <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9030272>.

work²⁸ give the impression that there is a gap between the massive penetration of Christianity in Ghana and its impact on the Ghanaian society. This apparent gap makes the study of the identity and mission of the congregations in Ghana important since the influence of the church on the world depends on a proper understanding of her identity and mission.²⁹

The challenges of diversity and fragmentation as well as the issue of the impact of the churches in Ghana make it crucial to revisit the Bible, because all churches appeal to various sections of the New Testament — which include the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline Epistles, the Letter to the Hebrews, the General or Catholic Epistles, and the Apocalypse of John — to find out how these texts project their identity and mission.³⁰ Among many possible texts, the research focuses on the Apocalypse of John.

This choice was based on the plethora of literary evidence found in the book. Among the 114 occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament, 20 is found in the Apocalypse of John, which is the third highest compared to 22 in 1 Corinthians and 23 in Acts.³¹ Inside the book of Revelation, it is worth noting that Rev. 2—3 is the only literary unit in the New Testament where the term occurs 15 times. The frequency of the term in the Apocalypse of John is noteworthy because repetition connotes emphasis.

²⁸Anthony Sumnaya Kumasey, Justice Nyigmah Bawole, and Farhad Hossain, “Organizational Commitment of Public Service Employees in Ghana: Do Codes of Ethics Matter?,” *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 83, no. 1 (2017): 60.

²⁹Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Church’s Religious Identity and its Social and Political Mission,” *Theological Studies* 43, no. 2 (1982): 197.

³⁰Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 48-49.

³¹The frequency of the term in the rest of the New Testament books: Matthew-3x, Romans-5x, 2 Corinthians-9x, Galatians-3x, Ephesians-9x, Philippians-2x, Colossians-4x, 1 Thessalonians-2x, 2 Thessalonians-2x, 1 Timothy-3x, Philemon-1x, Hebrews-2x, James-1x, 3 John-3x.

However, what contradistinguishes the book of Revelation is not only the high occurrence of the term but its strategic position. Not only did the book begin and end with reference to seven ‘churches’ in Asia who are its recipients (cf. 1:4; 22:16), but also it contains seven ‘letters’ (2—3) addressed to seven communities explicitly called ‘churches,’ to deal with concrete challenges arising from their historical context.³²

The frequency of the term ἐκκλησία in the Apocalypse of John, the use of the term as an inclusion, and the fact that the book was addressed to seven communities *explicitly* called ἐκκλησία make it suitable for studying the identity and mission of the church.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Against this backdrop, the study examined the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία through an exegetical and theological analysis of Rev. 2—3. The aim is to ascertain the features of the first communities of Jesus which serve as a benchmark for contemporary congregations in Ghana, considering their fragmentation, and conflicting orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

1.3 Research Questions

The thesis was guided by a main research question and two secondary questions.

The main question is:

How does Rev. 2—3 present the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία?

The two subsidiary questions are:

³² Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 556.

- a) Which rhetorical devices did the writer use to describe the characteristics of the ἐκκλησία?
- b) What was the perlocutionary effect of Rev. 2—3 on the original readers?

1.4 Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two main sections. The first part focuses on the composition, literary genre, and function of Rev. 2—3 while the second part concentrates on the method employed in the analysis of the text, which is rhetorical criticism.

1.4.1 Composition of Revelation 2—3

The composition of Rev. 2—3 is one of the subjects that has attracted scholarly debates. Spitta argues that the literary unit is organized into seven distinct letters that were originally crafted and later added to the body of Revelation to its destination.³³ Charles agrees with Spitta and adds that Rev. 2—3 represents separate letters that likely circulated near the end of Vespasian's reign and were later edited into the book of Revelation.³⁴ He argues that the letters were significantly edited to align their themes and motifs with Rev. 4—22 by a redactor.

Ramsay concurs partially with Spitta and Charles. He admits that the letters existed separately from the rest of the book of Revelation. Nevertheless, he contends that the

³³ Robert L. Muse, "Revelation 2—3: A Critical Analysis of the Seven Prophetic Messages," *JETS* 29, no. 2 (June 1986): 147.

³⁴ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 37-47.

messages in Rev. 2—3 were written together³⁵ in the form of epistles that may have been influenced by the Pauline corpus.³⁶

These redaction arguments, nonetheless, have been rejected by modern commentators. Muse disparages the redaction proposition by noting that key ancient letter elements like personal salutation and closing are clearly missing in the form contained in Rev. 2—3.³⁷ For this reason, they are not letters and therefore they never existed separately prior to the writing of the book of Revelation. He adds that the proponents of the redaction argument have failed to provide evidence for the existence of any such collection of letters. Consequently, he concludes that it is very unlikely that Rev. 2—3 ever existed as a separate literary unit.³⁸

Beasley-Murray subscribes to Muse's hypothesis and explains that the hypothetical pre-edited letter forms would have been too short to be sent to the communities in case they ever existed separately.³⁹ Hemer shares the views of Muse and Beasley-Murray, and maintains that the general trend of the historical-critical study of the literary unit is opposed to the assertion that the seven messages were produced separately from the rest of the book.⁴⁰

The researcher aligns with scholars like Muse, Beasley-Murray, and Hemer who hold that Rev. 2—3 has always been part of the book of Revelation because of the thematic unity between literary unit under study and the rest of the Apocalypse (4—22).⁴¹

³⁵ W. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Minneapolis: James Family, 1978), 38-39.

³⁶ Ramsay, *The Letters*, 38-39.

³⁷ Muse, "Revelation 2—3," 148.

³⁸ Muse, "Revelation 2—3," 149.

³⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Oliphants, 1974), 70-72.

⁴⁰ C. H. Hemer, *A Study of the Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia with Special Reference to their Local Background* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1969), 16-17.

⁴¹ Hemer, *A Study of the Letters*, 16.

1.4.2 Literary Genre of Revelation 2—3

Like the composition, various scholars have different views on the literary genre of Rev. 2—3. The seven short messages have generally been referred to by scholars as ‘letters.’⁴² This opinion was shared by several scholars because of the literary evidence e.g., the instruction to ‘write’ to the churches, the content of the writings, etc.⁴³ For example, Ramsay maintains that Rev. 2—3 contains literary epistles that mirror the traditional Christian epistolary genre.⁴⁴ Accordingly, he argues that they were influenced by the Pauline epistles.⁴⁵

However, this viewpoint was not accepted by some scholars. Hadon contends that the letters in Rev. 2—3 are hymns written in seven-strophes⁴⁶ and adds that they had a strong prophetic tone, like Amos 1—2. While many scholars including Lohmeyer, Kraft, Ford, Fiorenza, Swete, and Muse rejected this hypothesis, Hadon’s prophetic perspective on the literary unit was accepted and developed by Swete, Ford and Muse.

Swete argues that the syntagm *τάδε λέγει* (“thus says;” 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) eliminates the notion that the messages in Rev. 2—3 are basically letters and replaces it with the idea that the two chapters are pronouncements or judgements on the churches.⁴⁷ As a result, they are like the prophetic oracle of judgment in the Old Testament.

⁴² Muse, “Revelation 2—3,” 147.

⁴³ Muse, “Revelation 2—3,” 147.

⁴⁴ Ramsay, “The Letters,” 38-39.

⁴⁵ Ramsay, “The Letters,” 38-39.

⁴⁶ Muse, “Revelation 2—3,” 151.

⁴⁷ H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: MacMillan, 1911), 24.

Ford concurs with Hadon and Swete but adds a new dimension to the prophetic nature of the textual unit. He classified them as ‘literary prophecy.’⁴⁸ Therefore, he indicates that the two chapters are not real letters, but prophetic messages symbolized by the number seven, and directed to the church in Asia Minor in the first Christian century.⁴⁹ Muse supports the prophetic view of the messages in Rev. 2—3. Nevertheless, he classified the seven messages into two main categories namely, warning of judgement messages and promise of salvation messages.⁵⁰

Aune holds a unique perspective on the form of the messages in Rev. 2—3. He contends that the seven messages constitute a mixed genre that was created by the author.⁵¹ As such they belong to the literary genre called the royal or imperial edict while their mode is that of the prophetic form of speech called the parenetic salvation-judgement oracle.⁵²

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the messages found in Rev. 2—3 do not belong to a single literary genre. They possess characteristics of both the epistolary tradition, the prophetic tradition, and royal decrees.

1.4.3 Function of Revelation 2—3

Another aspect of Rev. 2—3 that scholars disagree on is the function the literary unit plays in the Apocalypse.

Popkes contends that the seven messages of Rev. 2—3 are John’s hermeneutical preparation and instruction for the Christian communities in Asia Minor regarding the

⁴⁸ J. Massygbede Ford, *Revelation* (New York: Doubleday), 373.

⁴⁹ Ford, *Revelation*, 373.

⁵⁰ Muse, “Revelation 2—3,” 155.

⁵¹ D. E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches” *New Testament Studies* 36, no. 2 (1990): 182-204.

⁵² Aune, “The Form and Function,” 182.

‘future’ apocalypse found in Rev. 4—22.⁵³ He points out that the exhortation to listen to the messages is anchored in the apocalyptic and wisdom tradition of the Old Testament and links Rev. 2—3 to the synoptic parable tradition.⁵⁴ Based on this assertion, he concludes that the text has an apocalyptic function. This view was, nonetheless, challenged by several scholars because it fails to take into consideration the prophetic character of the seven messages.

Ford insists that the literary unit is prophetic in nature.⁵⁵ As a result, its primary function is prophetic exhortation and critical evaluation.⁵⁶ Fee and Stuart concur with Ford and maintain that the combined tone of criticism, comfort and consolation, aimed at the churches themselves, seem to tie the messages more closely to prophetic or pastoral functions than apocalyptic or wisdom or parable traditions.⁵⁷ As such, the messages function as prophetic exhortations to the churches.

Dodd agrees with the proponents of the prophetic function of the messages. He notes that the emphatic demand for repentance and or faithfulness sets the messages closer to the judgment tradition of the prophets.⁵⁸ For this reason, even if the exhortation to listen sets the messages in the wisdom-parable tradition, it should be seen as a subordinate role in the messages, which serves a more fundamental prophetic motif.

⁵³ Muse, “*Revelation 2—3*,” 160.

⁵⁴ Muse, “*Revelation 2—3*,” 160.

⁵⁵ Ford, *Revelation*, 375.

⁵⁶ Ford, *Revelation*, 375.

⁵⁷ G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 208.

⁵⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961).

However, Decker argues that the numerous allusions to various portions of the Old Testament in the messages found in Rev. 2—3 underscore their covenantal nature, which aims at encouraging the churches to remain faithful to Jesus, their covenant King.⁵⁹ As a result, John emphasizes the covenant status of the churches with God to inspire them to be loyal to Jesus. He concludes that the messages in Rev. 2—3 have a pastoral motif.⁶⁰

The review of literature above informed the researcher that the messages in Rev. 2—3 have two main functions in the book of Revelation. First, the literary unit functions as the hermeneutical preparation for God's later revelation in Rev. 4—22. Secondly, the specific messages in the text understudy function as exhortations to these communities to remain faithful to Jesus through warning of judgment and promise of salvation, contingent on the peculiarities of each local church situation. This function aided the researcher in determining the method employed in analysing the text, which is rhetorical criticism since it focusses on the persuasive elements of a text as the next section explores.

1.4.4 Method: Rhetorical Criticism

The study used rhetorical criticism to analyse the rhetorical features and the structural elements of the literary unit to reach an informed understanding of the text.

The origin of rhetoric can be traced to Aristotle. Rhetoric was an efficacious means of persuasive communication among the Greeks.⁶¹ Subsequently, it was deemed inferior to

⁵⁹ Timothy L. Decker, "Faithfulness to Christ as Covenant Fidelity: The Pastoral Purpose behind the Old Testament Allusions in the Seven Messages of Revelation 2—3," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 1.

⁶⁰ Decker, "Faithfulness to Christ," 1.

⁶¹ Patricia K. Tull, "Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality," in *To Each its Own Meaning: Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, ed. Stephen R. Haynes and Steven L. McKenzie (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1999), 156.

scientific language because it was understood as describing the subjective stylistic qualities of language.⁶² Kennedy argues that Aristotle's rhetoric describes human communication which is a common phenomenon although he uses peculiar examples from Greek city-state.⁶³ For this reason, it is applicable to the study of speech or text in other parts of the world which have cultures that are diverse from Greek culture.⁶⁴ Cathcart defines it as "the conscious use of language and other symbols by a communicator to impact or convince recipients to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires in challenging situations."⁶⁵ In the same vein, Kennedy explains rhetoric as the mark of a discourse that helps the speaker or writer to accomplish his purposes.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Russell defines it as the ability to know how to convince on a topic or an issue.⁶⁷

Kennedy identified three types of rhetoric based on the works of Aristotle which encompass judicial rhetoric, deliberative rhetoric, and epideictic rhetoric.⁶⁸ Judicial rhetoric is used when an author or speaker seeks to persuade an audience to make a judgment about events occurring in the past.⁶⁹ It is usually employed in defence and apologetic speeches. Deliberative rhetoric is used when a writer or speaker seeks to persuade his audience or readers to take some action in the future.⁷⁰ It is employed in exhorting people to a particular course of action that is of interest to the author. Epideictic

⁶² Tull, "Rhetorical Criticism and Intertextuality," 157.

⁶³ George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 10.

⁶⁴ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 10.

⁶⁵ Robert Cathcart, *Post-Communication: Rhetorical Analysis and Evaluation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1981), 2.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁶⁷ Godfred Nsiah, "Living in an Eschatological Anticipation: An Exegetical Study of 1 Thess. 4:1-5:11" (PhD Thesis, University of Ghana, 2018), 20, <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/handle/123456789/28967>

⁶⁸ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

⁷⁰ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

rhetoric is used when the speaker or writer seeks to persuade the audience to hold or reaffirm some point of view in the present by celebrating or denouncing some person or some quality.⁷¹ Epideictic rhetoric focusses on a change of attitude or deepening of values that are good and honourable. In the Bible, it focusses on belief or faith. These species are applicable to all discourse albeit they specifically refer to the circumstances of classical civic oratory.

Rhetorical analysis has been defined by Cathcart as “a qualitative research method that is configured for systematically investigating and exploring symbolic acts and artefacts with the aim of understanding the rhetorical processes that make a message effective.”⁷² Kennedy also insist that Rhetorical criticism involves the examination of the final form of a text with reference to the author’s goal and how the audience of his time would understand it.⁷³ He maintains that although the method can be engaged for varied reasons its main goal is to understand the effect of texts on the readers.⁷⁴ Tate, who concurs with Kennedy, explain it as a form of literary criticism that focuses on the communication between an author and a reader through an analysis of the strategies employed by an author to influence a reader’s view or shape a reader’s response.⁷⁵

Scholars, both in Old Testament and the New Testament studies, have employed rhetorical analysis in their exegesis since its inception including Muilenburg, Tribble, Lundbom, Kirby, DeSilva, and Kennedy. Tribble anchored her use of this method on Muilenburg’s

⁷¹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁷² Cathcart, *Post-Communication*, 4.

⁷³ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

⁷⁴ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

⁷⁵ W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publications, 2008), 286.

proposition that effective communication of meaning depends on proper articulation of form and content.⁷⁶ She applied the method to the study of Job. In her view, rhetorical criticism primarily focuses on an intrinsic reading of the text. As a result, she emphasizes an attentive reading of the text with emphasis on their form and content. Tribble argues that in the use of rhetorical analysis, the interpreter must pay attention to the beginning and ending of the text as well as features such as the repetition of words, phrases, and sentences; types of discourse whether narrative, epistle, or apocalyptic, design, portrayal of characters, syntax, and particles among others.⁷⁷ The method has also been employed to study the Apocalypse of John by scholars including Kirby and DeSilva since its goal synchronizes with the nature of the book.

Kennedy contends that the New Testament authors communicated their message with the view of convincing their audience to believe it.⁷⁸ In view of this, they are rhetorical, and can be studied using rhetorical criticism. He applied the three species of rhetoric to the study of texts in the gospels and the Pauline corpus. He delineates a method for doing rhetorical analysis which consist of six steps.⁷⁹

The first step involves the determination of the rhetorical unit of the text to be examined. This includes setting the boundaries of the text: where the text begins and ends. It is also called the delimitation of the text.

⁷⁶ Phyllis Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁷⁷ Nsiah, "Living in an Eschatological Anticipation," 37.

⁷⁸ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 3.

⁷⁹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33-38.

The second step entails defining the rhetorical situation of the literary unit. It focusses on what was happening at the time the author composed the text. There are four universal factors in any rhetorical situation: the speaker or writer, the audience, the discourse and the occasion or context in which the work is composed or delivered. All these factors make the communication effective and must be carefully investigated in the interpretative process.

The third step is the identification of the rhetorical problem, namely the overarching problem in the context that the author seeks to address by the speech or text. Out of the many rhetorical situations, the speaker may focus on one main rhetorical problem that may be particularly visible in the discourse.

Step four deals with determining the type or species (judicial, deliberative, or epideictic) of rhetoric employed by a text. The rhetorical species help the exegete to establish the emphasis of a work and the intent of the author.

The fifth stage involves considering the arrangement of material in the text in terms of its subdivisions, persuasive effect of the parts, their coordination, devices of style, etc. It consists of the actual analysis of the various compositional structural elements of the text: the words, phrases, clauses, key expressions, and grammar using the appropriate tools for biblical research. The goal is to identify the rhetorical functions of these elements and how they contribute to achieving the author's persuasive purpose.

The sixth step encompasses a review of the process of analysis by looking back over the entire unit and reviewing its success in addressing the rhetorical situation and what the implications may be for the speaker or audience.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that texts are written to elicit specific responses from their readers.⁸⁰ Towards this end, authors use specific rhetorical devices which must be examined to discover the intended meaning of a text. In view of this, the research employed rhetorical criticism in studying Rev. 2—3 since it is persuasive in nature. The writer seeks to persuade the communities to take specific actions (deliberative rhetoric) or hold or reaffirm a particular point of view (epideictic rhetoric).

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The research was guided by Holladay's Theological Conversation model. He asserts that theology in a general sense is a conversation about God based on an ongoing conversation humans have with God.⁸¹ It has three main dimensions namely, having a theology, doing a theology, and living a theology. The process of formulating our theological beliefs fall under the second dimension, which is doing theology. This process is called theological reflection. According to Holladay:

Christian theological reflection results when interpreters, either an individual believer or a community of believers, engage in conversation with a sacred text and tradition, broadly construed, in order to make sense of, and give formal expression to, their experience and understanding of "God at work in Christ" within a specific context.⁸²

In view of this, he argues that theological sense-making involves the interplay of several distinct elements. The components include the text, tradition, context or setting, interpreter, and catalyst.

⁸⁰ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

⁸¹ Carl R. Holladay, *Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 13.

⁸² Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 19.

Holladay defines a text as a written document that has come to be regarded as uniquely normative by a community of faith.⁸³ In this regard, the text in the Christian domain refers to both the Tanak and the New Testament.

He notes that tradition refers to the re-readings of the text by successive communities.⁸⁴ He maintains, however, that it may also extend beyond the text. Examples include the Talmud, which is a collection of rabbinic interpretations of the Jewish scriptures, commentaries, articles, sermons, books, stories, and liturgies.

Holladay posits that the context of theological reflection can be construed either broadly or narrowly. The broad characterization of the context refers to all the elements that define a given society: time and place as well as the political, social, economic, and religious circumstances.⁸⁵ He points out that a narrow characterization of context connotes a recognizable social setting that is usually defined by an institutional structure.⁸⁶ Examples include the family, government, economy, education, and religion. He argues that context influences theological reflection in two main ways. First, it determines the kind of theological reflection that is carried out. Second, it gives a unique identity to the theological-sense-making done in it.

The catalyst refers to what triggers or provokes the theological sense-making. He argues that both crises and good experiences can be the catalyst that sparks theological reflection. However, Jesus Christ is the ‘chief catalyst’ in Christian theological reflection, whose

⁸³ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 14.

⁸⁴ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 15.

⁸⁵ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 16.

⁸⁶ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 16.

special mission is to understand how God has been revealed and experienced in the world through Jesus Christ.⁸⁷

Holladay posits that the centre of theological reflection is the ‘I-Thou’ dialogue that takes place between the believer and God. It is the believer who desires to understand how God is present and active in the world through the person of Jesus Christ and communicate it in contemporary language.

He maintains that the interpreter plays a very creative role in the process, because it is the interpreter who engages in theological sense-making by bringing all the other elements together and casts them into profound theological language.⁸⁸ He contends, in view of the above, that a theological reflection carries the ‘stamp’ of the interpreter. The interpreter’s image is reflected in the theology because it passes through his or her faith.⁸⁹

In conclusion, this model emphasizes the essential elements needed for a meaningful theological reflection namely: text, tradition, context, or setting, interpreter and catalyst; their interaction plays a crucial role in theological reflection. Thus, the need to effectively engage them to arrive at an informed understanding of the text. Considering the above, the researcher finds the model appropriate because it allows for a detailed analysis of the historical context, grammatical and linguistic components, rhetorical devices in the text; to explore how they contributed to shape the identity and mission of the church in Rev. 2—3.

⁸⁷ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 22.

⁸⁸ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 17.

⁸⁹ Holladay, *Critical Introduction*, 17.

1.6 Methodology

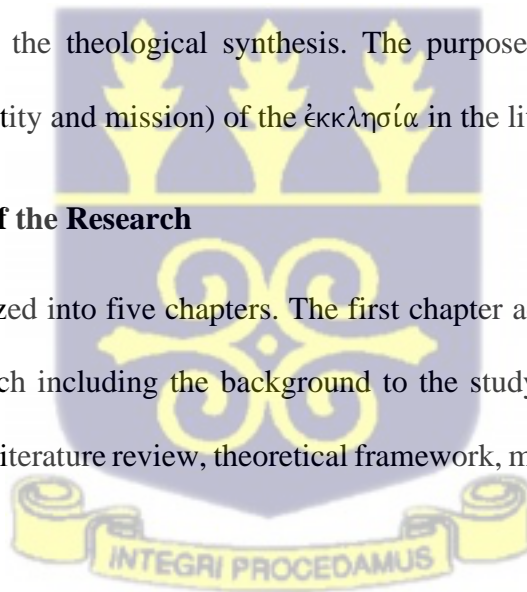
Holladay's theological conversation model guided the research. As a result, the study proceeded in two steps namely, analysis of the text and theological synthesis.

The analysis of the text employed the six-step method proposed by Kennedy⁹⁰ to discover the perlocutionary effect of the text on the original readers. To reach this aim, the researcher investigated the rhetorical devices the author used to describe the characteristic of the ἐκκλησία.

The second step is the theological synthesis. The purpose is the identification of the characteristics (identity and mission) of the ἐκκλησία in the literary unit.

1.7 Organization of the Research

The study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter addressed all the introductory issues of the research including the background to the study, statement of the problem, research questions, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology and organization of the chapters.



Chapter two to chapter four focused on the exegetical and theological analysis of Rev. 2—3. Chapter two elaborated the determination of the rhetorical unit, the discussion of the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical problem, determination of the rhetorical species, and the discussion of the rhetorical structure of the text.

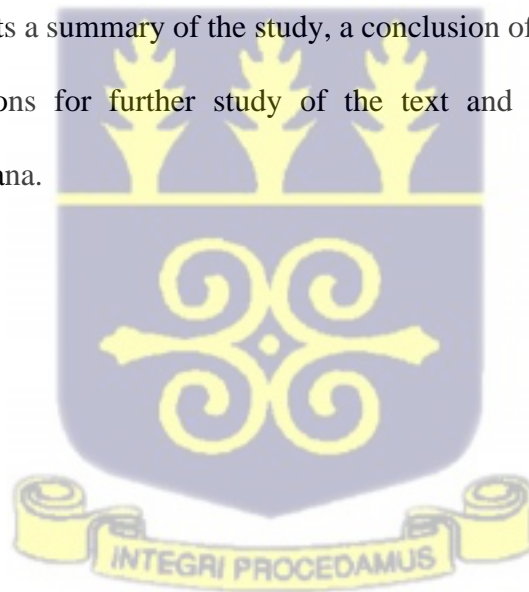
Chapter three dealt with the actual analysis of Rev. 2:1-17, which comprises the messages to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum. It examined the verbal systems used

⁹⁰ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33-38.

in the composition of the literary unit, the syntax, the grammar, the rhetorical devices, and expressions employed by the author in communicating his message as well as their pragmatic effect on the hearers.

The fourth chapter provides the actual analysis of Rev. 2:18—3:22, the messages to the churches in Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. It also highlights the key features of the ἐκκλησία with reference to its identity and mission and concludes with a reflection on contemporary Christian communities in Ghana.

Chapter five presents a summary of the study, a conclusion of the findings of the research, and recommendations for further study of the text and for contemporary Christian communities in Ghana.



CHAPTER TWO

THE BACKGROUND ISSUES OF REVELATION 2—3

2.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the background issues of Rev. 2—3 following the steps proposed by Kennedy for Rhetorical Criticism. They include the analysis of the rhetorical situation, the determination of the rhetorical unit, the identification of the rhetorical problem, the discussion of the rhetorical species of the text under study, and the rhetorical structure that guides the analyses of the text. This chapter is, therefore, a preparation towards the actual analysis of the text and contributes significantly to the understanding of the rhetorical elements of the text and how they help shape the identity and mission of the seven communities in the book of Revelation.

2.2 The Rhetorical Situation

The rhetorical situation focusses on the specific context of a literary unit; it examines the persons, events, and relations involved in a particular discourse as well as the time and place.⁹¹ Against this backdrop, this section discusses the overview of the book of Revelation, the nature of the Christian communities that received the book, their relationship with the Jewish community, and issues affecting their life.

⁹¹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 35.

2.2.1 Overview of the Book of Revelation

This section discusses the authorship, the historical background, and the structure of the book.

Although the book of Revelation specifically identifies its author as ‘John’ (cf. 1:1, 4, 9), different scholars hold unique perspectives on his identity. While some scholars assert that ‘John’ was the apostle of Jesus Christ and the author of the fourth gospel, others hold that he was an elder in the early church. Furthermore, some hold that he was a prophet in one of the churches mentioned in the book of Revelation while others still think ‘John’ is a pseudonym for an unknown figure.

The proponents of the first hypothesis maintain that the author of the book is an apostle,⁹² John the son of Zebedee.⁹³ This view originates from comments made by church fathers in the second and third centuries like Justin Martyr (ca. 165), Irenaeus (ca. 200) and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 215).⁹⁴ Some modern scholars find this position convincing for the following reasons. First, it was held by the early church consisting of people who lived in the churches addressed; for example, it is believed that Justin lived in the church in Ephesus while Irenaeus sojourned in Smyrna.⁹⁵ Accordingly, the apostolic authorship might be the preserved tradition about the author in those congregations. However, it is worth noting that the writer does not claim apostolic authority (cf. 21:14) and has a Hellenistic background: for example, the love for the city (cf. 17—18; 20—21) and the description of

⁹² Gonzalo Rojas-Flores, “The Book of Revelation and the First Years of Nero’s Reign,” *Biblica* 85, no. 3 (2004): 375, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42614530>.

⁹³ Rojas-Flores, “The Book of Revelation,” 375.

⁹⁴ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. John J. Collins (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary, 38A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 66.

⁹⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 66.

the temple (cf. 21:21b-22; 3:12). Second, the adherents who hold that the fourth gospel was written by John insist that there are theological and literary similarities between the book of Revelation and the fourth gospel.⁹⁶

The second hypothesis contends that the name 'John' as indicated in the book is a pseudonym. It originates from the early church because some of the people objected to the content of the book and they intended to discredit it by proffering that it was written under a false name.⁹⁷ A more relevant reason in favour of this hypothesis is the literary genre of the book, apocalyptic, which usually indicates pseudonymous authors.⁹⁸ For example, while Jewish apocalypses like Daniel, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch are written under the names of figures from Israel's history, Christian apocalypses such as the Apocalypse of Peter (second century) and Apocalypse of Paul (fourth century) were ascribed to apostles.⁹⁹ Therefore, the book of Revelation was written in the name of John the apostle to give it apostolic authority.¹⁰⁰

The third hypothesis postulates that the Apocalypse of John was written by an elder called John. The proponents argue that the book was not written by John the beloved disciple (John 20: 20-24) but by 'the elder' who wrote 1 and 2 John.¹⁰¹

These hypotheses notwithstanding, there is a fourth view that maintains that the identity of the author must be ascertained mainly from the book itself: the author introduced himself

⁹⁶ Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 27-35.

⁹⁷ For example, St. Augustine notes that his spirit cannot bear with the book.

⁹⁸ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 585.

⁹⁹ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 585.

¹⁰⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 66.

¹⁰¹ Hugo Méndez, "Did the Johannine Community Exist?," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 3 (2020): 360-366; doi/pdf/10.1177/0142064X19890490.

as John (1:1, 4, 9); he was a Christian prophet (1:3; 22:18-19) who was active among the prophets in Asia Minor (22:9-10). He is also acquainted with the Jewish Scriptures because he quotes or alludes to them 500 times in 440 verses and has knowledge of Hebrew (9:11; 16:16). In addition, he does not compromise regarding eating food sacrificed to Greco-Roman deities (2:14, 20). The researcher finds this last hypothesis more convincing since it is based on evidence from the book itself and it is confirmed also by the scholarly view on the date of composition.

Although Koester argues that the book of Revelation is best situated between 80-100 CE,¹⁰² several commentators date it more precisely at the latter years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 CE).¹⁰³ In this period, Asia Minor was colonized by Rome and thus marked by imperial rule¹⁰⁴ which led to the worship of the emperors; prayers to the emperor, sacrifices for him, and expected intercession on behalf of the empire by the emperor.¹⁰⁵ The imperial cult is believed to have started with Augustus in the late first century BCE, who granted divine status to the ruling emperor, and sometimes to members of his family, in death and even in life.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, cities competed to gain the Roman Senate's approval to build temples for the emperor or his family for which they were granted the title *neokoros*, or "temple warden of the imperial cult."¹⁰⁷

During the reign of Domitian, the city of Ephesus built the temple of Sebastoi and, therefore, became the first city to receive the title of *neokoros*. Pergamum followed a

¹⁰² Koester, *Revelation*, 79.

¹⁰³ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 572.

¹⁰⁴ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 250-65.

¹⁰⁵ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 532.

¹⁰⁶ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 250-65.

¹⁰⁷ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 250-65.

decade later.¹⁰⁸ By the end of the first century, the imperial cult was present in each of the seven cities addressed in the book of Revelation, either with a temple or an altar. The emperor was also connected with the gods and sometimes presented as a god himself. In view of this, many of the coins in use carried the portrait of the emperor, often depicted as Zeus, Apollo, or Hercules.¹⁰⁹ According to Winter, “the imperial cult temples and their precincts were strategically located in the public domain; in or near the agora, the place where inhabitants engaged... in commercial, cultural, judicial, administrative activities.”¹¹⁰

Although participation in the imperial cults was not strictly imposed, lack of participation made life difficult because it was a significant part of civic life in Asia Minor.¹¹¹ Also, failure to participate connotes lack of commitment both to the empire and to the protective powers of the imperial leader.¹¹²

Further, the region was characterized by a proliferation of cults that honoured gods and goddesses which were believed to oversee governance, education, family life, commerce, and worship,¹¹³ and a constellation of deities were associated with the seven cities named in Revelation, although one or two may be dominant in the city. For example, the goddess Artemis was associated with the city of Ephesus¹¹⁴ while the mother goddess, Cybele, was

¹⁰⁸ Steven J. Friesen 2001, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46.

¹⁰⁹ Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Book of Revelation,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 2000), 1: 397.

¹¹⁰ Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 11.

¹¹¹ Yarbro Collins, “The Book of Revelation,” 397.

¹¹² Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 103.

¹¹³ Steven J. Friesen, “Revelation, Realia, and Religion,” *HTR* 88 (1995): 299.

¹¹⁴ Morna D. Hooker, “Artemis of Ephesus,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 64, no. 1 (April 2013): 37.

associated with Smyrna.¹¹⁵ The author agrees with this specific date since internal evidence supports the presence of the imperial cult (cf. 13:4-8, 15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

Finally, concerning the structure of the book, it is generally divided by scholars into three sections. They include introduction (Chap. 1), letters to seven churches (Chaps. 2—3) and visions of the future (Chaps. 4—22).¹¹⁶ The study focusses on the second section: the ‘letters’ to the seven churches (Chaps. 2—3).

2.2.2 The Nature of the Christian Community in Asia Minor

The book of Revelation was written to specific Christian communities located in Asia Minor (cf. 1:4; 2:1, 8, 12). Internal evidence suggests that the Christian communities were constituted by people from different ethnicities (5:9; 7:9), both Jews and Gentiles even though the Gentiles were the majority.¹¹⁷

The Christian communities had some common beliefs and practices.¹¹⁸ They believe that God is eternal, just and the creator of the world (1:8; 4:11; 6:10; 15:3-4); that Jesus is the anointed Messiah of God who witnessed about God’s kingdom and was crucified to redeem all people (5:9-10; 7:14; 11:8, 15).¹¹⁹ Furthermore, they hold that Jesus is now alive (1:5, 17-18) and will return (22:20).

Koester posits that evidence in the book suggests that the communities apparently met as house churches on the first day of the week for worship, which is characterized by prayers

¹¹⁵ W. M. Ramsay, “Newly Discovered Sites near Smyrna,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 1 (1880): 63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/623614>.

¹¹⁶ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1—7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 11.

¹¹⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 87.

¹¹⁸ Koester, *Revelation*, 112.

¹¹⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 112.

of thanksgiving, intercession, hymns of praise (cf. 5:8-10; 8:3-4; 15:3-4) and the reading of Scripture (1:3).¹²⁰ The disciples were also expected to obey “the commandments of God” (12:17), which include worshiping God, staying away from idolatry, and avoiding practices like sorcery, murder, theft, sexual immorality, and deception (9:20-21; 19:10; 21:8, 27; 22:9, 15).¹²¹

In addition to the beliefs and practices of the communities, they were expected to live as witnesses of the kingdom of God. According to Koester, witnessing in the book of Revelation connotes living out one’s faith, especially in situations where there is uncertainty or disagreement.¹²² Nonetheless, the risk of witnessing is evident in the fate of Antipas and others who were slain because of their *parrhesia* (cf. 2:13; 6:9; 13:8). Thus, steadfastness can provoke conflict and subsequently death.

It is important to note that the members of the communities had different perception of the Christian identity and relationship with society, often in contrast with the radical position of John.¹²³ Although these communities have common beliefs and practices, there were also subgroups that developed their own sense of identity; the groups include the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), those who subscribe to the doctrine of Balaam (2:14) and the followers of Jezebel (2:20).¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 86.

¹²¹ Koester, *Revelation*, 86.

¹²² Koester, *Revelation*, 87.

¹²³ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 335-42.

¹²⁴ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 533-534.

2.2.3 Relationship between the Christian Community and the Jewish Community

One of the groups of people in Asia Minor that the Christian communities interacted with were the Jews. Although the Jews preserved a greater sense of distinctiveness, they also integrated well into the Greco-Roman society.¹²⁵ The Jewish communities possessed their own sacred scriptures, worshiped the God of Israel, and rejected the polytheistic religions that were prevalent in their environment.¹²⁶ They worship in the synagogues and were forbidden from consuming food dedicated to pagan deities by Jewish tradition. Circumcision, kosher cuisine, and Sabbath observance¹²⁷ distinguished them from the popular traditions in Greco-Roman cities. However, they spoke Greek, took part in various trades and commerce,¹²⁸ engaged in professional organizations with non-Jewish members, and some had Roman citizenship.

The Christian communities addressed by Revelation shared certain features of Jewish identity since Christianity evolved from the Jewish religion. They worshipped the Israelite God, believed in the Jewish Scriptures, and observed God's commandments listed in the Torah.¹²⁹ In spite of this, the book attests to tension between the two communities which climaxed in active persecution of the disciples (3:8-9).

2.2.4 The Issues Affecting the Christian Community in the Greco-Roman World

Roman occupation of Asia Minor posed three categories of challenges for the Christian communities addressed in the book of Revelation namely; conflict with outsiders,

¹²⁵ John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323BCE- 117CE)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1996), 259-81, 320-35.

¹²⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 92.

¹²⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 92.

¹²⁸ Koester, *Revelation*, 92

¹²⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 92.

assimilation, and complacency.¹³⁰ It is worth noting that different scholars prioritize one dimension over the others; while some scholars emphasize Roman oppression, others underscore disputes within the Christian community.¹³¹ This notwithstanding, Koester's classification provides an adequate understanding of the issues facing the churches in the Apocalypse of John.

2.2.4.1 Conflict with Outsiders

Koester notes that some of the Christian communities experienced persecution, which was local and sporadic but had the capacity to destroy their faith.¹³² It is noteworthy that the persecution originated from both Jews and Gentiles (cf. 2:9; 6:9-10). For example, the church in Philadelphia experienced conflict in the form of verbal harassment from Jews who were members of a local synagogue.¹³³ The tension might derive from certain Christological claims being made by the churches which might seem blasphemous to Jews.¹³⁴ It is also likely that the Jewish Christians were pressured to deny the name of Jesus to continue to be part of the Jewish community (cf. 3:8-9).

However, the greater level of persecution came from the Roman authorities.¹³⁵ For example, the church in Smyrna was persecuted by the Roman authorities due to the church's rejection of Roman polytheism and the proclamation of Jesus as Lord.¹³⁶ The presence of persecution is further supported by the execution of Antipas, who was a witness of Jesus Christ in the church in Pergamum (2:13). In the visions of 4–22, the imperial power

¹³⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 96.

¹³¹ Koester, *Revelation*, 96.

¹³² Koester, *Revelation*, 96.

¹³³ Koester, *Revelation*, 97.

¹³⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 97.

¹³⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 97.

¹³⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 98.

is portrayed as a beast that kills the disciples and Roman Empire as ‘Babylon,’ the whore, who drinks the blood of the believers (17:6; 18:24).

2.2.4.2 Assimilation and Greco-Roman Religions

Assimilation refers to the degree to which the Christians adopted non-Christian behaviours while remaining committed to their own faith.¹³⁷ According to Collins, this adaptation was significant because it allowed Christians to retain positive social and business relationships with non-Christians.¹³⁸

One of the key issues the early community had to deal with was the question of consuming food that has been sacrificed to the gods. Although John rejected the practice, the Nicolaitans and the adherents of the doctrine of Balaam and Jezebel practiced it (cf. 2:6, 14-15, 20).¹³⁹ Christians encounter meat offered to idols at different times and on different occasions such as religious festivals which involve sacrifices, private meals of families or associations where people are invited to dine in honour of a god,¹⁴⁰ and meals shared by members of trade and professional associations in events that honour various gods and deified emperors. In addition, sacrificial meat that was not consumed by worshipers was sold alongside meat from other sources in public markets (cf. 1 Cor. 8; 10:23-33).

It is worth noting that refusing to join in such meals could make life socially and financially difficult for the Christians (13:16-17). Because of this, some may wish to partake in private dinners to retain relationships with family, friends, and business associates, despite the risk

¹³⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 99.

¹³⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 88.

¹³⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 96.

¹⁴⁰ Wendell Lee Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (SBLDS 68; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985), 40-42.

of appearing to worship other gods.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, John firmly opposed the consumption of food offered to a Greco-Roman deity because he associates idolatry with demonic power (2:20, 24; 9:20).

2.2.4.3 *Complacency and Wealth*

The attitude of complacency that emerges from prosperity is another issue facing the Christian communities.¹⁴² The situation in the Laodicean church is a classic example; its members were wealthy and prosperous, but the congregation's faith commitment had waned (3:17).

The prosperity of some of the Christian communities depended on trade in items including metal and leather goods, textiles, wine, grain, and slaves in the Roman empire because of imperial rule.¹⁴³ Trade in the Roman empire was supported by the good road system and assurance of safety on the sea.¹⁴⁴ For this reason, Rome is celebrated for its ability to provide unprecedented prosperity through trade.

Interestingly, John was highly critical of the prosperity of the Laodiceans because they use dishonest and self-serving means to acquire wealth, since the wealthy had special privileges or favours in the Roman empire.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the quest for riches undermines the Christian community's cohesiveness by prioritizing trade-based connections above faith-

¹⁴¹ Koester, *Revelation*, 99.

¹⁴² J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNT Sup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 25-31.

¹⁴³ Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 566.

¹⁴⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 102.

¹⁴⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 102.

based relationships, and it also draws people into participating in the imperial cult and idolatry.¹⁴⁶

2.3 The Determination of the Rhetorical Unit

The rhetorical unit denotes the text's borders and literary traits that distinguish it as a literary unit.¹⁴⁷ It marks the beginning and the end of a literary unit. It is worth noting that scholars unanimously agree that the literary unit under consideration ends in chapter 3:22. This agreement stems from the fact that 4:1 begins the second section of the book (4—22) which primarily constitute future visions that are apocalyptic in outlook.¹⁴⁸ This vision motif is evident in the repetition of the phrase “after these things I looked” (μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον), which shows a shift from one vision to another. They are found in 5:1 (“then I saw”), 6:1 (“now I watched”), 7:1, 9 (“after this I saw”), 10:1 (“then I saw”), 13:1, 11 (“and I saw”), 14:1 (“then I looked”), 15:1 (“then I saw”), 18:1 (“after this I saw”), 20:1 (“then I saw”), and 21:1 (“then I saw”). This apocalyptic nature of the visions differentiates this section of the book from Rev. 2—3.

However, scholars hold three main views on the beginning of the rhetorical unit. The first perspective states that the literary unit begins from 2:4. One of the proponents of this view is Brown. He observes that Rev. 1:4—3:22 forms one literary unit which can be identified

¹⁴⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 103.

¹⁴⁷ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ They are universal and dualistic in perspective, portray a dissatisfaction with the present and divine sovereignty (a violent God), focus on the unseen world and the future (world to come), indicate eschatological timetable (eschaton, end-time conflict, tribulation) and highly symbolic.

as letters to the seven churches,¹⁴⁹ and maintains that 1:4-5a constitutes an epistolary introductory formula that begins the letters to the seven Christian communities (2—3).¹⁵⁰

Scholars like Koester and Osborne propose that the literary unit begins from 1:9 and ends in 3:22. Osborne observes that 1:9—3:22 constitute the first major section of the Apocalypse and centres on the churches that are addressed in the book.¹⁵¹ Koester opines that the Apocalypse of John consists of six vision cycles that are sandwiched by a prologue and an epilogue.¹⁵² He posits that the first vision constitutes 1:9—3:22 of which the text under study is a part. He indicates that the first cycle encompasses a vision of the glorified Christ, who commands John to write to seven churches. The cycle concludes with a vision of Christ standing and knocking at a closed door (3:20-22), which serves as a preparation for the next cycle of visions where John saw God's heavenly throne room through an open door (4:1-2).¹⁵³ In view of this, he concludes that Rev. 1:9—3:22 forms a single literary unit.

The third perspective holds that Rev. 2:1—3:22 form a single literary unit. This hypothesis is held by scholars like Mounce, Aune and DeSilva. Mounce maintains that the letters to the seven churches of Asia form a distinct unit.¹⁵⁴ The researcher aligns with the third hypothesis because of the presence of a plethora of literary features that make the unit unique.

¹⁴⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven - London: Yale University Press, 2016), 276-277.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 276-277.

¹⁵¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 77.

¹⁵² Koester, *Revelation*, 112.

¹⁵³ Koester, *Revelation*, 112.

¹⁵⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 73.

First, the messages consist of stereotypical features that distinguish the literary unit from the other sections in the book.¹⁵⁵ They include: an address, a self-presentation of the Risen Lord, a judgement section, an exhortation, an appeal to listen to the Spirit, and a promise.¹⁵⁶

Second, the literary unit contains repetitive expressions within these six stereotypical features that distinguish it. In the address section, the author repeats the phrase “to the angel of the church in Ephesus write” (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψου) in all the seven messages (2:8a,12a,18a; 3:1a,7a,14a). The only variation in this phrase is the name of the city in which the Christian community is located. Also, the author introduces an ‘and’ (καί) at the beginning of the second message through to the last message. Thus, the author indicates a continuation of the messages with the last being the message to the church in Laodicea (3:14a). Therefore, the unity of the literary unit is underscored.

Further, the author repeats the syntagm ‘thus says’ (τάδε λέγει) in the self-presentation of the Risen Lord (2:1b, 12b, 18b; 3:1b, 7b, 14b), the knowledge formular “I know your works” (οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου) and the indictment formular “but I have this against you” (ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ) in the judgement section (2:2-4, 9, 13-15, 19-20; 3:1c, 8, 15), the entire hearing formular “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις) in the appeal to listen to the Spirit (2:7a, 11a, 17a, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) and the overcomer formular “to him who overcomes” (τῷ νικῶντι) in the promise section (2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

¹⁵⁵ Aune, “The Form and Function,” 184.

¹⁵⁶ Aune, “The Form and Function,” 184.

Finally, the literary unit focuses on specific situations in seven Christian communities that the book was written to. While the visions in 4—22 are cosmic in scope, as is characteristic of apocalyptic literature, the literary unit deals with the specific state of the recipients of the book and the issues confronting them. Against this backdrop, the researcher concludes that Rev. 2:1—3:22 can be considered a literary unit.

2.4 The Rhetorical Problem

Apocalyptic literature is defined by the study group of Society of Biblical Literature as

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.¹⁵⁷

However, Hellholm argues that this definition is incomplete because it fails to underscore the crisis which usually marks the production of apocalyptic literature. Considering this, he argues that the definition will be complete if “intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority”¹⁵⁸ is added to it. In view of the ending provided, Hellholm seeks to emphasise the fact that apocalyptic literature usually originates from contexts marked by persecution and suffering which many other scholars attest to.

Collins is one of the scholars that agrees with Hellholm that Jewish apocalypses generally provide exhortation and consolation in a crisis. He, however, adds that not all apocalypses are written to a group in crises.¹⁵⁹ For example, 4 Ezra is an apocalypse even though it was

¹⁵⁷ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed., (The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 5.

¹⁵⁸ David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 27; Cf, Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 41.

written to instruct and refute a heretical party.¹⁶⁰ It can, therefore, be concluded that apocalyptic literature serves different purposes.

Regarding the literary unit, there is scholarly agreement that the author addressed different issues. Brown argues that persecution is not the only issue addressed in the literary unit. He notes that the unit also deals with the issues of complacency as a response to persecution and false teaching, which includes eating meat offered to idols.¹⁶¹ Achtemeier, Green and Thompson concur with Brown that comfort and assurance in a time of crisis does not exhaust the function of the literary unit and adds that the section was written to call the churches to faithfulness in the presence of threats like laxness, self-sufficiency, syncretism, and materialism.¹⁶² Powell admits the multi-function of the unit by pointing out that the unit was written to

...inspire confidence in those whose obedience to God may prove costly, stir up indignation toward those who defy God and promote injustice, provoke repentance on the part of those who have been overly accommodating, and inspire praise for God from those who realize the Lord of history is worthy of their trust.¹⁶³

Considering the discussion above, the researcher concludes that the letters were written to address two main issues. The first is the problem of persecution and suffering resulting from the presence of the imperial cult. Thus, the author writes to offer comfort, assurance, and consolation for the Christian communities. Second, the author writes to elicit their faithfulness to God and Jesus in a Hellenistic-Roman world that is characterized by complacency, false teaching, laxness, self-sufficiency, syncretism, and materialistic

¹⁶⁰ Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 41.

¹⁶¹ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 279.

¹⁶² Achtemeier, Green and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 565.

¹⁶³ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 534.

lifestyle. Accordingly, he calls them to a life of witness devoid of the accommodation of Roman culture.

In the larger context, the literary unit serves as a hermeneutical preparation for the future revelations in 4–22. The book is structured like many Pauline epistles in the New Testament where the first part focusses on doctrinal issues and the second part provides instructions that are consistent with the doctrine. An example is the epistle to the Ephesians where the first three chapters concentrate on doctrine and the remaining three chapters focus on instructions in light of the doctrine. In the book of Revelation, the author reverses this order. The instructions or the practical part comes first (2:1—3:22), followed by the doctrinal part (4—22), which elaborates on the motivations for obeying the instructions. In view of this, the literary unit contributes to the understanding of the rest of the book.

2.5 The Rhetorical Species of the Text

The type of rhetoric used by an author in any given discourse plays a key role in the interpretation of the author's message. The species of rhetoric employed in a work, in fact, determines the work's primary focus and hence the author's intention. Aristotle identified three species or types of rhetoric namely, deliberative, judicial, and epideictic rhetoric.¹⁶⁴ Kennedy, however, indicates that one of the species usually dominates a discourse which underscores the overarching purpose in the speech or writing of an author.¹⁶⁵

The seven messages are deliberative in nature. The use of deliberative rhetoric seeks to guide the congregations addressed to take courses of action in their immediate or near-

¹⁶⁴ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

¹⁶⁵ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

immediate futures.¹⁶⁶ For example, the church in Ephesus was invited to remember how the community was formerly characterized by love and return to their first conduct (“do the works you did at first” cf. 2:5); the church in Smyrna was instructed to remain steadfast in their witness even to the point of death despite an imminent increase in hostile opposition (cf. 2:10), and the church in Pergamum and Thyatira were commanded to stop tolerating the false teachers among them (cf. 2:14–16, 20–23). Moreover, the author sought to elicit conversion by indicating considerable consequences, in the form of warnings and promises, if the actions are not taken, which is common with deliberative rhetoric.¹⁶⁷ The refusal of the churches to act as the Risen Lord directs will lead to negative consequences (cf. 2:5b, 16, 22–23; 3:3b, 16b, 18b) while embracing the recommended course of action will lead to positive outcomes (cf. 2:7b, 10b, 11b, 17b, 26–28; 3:4b–5, 9b, 12, 18a, 18c, 20–21).¹⁶⁸

The writing style of the seven messages also display significant affinities with epideictic rhetoric. When a speaker or writer seeks to persuade his or her audience to hold or reaffirm a current point of view, such as when he celebrates or condemns a person or quality, epideictic rhetoric is used.¹⁶⁹ The focus of epideictic rhetoric is a shift in attitude or a deepening of values such as the honourable and the good, or, in the Christian context, belief or faith.¹⁷⁰ This rhetorical effect is accomplished by employing the elements of praise or blame. For this reason, the Risen Lord calls these communities to persevere in the face of

¹⁶⁶ John T. Kirby, “The Rhetorical Situations of Revelation 1–3,” *NTS* 34, no. 2 (April 1988): 200.

¹⁶⁷ David A. DeSilva, “Rhetorical Features of the Book of Revelation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 71.

¹⁶⁸ DeSilva, “Rhetorical Features,” 71.

¹⁶⁹ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 20.

persecution and suffering, as well as remain faithful in times of infiltrating Roman culture by praising and/or blaming each of them.¹⁷¹

The praise motif is emphasized by the knowledge formular “I know your works” (οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου), while the blame motif is underscored by the indictment formular “but I have this against you” (ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ), which describes the specific indictment on a particular community. However, it is important to note that there are differences in emphasis on either blame or praise in the letter to the various churches. The elements of praise and blame are present in five of the messages: they include Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea while two of the messages emphasize primarily the praise motif; the messages to the church of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

The messages also embody judicial rhetoric; it is used when an author attempts to persuade the audience to make a verdict on past events.¹⁷² As a result, the messages have a judicial tone, as they deal with a review of the churches’ previous conduct.¹⁷³

In view of the discussion, the researcher deems that the messages to the seven churches employ deliberative, epideictic, and judicial rhetoric. However, the dominant species used are deliberative and epideictic rhetoric.

2.6 The Rhetorical Structure of the Text

There is no disagreement among scholars on the internal division of the text under consideration because the author addressed different Christian communities in distinct

¹⁷¹ Robert M. Royalty, “The Rhetoric of Revelation,” *SBL Seminar Papers* 133, no. 36 (1997): 611.

¹⁷² Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation*, 19.

¹⁷³ Kirby, “The Rhetorical Situations,” 200.

geographical locations clearly identified in the *incipit* of each letter. Therefore, the text is divided as follows:

- a. The Proclamation to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)
- b. The Proclamation to the church in Smyrna (2:8-11)
- c. The Proclamation to the church in Pergamum (2:12-17)
- d. The Proclamation to the church in Thyatira (2:18-28)
- e. The Proclamation to the church in Sardis (3:1-6)
- f. The Proclamation to the church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)
- g. The Proclamation to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

Scholars have also maintained that the seven messages follow a similar structural pattern. Aune posits that the seven proclamations have eight stereotypical features.¹⁷⁴ They are “the *adscriptio*, the command to write, the *τάδε λέγει* (thus says) formula, the Christological predications, the *οἶδα* (I know)-clause, the *dispositio*, the proclamation formula, and the promise of victory.”¹⁷⁵

Muse concurs with Aune; however, he proposed that the messages have five main parts which he identified as stylistic features. They are “addressee greeting, *graphon* (write) imperative, message formula, body of the message (including knowledge formula, statement of praise and or blame, encouragement and or warning) and conclusion (including exhortation to listen and a promise).”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Aune, “The Form and Function,” 184.

¹⁷⁵ Aune, “The Form and Function,” 184.

¹⁷⁶ Muse, “Revelation 2—3,” 149.

Biguzzi proposed that the messages have six main parts namely, address, self-presentation of the Risen Lord, judgement, exhortation, appeal to listen to the Spirit and promise.¹⁷⁷ The researcher aligns with the structure proposed by Biguzzi because it is based on literary evidence. As a result, the seven letters will be analysed separately using a six-part structure.

2.7 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the rhetorical situation of the book of Revelation, the delimitation, the rhetorical problem, the rhetorical species, and the rhetorical structure of the text under study. The author of the book is John (cf. 1:1, 4, 9), a Christian prophet (cf. 1:3; 22:18-19) active among the prophets in Asia Minor (cf. 22:9-10). The author is also acquainted with the Tanak since he used it frequently in the Apocalypse. His Jewish background is also proven his frequent allusions to the Tanak, his instructions regarding eating food sacrificed to Greco-Roman deities (cf. 2:14, 20), and the use of Hebrew terms (cf. 9:11; 16:16).

The book was written probably during the latter years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 CE). In this period, Asia Minor was a Roman colony and therefore ruled by Roman emperors. The imperial rule led to the imperial cult, which is worship of emperors. The region was also characterized by a proliferation of cults that honoured gods and goddesses which were believed to oversee various aspects of life.

It was addressed to seven Christian communities located in Asia Minor (1:4). The communities met in the houses of members and were composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

¹⁷⁷ Giancarlo Biguzzi, *Apocalisse: Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (I libri biblici: Nuovo Testamento, 20; Milano: Paoline, 2005), 91-92.

They were confronted with issues like, conflict with outsiders, assimilation of the culture of their environment, and complacency.

The letters have two functions. First, they were written to address concrete issues including persecution and suffering resulting from the presence of the imperial cult. The author wrote to offer comfort, assurance, and consolation to the disciples. Furthermore, he intended to exhort the communities to be steadfast since they were confronted with challenges like complacency, false teaching, laxness, self-sufficiency, syncretism, and materialistic lifestyle. For this reason, he encouraged them to a life of witness devoid of any compromise with the Hellenistic-Roman culture. Second, the literary unit serves as a hermeneutical preparation for the future revelations in 4–22.

The writer employed deliberative, and epideictic rhetoric. Majority of the scholars proposed a ‘geographical’ organization of the literary unit: the seven messages to the churches are structured into six parts namely, address, self-presentation of the Risen Lord, judgment, exhortation, appeal to listen to the Spirit, and promise. Following this structure, the subsequent chapter presents the rhetorical analysis of the first three letters (2:1-17).

CHAPTER THREE

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF REVELATION 2:1-17

3.1 Introduction

The main objective of chapters three and four is to examine the seven messages (2—3) addressed to the Christian communities in Asia Minor to identify how the text describes the identity and mission of the *ekklēsia*. To this end, the chapters analyse the text's compositional structural elements and the rhetorical strategies employed by the author to address the rhetorical problem of the seven churches located in Asia Minor. The message to each community is investigated following the proposed structure.

The present chapter offers the rhetorical analysis of Rev. 2:1-17; chapter four completes the exegesis of the text, discusses the ecclesiology of Rev. 2:1—3:22 and concludes with a discussion of the relevance of the literary unit for contemporary denominations in Ghana.

3.2 The Message to the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

The dialogue between the Risen Lord and his communities opens with the message to the church in Ephesus. The exegesis of Rev. 2:1-7 is more detailed because some important terms and rhetorical devices are common to all the messages.

3.2.1 Address (2:1a)

Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον·

The message to the community in Ephesus begins with an address that consists of a recipient (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ), which is associated with the church in Ephesus (τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας), and the order to write (γράψον).

The identity of the ‘angel’ (τῶ ἀγγέλω) has been highly debated by scholars; St. Augustine referred to it as *res obscurissima* in view of its complexity.¹⁷⁸ However, three main hypotheses dominate the conversation. The first hypothesis interprets the angel as a ‘spiritual being’ (real angels).¹⁷⁹ The proponents argue that the 59 occurrences of the word ἄγγελος in the book of Revelation, outside chapters 2 and 3, clearly refer to a spiritual being, celestial being or ‘real’ angel (cf. 4:11; 8:2; 12:7, 9). The second hypothesis contends that the ‘angels’ are celestial representations of the churches.¹⁸⁰ This viewpoint derives from the Hellenistic tradition, according to which every reality on earth has a counterpart in heaven.¹⁸¹ The third hypothesis understands the ‘angels’ as the human leaders of the communities.¹⁸² These viewpoints notwithstanding, a new hypothesis has been formulated which sees the use of ‘angel’ in these two chapters as a rhetorical strategy to reproach without humiliation.¹⁸³ This conclusion stems from the fact that the author uses the second person singular pronoun (a reference to the angel) for critique and the second person and third person plural pronouns (a reference to the community) for appreciation. The following section analyses and assesses the different hypothesis.

Scholars like Koester, Osborne, Morris, and Struckenburg interpret ἄγγελος literally.¹⁸⁴

For example, Koester argues that in the book of Revelation ἀγγέλοι consistently denote

¹⁷⁸ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁷⁹ Henry Morris, *The Revelation Record* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983), 45.

¹⁸⁰ Charles Homer Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 49-50.

¹⁸¹ Cf. G.R. Beasley-Murray, “How Christian is the Book of Revelation?” in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essay on Atonement and Eschatology*, ed. R. Banks (FS L.L. Morris; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 275-284; R. Morton, “Glory to God and to the Lamb. John’s Use of Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman Themes in Formatting his Theology in Revelation 4-5,” *JSNT* 83 (2001): 89-109.

¹⁸² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 116-118.

¹⁸³ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁸⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 249.

supernatural agents of God (4:11; 8:2) or demonic beings (9:11; 12:7, 9) and, therefore, in 2:1, it describes a supernatural being that represents the ἐκκλησία in Ephesus.¹⁸⁵ He asserts that this view is confirmed by the fact that individuals (cf. Matt. 18:10; Acts 12:15) and nations, including Israel, are assisted by angels (cf. Dan. 10:13, 20-21; 12:1).¹⁸⁶ Osborne agrees with Koester, adding that in this literary context, the angel is the messenger and protector of the city and thus formally associated with the city itself;¹⁸⁷ furthermore the reference to ‘angel’ underscores the eschatological motif of the messages.¹⁸⁸

These arguments notwithstanding, the literal interpretation has been challenged by scholars on three accounts. First, the adherents of the angelic perspective fail to explain why the angel was associated with the sinful conduct of the churches and exhorted to repent since unfallen angels do not sin and, therefore, do not need repentance as suggested in five of the messages (e.g., 2:4-5, 14, 20; 3:1, 2, 3, 15, 17, 19).¹⁸⁹ Second, the proponents fail to explain why the Risen Lord will write to an angel through a human being, John. Third, the hypothesis fails to explain how the angel lives in heaven and in the city at the same time.¹⁹⁰

The second hypothesis proposed by Giblin holds that the angels are celestial representations of the churches, which is consistent with the Hellenistic worldview that every reality on earth has a projection in heaven.¹⁹¹ This hypothesis, nonetheless, is not supported by many scholars for the following reasons. First, there is no evidence that a faith community has an

¹⁸⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 248.

¹⁸⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 248.

¹⁸⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 99-100.

¹⁸⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 99-100.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 116-118.

¹⁹⁰ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁹¹ Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 49-50.

angelic representation in heaven in both the Tanak and the New Testament.¹⁹² Second, this hypothesis leads to the over-symbolism of the angel, which already represents the stars (cf. 1:20).¹⁹³ Third, it leads to confusion since it is difficult to explain how an individual ‘angel’ is addressed with both singular and plural pronouns;¹⁹⁴ for instance, second person singular in 2:4, 5, 10, 14, and second and third person plural in 2:10b, 24-25.

The third hypothesis, proposed by scholars like Thomas, Ferguson, Kraft, and Slater, interprets the ‘angels’ mentioned in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14 as human beings. For instance, Thomas argues that in other New Testament writings, ἄγγελος refers to an envoy sent to carry a message and it is used to denote both human representatives (Luke 9:52) and spirits (Luke 1:11; Heb. 1:13-14; Jude 6; 2 Pet. 2:4) and therefore the syntagm τῷ ἀγγέλῳ refers to human representatives of the church, their leaders.¹⁹⁵ Also, Ferguson contends that the order of communication in the book of Revelation is from the Risen Lord to John, to the angel or messenger, and to the church and as a result, it is unlikely that the Risen Lord will write to an angelic figure through John, a human being.¹⁹⁶ Consequently, he concludes that the syntagm refers to human representatives of the churches. The proponents also maintain that the ‘angel’ must be human since it is associated with the sin of the people. This hypothesis, although intriguing, ignores the fact that there was no individual leader, like a bishop or priest, in the local churches of the first century CE since leadership was communal.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁹³ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁹⁴ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁹⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 116-118.

¹⁹⁶ Everett Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1—3: Status Quaestionis and Another Proposal” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21, no. 3 (2011): 385.

¹⁹⁷ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

Considering the obvious weaknesses of the three hypotheses discussed above, Biguzzi proffered a new hypothesis that the researcher aligns with. He notes that among the many uses of ἄγγελος in the Apocalypse, the closest to the one in the seven messages are in 21:12 (the angels of the tribes of Israel) and in 7:1; 9:3; 14:18; 16:5 (the angels of the elements like fire).¹⁹⁸ Therefore, if in the theology of Revelation, the twelve tribes of Israel have an angel, then the ‘churches’ can have an angel; furthermore, the angels see themselves as fellow servants with the prophetic writer (cf. 19:10b; 22:9). However, this raises the question of how a spiritual being can relate to humans and how an angel can be accused. Consequently, Biguzzi indicates that Christ attributes the guilt of the churches to the angel by using the second person singular (2:4, 5, 14, 16, 20; 3:2-3, 15-18), while using the second person plural and the third person plural to appreciate the churches for their good works (2:10b, 24-25).¹⁹⁹ For this reason, he concludes that the angels are “narrative angels,” a rhetorical strategy used by the author to reproach the churches without humiliating them.²⁰⁰

This strategy of referring to the communities as ‘angels’ even though they have challenges, summons them to live faithfully by reminding them of what they are and of what they can become. In view of this, the author indicates that the church can live above its challenges and be holy like spiritual beings.

John was commanded to write to the angel of the ἐκκλησίας in Ephesus. Garland points out that the ἐκκλησίας refers to Jesus’ community located in Ephesus.²⁰¹ Thomas agrees but

¹⁹⁸ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

¹⁹⁹ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 95.

²⁰⁰ Biguzzi, *Apocalisse*, 96.

²⁰¹ Anthony C. Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Camano Island, WA: SpiritAndTruth.org, 2004), 1:209.

adds that the use of ἐκκλησίας denotes all the assemblies in a single city (cf. Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2).²⁰² In view of this, he suggests that the Christian community consists of many house-churches meeting separately from one another.²⁰³ Nevertheless, all these communities are marked by the fact that they belong to the Risen Lord.

Ephesus was one of the largest cities in Asia Minor, located in Anatolia, in contemporary Turkey.²⁰⁴ It was a seaport with a very busy harbor and well-constructed aqueducts for supplying water to its residents. It came under Roman control in the 133 BCE.²⁰⁵ The city had a mixed population and was rivalled by two other important cities namely Smyrna and Pergamum.²⁰⁶ The inhabitants include Greeks, Romans, Jews, Rhodes, Egypt, Galatia, Lydia, and Mysia.²⁰⁷ The city was known for its dedication to the Temple of Artemis, the Greek goddess also called Diana, which was the largest Greek temple in antiquity and hence referred to as one of the seven great wonders of the world in its time.²⁰⁸ It also promoted the worship of emperors like Caesar Augustus and Emperor Claudius.²⁰⁹ As a result, it was characterized by inscriptions of the goddess Artemis, emperor Augustus, emperor Tiberius, emperor Nero and emperor Domitian.

The Risen Lord instructed John to write to the community in Ephesus. The use of the aorist imperative, coupled with its emphatic position, and the use of the indirect object (τῷ

²⁰² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 128.

²⁰³ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 128.

²⁰⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 256.

²⁰⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 256.

²⁰⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 256.

²⁰⁷ Koester, *Revelation*, 256.

²⁰⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.

²⁰⁹ Koester, *Revelation*, 256.

ἀγγέλω), makes the order urgent,²¹⁰ authoritative and emphatic.²¹¹ Moreover, the command to write presents the church as an entity under the authority of the Risen Lord.

3.2.2 Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (2:1b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ, ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν·

After addressing the recipients of the message, the writer identifies the authority behind the message, using the τάδε λέγει (“thus says”) formula, and two descriptive clauses from the initial Christophany (1:9-20). The syntagm τάδε λέγει precedes the descriptions of the Risen Lord in the seven messages (cf. 2:1, 8, 12). Outside the book of Revelation, it occurs only in Acts 21:11; Thomas opts for an extra-biblical origin, the Persian Kingdom, where the formula introduces a strong, authoritative, and emphatic assertion.²¹² Muse considers it a prophetic formula based on the Hebrew כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה (cf. “...thus says the Lord” – cf. Amos 2:1).²¹³ Beale concurs and observes that the author of the Apocalypse uses this allusion to present the Risen Lord as YHWH addressing the churches.²¹⁴ Against the backdrop of the love of the author of Revelation for the Old Testament, the researcher aligns with Muse’ hypothesis.

The Risen Lord is described by two clauses “the one who holds (litt. the holder) the seven stars in his right hand” (ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ) and “who walks

²¹⁰ David Alan Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2009), 219.

²¹¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 99.

²¹² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 131.

²¹³ Muse, “Revelation 2–3,” 147–61.

²¹⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 229.

among the seven golden lampstands” (ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν) quoted from 1:13, 1:16 respectively.

The symbolic meaning of the “seven stars” (ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας) has been already expounded by the Risen Lord himself in 1:20. It is interesting to note that the writer used different words for ‘hold’ in the opening vision (1:9-20) and in the message to Ephesus (2:1-7): ἔχων (1:16) and κρατῶν (2:1). While ἔχων connotes having something, κρατῶν means to hold firm or grasp.²¹⁵ The shift underscores Christ’s absolute authority over the community in Ephesus.²¹⁶ Furthermore, the use of the present participle connotes the continuous presence of the Risen Lord in his community.

In the second descriptive clause, the writer employs a symbology, “seven golden lampstands” (τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν), interpreted by Jesus as the “seven churches” (ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι - 1:20). However, while in 1:13, the Son of Man stood in the midst of the lampstands, in 2:1 he is walking (περιπατῶν) in the midst of them. The present participle form emphasizes the continuity of the action. The metaphor alludes to YHWH’s promise in Exod. 33:14 and therefore connotes Christ’s dynamic presence, the assurance ‘to walk with them’ in every situation and constantly caring for them.²¹⁷

3.2.3 Judgement (2:2-4, 6)

² οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου καὶ τὸν κόπον καὶ τὴν ὑπομονὴν σου καὶ ὅτι οὐ δύνη βαστάσαι κακοὺς, καὶ ἐπείρασας τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν καὶ εὗρες αὐτοὺς ψευδεῖς, ³ καὶ ὑπομονὴν ἔχεις καὶ ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου καὶ οὐ κεκοπίακες. ⁴ ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφήκες.⁶ ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχεις, ὅτι μισεῖς τὰ ἔργα τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν ἃ κἀγὼ μισῶ.

²¹⁵ F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Chicago - London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 113.

²¹⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 131.

²¹⁷ Garland, *A Testimony of Jesus Christ*, 211.

After the self-presentation of the Risen Lord, the speaker proceeds to pronounce judgement on the ἐκκλησία. The author employs elements of blame and praise to urge the churches to both discontinue their negative behaviour and continue their positive works respectively.²¹⁸

The judgement begins with the positive characteristics of the church. The section starts with a knowledge formula “I know your works” (οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου). The verb οἶδα connotes the Risen Lord’s intuitive and precise knowledge of the works of the Ephesian church.²¹⁹ Thomas asserts that οἶδα reflects profound knowledge compared to γινώσκω which connotes progressive knowledge.²²⁰ It translates the Hebrew verb עָרַף which means deep or intimate knowledge (Jer. 1:5; Exod. 3:7; cf. Matt. 26:72, 74; John 8:19; 2 Cor. 5:16; 2 Thess. 1:8). Thus, it also connotes loving knowledge.

Mounce comments that the Risen Lord’s knowledge of the community is not fragmentary; he knows their overall manner of life;²²¹ in light of this, the ἔργα refers to the whole life of the Christian community. The terms ‘toil’ (κόπος) and ‘endurance’ (ὑπομονή) summarize the good works; κόπος is expanded in 2:2 and ὑπομονή is expatiated in 2:3; the two nouns represent both the outward and active side or the inward and passive side of the ἔργα.²²² The author used κόπος to indicate that the Ephesian church was engaged in slavish toil to

²¹⁸ Five of the messages possess both negative and positive judgements while two of them possess only positive judgements. The messages that are made up of both positive and negative judgments are the messages to Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. Those that possess only positive judgements include the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia.

²¹⁹ Gingrich, *A Shorter Lexicon*, 136.

²²⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 133.

²²¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.

²²² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 134.

the point of exhaustion while ὑπομονή was employed to show that they endured with lasting patience every burden they encountered.²²³

The ‘labour’ of the Ephesian church is manifested in their resistance to false apostles (2:2b). Koester opines that they were traveling evangelists who had come to Ephesus from elsewhere,²²⁴ while Mounce contends that these apostles were Judaizers from Jerusalem (2 Cor. 11:13-23), Nicolaitans (v. 6) or any self-styled apostles who were claiming authority over the local assembly.²²⁵ Thomas agrees with Mounce but explains that these self-proclaimed apostles are itinerant Nicolaitan missionaries who presented themselves as equal or superior to the apostles.²²⁶

Verse 2b demonstrates that the Ephesian church did not ‘bear’ (βαστάζω) with those who are evil (κακός). Κακός describes the basic characteristic of the false apostles, and it connotes both moral and spiritual evil.²²⁷ The magnitude of the opposition the Ephesian church posed to these false teachers is emphasized by the syntagm οὐ δύνη βαστάσα. A literal understanding of the term βαστάζω means to carry or pick up.²²⁸ However, it is also used figuratively in other contexts where it means “to bear intense heat (cf. Matt. 20:12) or the weaknesses of others (cf. Rom. 15:1).”²²⁹ The figurative motif is employed in this context to describe the unwillingness of the Ephesian church to tolerate or be led astray by the false teachers.

²²³ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 134.

²²⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 262.

²²⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 76.

²²⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 136.

²²⁷ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary*, 561-62.

²²⁸ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 34.

²²⁹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 34.

The text also indicates that the church ‘tested’ (ἐπείρασας) the apostles and found them false (ψευδεῖς). Πειράζω connotes, in fact, the idea of critically examining a person or a person’s claim to see if they are valid;²³⁰ in the context of the message to Ephesus, these self-acclaimed apostles were found to be false. Thus, although they called themselves apostles (τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς), they were not genuine apostles of the Risen Lord. They probably were part of the Nicolaitans the author later mentioned (v. 6).

After describing the ‘labour’ of the Ephesian church in 2:2b, the author turns to their ‘endurance’ (ὑπομονή), their patient perseverance and steadfastness in hard times,²³¹ further elaborated by two phrases: “and bearing up for my name’s sake” (καὶ ἐβάστασας διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου) and “and have not grown weary” (καὶ οὐ κεκοπίακες). In light of this, the church endured (βαστάζω) because of the name of the Risen Lord and did not grow weary. Although what she endured are not explicitly mentioned, the immediate context suggests that it refers to their resistance to false teaching (2:2). This affirms the extent of the loyalty of the church to the Risen Lord and her desire to glorify him.

In v. 4, the previous triumphant tone changes abruptly with the introduction of the adversative conjunction ἀλλά (but), which signals a sudden change from commendation to condemnation. The author uses the formular “I have this against you” (ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ) to introduce the spiritual and moral problem confronting the Ephesian church, which conveys divine displeasure and warns of future judgement in case the situation does not change.²³²

²³⁰ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 154.

²³¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 76.

²³² Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 76

The Risen Lord's displeasure about the church bothers on the abandonment of their first love (τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφῆκες). Although this was the only condemnation pronounced on this church, it was a significant issue that threatened the existence the church.²³³ Beasley-Murray argues that the 'love' the church in Ephesus has forsaken is love for one another.²³⁴ Ladd agrees with Beasley-Murray but adds that the church in Ephesus lost her love through her resistance to the false teachers and their teaching.²³⁵ Other scholars like Duvall argue that the love in this context connotes love for God.²³⁶ Finally, scholars like Osborne and Thomas contend that it constitutes both love for God and for one another since it is difficult to separate love for humans from love for God.²³⁷

In view of the foregone discussion, the researcher concludes that the problem with the Ephesian church is the loss of love for one another for the following reason. First, the church's love for the Risen Lord is evident in their labour and constant endurance for the name of Jesus (his person and gospel). Second, the church's reaction to the heretical group connotes perhaps a violent division between the Christian community and the group. The church could not bear with them, tested the self-acclaimed apostles, found them false, and hates the works of the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:2,6). Thus, the community acted with determination but without mercy. In this case, the condemnation pronounced on the church by the Risen Lord constitutes a strong appeal to reconciliation.

²³³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 76

²³⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, "The Contribution of the Book of Revelation to the Christian Belief in Immortality," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 75.

²³⁵ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 39.

²³⁶ J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation* (Teach the Text Commentary Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 88.

²³⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 140.

The Risen Lord proceeded to reiterate the church's commitment to resisting false teaching (2:6). The return to the topic of vv. 2-3 has a repetitive and expansive motif and hence the false apostles in v. 2 are now identified as Nicolaitans (v. 6).²³⁸ As a result, v. 6 functions both as a return to the commendation of vv. 2-3 and as a further encouragement to the church to repent and persevere. This commendation is introduced by "but you have this" (ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχετε), which implies a contrast with the condemnation, and a threat of impending punishment if they do not repent. The church is commended for hating 'the works' (τὰ ἔργα)²³⁹ of a group called Nicolaitans (τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν). The author used the present indicative of the verb 'to hate' (μισέω) to indicate the imperfective and present nature of their attitude towards the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

Concerning the identity of the Nicolaitans, scholars offer three main suggestions. First, they are believed to be the followers of Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven original deacons (Acts 6:5), a Jewish proselyte, who was an apostate.²⁴⁰ Second, the group began through a misinterpretation of a statement by Nicolaus; they indulged in the lust of the flesh and were an early expression of Gnosticism.²⁴¹ Third, the word Nicolaitan comes from the Greek words νῆκος (conqueror) and λαός (people) and thus means 'conqueror of the

²³⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 147.

²³⁹ Osborne holds that the practices of the Nicolaitans are linked with Balaam (2:14-15) and Jezebel (2:20-23). And the sins committed by these people are idolatry and immorality, which are believed to be accommodations of pagan practices like emperor worship and an antinomian type of libertinism.

²⁴⁰ Adolf von Harnack, "The sect of the Nicolaitans and Nicolaus, the deacon in Jerusalem," *The Journal of Religion* 3, no. 4 (1923): 417.

²⁴¹ Stephen Benko, "The Libertine Gnostic Sect of the Phibionites according to Epiphanius," *Vigiliae Christianae* 21, no. 1 (1967): 103.

people,' whose parallel in Hebrew is Balaam, which also means 'devourer of the people.' For this reason, they were probably the followers of the prophet Balaam (Num. 22-24).²⁴²

The teaching of the Nicolaitans promoted sexual immorality (πορνεία), and approved eating of food sacrificed to pagan gods (φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα), which constitutes participation in their worship.²⁴³ As a consequence, they indorse compromise with the society because the refusal to partake in the banquet where meat sacrificed to idol was eaten create a sort of socio-economic alienation; some of these meals, in fact, were eaten in meetings organized by trade guilds of which one must be part of to be able to thrive in business.

The group was probably quite prominent in the area because they are mentioned in two other messages namely the letter to Pergamum (2:14-15) and Thyatira (2:20). However, the reader can note a progression: while Ephesus hated their works, Pergamum welcomed them (2:15), and Thyatira allowed them to operate (2:20).

3.2.4 Exhortation (2:5)

⁵ μνημόνευε οὖν πόθεν πέπτωκας καὶ μετανόησον καὶ τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον· εἰ δὲ μὴ, ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς, ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσῃς.

After indicting the church in Ephesus, the Risen Lord urged her to change her ways. The author used three verbs in the imperative mood; present (μνημόνευε - remember) and aorist

²⁴² David A. DeSilva, "The Social Setting of the Revelation to John: Conflicts within, Fears without," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (1992): 293.

²⁴³ Adela Yarbro Collins, "Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1-3 (1986): 316-17.

(μετανόησον, ποιήσον - repent, do), to exhort the community to continually ‘remember,’ and urgently repent and return to the first works; the fraternal love.²⁴⁴

He commanded them to ‘remember’ (μνημόνευε) from whence they have ‘fallen’ (πέπτωκας). The verb has a clear Old Testament background; the root רָזַח is central in the Deuteronomistic tradition, where the life of Israel, her journey with God, is based on remembrance.²⁴⁵

The purpose is repentance and a return to perform their first works since μετανόησον calls for a decisive change of attitude with its resultant action.²⁴⁶ Osborne defines repentance as the change of heart that involves the repudiation of the past as well as embrace of a new lifestyle.²⁴⁷ In view of this, they are to deliberately repudiate their former sins and wholehearted return to a life marked by love for one another.

The consequence if the church does not convert is expressed with the metaphor, “I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand from its place” (ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς). It is sandwiched between two conditional phrases ‘if you do not’ (εἰ δὲ μή) and ‘except you repent’ (ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσης). The use of conditionals to frame the judgment statement produces a powerful effect by underscoring the way out of their predicament, which is repentance.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴ Black states that the aorist imperative generally denotes an urgent command without regard to its continuation or frequency while the present imperative generally denotes a command to continue to do an action or to do it repeatedly. Cf. Black, *Learn to Read New Testament Greek*, 219.

²⁴⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 142.

²⁴⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 142.

²⁴⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 103.

²⁴⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

Scholars hold different views on the meaning of ἔρχομαί σοι (“I am coming to you”). Some argue that it refers to the Parousia, while others maintain that it conveys the imminent coming of the Risen Lord to judge.²⁴⁹ The scholars who subscribe to the Parousia perspective contend that everywhere else ἔρχομαι occurs in the first three chapters, it refers to the Parousia (1:4, 7, 8; 2:16; 3:10, 11).²⁵⁰ Also, they insist that it is always presented as ‘imminent’ in the Apocalypse, and its force is always in view when the present tense of ἔρχομαι is used with a future tense (κινήσω).²⁵¹ Those who object to the Parousia perspective argue that this verse falls in a private letter and, therefore, its natural reading should be a private judgement upon this specific church. The foregone arguments notwithstanding, Osborne contends that the coming connotes both a private imminent judgement, which can mean salvation or punishment, and the Parousia since the verb connotes an initiated action.²⁵²

The writer implies that Christ will remove the church from her place at his coming (v. 5b). This metaphor has been interpreted differently by commentators. Hemer contends that κινήσω carries a historical undertones since Ephesus had been devastated on three occasions.²⁵³ Therefore, in line with the struggle of the city for survival, the church was also striving for its identity.²⁵⁴ Mounce maintains that the removal of the lampstand is a rhetorical strategy employed to underscore the critical need for love in the church; thus the church ceases to exist without love.²⁵⁵ The researcher aligns with the view of Mounce. The

²⁴⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

²⁵⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

²⁵¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

²⁵² Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

²⁵³ Hemer, *The Letters*, 53.

²⁵⁴ P. E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary* (Pillar Commentary Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 37.

²⁵⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 78.

Risen Lord highlights ‘brotherly love’ as a pivotal characteristic of the church. The issue of love is critical in a text considered to be part of Johannine literature where not only is God defined as ‘love’ (1 John 4:8) but love towards fellow humans is the ‘evidence’ of love towards God (cf. 1 John 4:20). Thus, love for fellow humans is the key feature by which the disciples of the Risen Lord are identified (cf. John 13:34-35).

3.2.5 Appeal to Listen to the Spirit (2:7a)

Ἦχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις.

The Risen Lord urges to the church to listen to the Spirit (v. 7a). The appeal emphasizes the role of the Spirit in the revelation and communication of the message to the churches.²⁵⁶ John employs the present tense form of the verb ‘to speak’ (λέγει) to emphasize its imperfective force. As a result, the Spirit spoke continually or repeatedly to the churches. Scholars have expressed varied views on the function of this appeal to listen to the Spirit. Beale, for example, maintains that this formula emphasizes God’s sovereignty in salvation.²⁵⁷ He argues that it alludes to Isa. 6:9-10 (cf. Mark 4:10-12) and thus, not everyone will heed the warning.²⁵⁸ Enroth also notes that it is a parenetic formula with a persuasive goal, and that it acts as a warning throughout the entire book.²⁵⁹ Osborne contends that it alludes to Jesus’ call to listen to the Spirit in the gospels (cf. Matt. 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35) and, therefore, it is a prophetic warning to the hearers to be

²⁵⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

²⁵⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 236-239.

²⁵⁸ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 236-239.

²⁵⁹ A. M. Enroth, “The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 600-604.

receptive to the truths of the kingdom.²⁶⁰ For this reason, it emphasizes the responsibility of the community members to open their ears, listen attentively and obey.

3.2.6 Promise (2:7b)

Τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ φαγεῖν ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ.

The message ends with a promise to the Ephesian church. The promise is not directed to everybody but to the one who overcomes, the ‘winner’ (τῷ νικῶντι); the author employs the present participle of the verb ‘overcome’ or ‘win’ (νικάω) to underscore its continuous or repeated nature. Thus, the qualification for attaining the promise is overcoming persistently, which constitutes a dynamic process of conversion towards a Christ-like life.²⁶¹ The ‘winner’ exemplifies perseverance and endurance, love and works of love, obedience to the Spirit and discernment to recognize and reject the false teacher. The promise to the ‘overcomer’ is the reward for obeying the message.²⁶² In view of this, the promise functions as an encouragement and motivation to the Ephesian church to obey the message.

The identity of the ‘overcomer’ is debated by scholars. Some scholars hold that the overcomers, who will participate in the promise, are those who repent.²⁶³ This view, nonetheless, has been challenged because identifying the overcomers as ‘obedient saints’ distinguishes two classes of Christians in Ephesus; those who obey the Risen Lord’s command to repent and those who do not. Thomas labels this assertion as unconvincing, because the promise to the overcomers involves eating of the tree of life (2:7), which is

²⁶⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

²⁶¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

²⁶² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 151.

²⁶³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

synonymous to the eternal blessings promised to all the saints in 22:2, 14.²⁶⁴ He argued further that the proponents fail to note that νικάω (to overcome or to prevail to win) in Revelation refers to faithfulness in challenging times because of unwavering trust in God (6:2; 11:7).²⁶⁵

In view of the forgone argument, the researcher agrees that the promise is for every member of the church in Ephesus. This is because the letters are prophetic in nature and, therefore, the author believes that the communities will repent. As a result, the promise is a rhetorical strategy employed by the author to persuade the church to be faithful to the Risen Lord.

The promise entails the possibility to eat of “the tree of life” (τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς), which is “in the paradise of God” (ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ). Against the backdrop of Jewish Apocalyptic literature, the tree of life connotes eternal life because it alludes to the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-24), where Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat from the tree of life due to their sin.²⁶⁶ However, scholars like Hermer, Kraft, Harrington, and Beale hold a different position. For example, Hermer argues that “the tree of life” in Revelation refers to the cross of Christ.²⁶⁷ He maintains that ξύλον usually refers to either the cross or the tree of life in the New Testament and because of this, the two images are connected.²⁶⁸ Consequently, he points out that it is the cross of Christ that produces life and makes it possible to inherit “the paradise of God.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 152.

²⁶⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 152.

²⁶⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 107.

²⁶⁷ Hermer, *The Letters*, 50-52.

²⁶⁸ Hermer, *The Letters*, 50-52.

²⁶⁹ Hermer, *The Letters*, 50-52.

These arguments notwithstanding, the researcher does not find Hermer's view convincing since in the book of Revelation, references to the crucifixion of Jesus (cf. 1:5, 12-16, 18; 5:5-6, 11-13; 13:8) are always associated with the resurrection; thus, the cross was defeated by Jesus. Considering this, the researcher aligns with scholars who hold that the metaphor alludes to the Garden of Eden in Gen. 2-3 because of the authors frequent allusions to the Tanak (500 times). As a result, it connotes a restorative motif; participation in God's life and immortality or unending life in the new Jerusalem.²⁷⁰

The word παράδεισος is derived from a Persian word that describes a pleasure garden or park with wild animals built for Persian monarchs.²⁷¹ In the New Testament, it is found only in Luke 23:43 and 2 Cor. 12:4 in addition to our text; all recurrences connote the abode of God, a permanent home of the redeemed with Christ.²⁷² Therefore, "the garden of delight has taken on the connotation of the new heavens and the new earth (cf. 21:1)."²⁷³ The church is presented as an entity that will experience unending and pleasurable life in the eschatological world. Thus, it is a rhetoric strategy employed by the author to urge the church to repent.



3.2.7 Summary

In the message to the church in Ephesus, the Risen Lord exhorts the community to embody love for one another even in the presence of divergent views. The community ceases to exist in the absence of love for one another because 'love' is the defining characteristic of the followers of Jesus (2:5; cf. John 13:34-35). Hence, despite the toil and endurance of the

²⁷⁰ Thomas, *Revelation* 1—7, 153.

²⁷¹ Thomas, *Revelation* 1—7, 153.

²⁷² Thomas, *Revelation* 1—7, 153.

²⁷³ Thomas, *Revelation* 1—7, 153.

community against false teaching, the Risen Lord threatens to remove the church if she fails to return to a life of love.

To guide their journey of conversion, the Risen Lord presents his relationship with the community as a model. He described himself not only as the one who has absolute authority over the community but also as the one who walks continually with them in every situation. His dynamic presence and care assure the community of his love demonstrated by dying for her (1:5), caring for them and living among them, notwithstanding their weaknesses. This is the kind of relationship that the community is called to emulate; selflessly loving one another. This exhortation is further emphasized by the promise to eat of “the tree of life” which connotes participating in God’s own unending life, in the eschatological kingdom. God is love and those who belong to him must walk in love.

3.3 The Message to the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

3.3.1 Address (2:8a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σμύρνῃ ἐκκλησίας γράψου.

The author begins the message to Smyrna with ‘and’ (καί), which in this context functions as a rhetorical signal to indicate the beginning of a new section. The conjunction καί is followed by the address which consists of a recipient “to the angel of the church in Smyrna” (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σμύρνῃ ἐκκλησίας) and the command to ‘write’ (γράψου).

Smyrna was one of the largest cities in Asia,²⁷⁴ comparable to Ephesus and Pergamum.²⁷⁵

It was a port city situated about forty miles north of Ephesus.²⁷⁶ The city officially came

²⁷⁴ Contemporary Turkey

²⁷⁵ Koester, *Revelation*, 272.

²⁷⁶ Duvall, *Revelation*, 96.

under Roman control after 133 BCE. It had a mixed population including Greeks, Jews, and Romans. The city was known for an impressive acropolis that towered above the sea, paved streets, colonnades, a library, a theatre, gymnasiums, baths, and a stadium. It had groups of goldsmiths, silversmiths, and winemakers, as well as associations for fishermen, porters, athletes, flax workers, and perhaps bankers.²⁷⁷

The city of Smyrna had a very intense religious life and a very strong support for the imperial cult. As a result, it erected an imperial temple in 26 CE to Tiberius, Livia, and the Roman Senate.²⁷⁸ The city had temples dedicated to the mother goddess Meter (also known as Cybele), Zeus, Tyche, Dionysus, and the Syrian goddess Atargatis. Additionally, some places in the city were sacred to the Ephesian Artemis and Apollo, Aphrodite Stratonikis, the Greek Herakles, the Anatolian god Men, and the Egyptian deity Anubis.²⁷⁹ A Christian community was probably established at Smyrna between 55 and 85 CE.²⁸⁰

3.3.2 Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (2:8b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν·

The author identifies the Risen Lord as the authority behind the message using the syntagm τάδε λέγει, again qualified with two descriptive phrases from the initial Christology: “the first and the last” (ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος; cf. 1:17) and “who died and came to life” (ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν; cf. 1:18).

²⁷⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 110.

²⁷⁸ Duvall, *Revelation*, 96.

²⁷⁹ Duvall, *Revelation*, 96.

²⁸⁰ Duvall, *Revelation*, 96.

The first description ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, translates the Hebrew רִאשׁוֹן אֶף אֲנִי אַחֲרָיון (cf. Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12).²⁸¹ Jesus Christ presents himself as the ‘continuous,’ ‘ever-present’ one, who has absolute sovereignty over history, comparable to YHWH.²⁸² This understanding is further supported by the various usages of the title in the Apocalypse of John. While it is primarily used to describe the Risen Lord (cf. 1:17; 2:8; 22:13), the same title “the Alpha and the Omega” is applied to God in 1:8 and 21:6.

This image of Christ provides comfort and encouragement to the community in Smyrna in time of crisis; her members were afflicted, made poor, and in danger of imprisonment and death. Thus, the image assures the community of the Risen Lord’s presence among them, because he has absolute power over history; their situation is not outside his control. He will ultimately direct history for their good.

The second description, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν, points to the historical events of Jesus’ death and resurrection.²⁸³ The verse employs two verbs in the aorist tense which underscore punctual time. As a result, the phrase connotes Jesus as one who has authority over death and the future. It also shows that Christ knows suffering and shared the ultimate human fragility, death. For this reason, he understands the pain and the challenges the community was facing. This description is an encouragement and comfort to the church in Smyrna in view of their persecution, which can lead to death. Although a person can be killed by the people of Smyrna, the Risen Lord offers ultimate security because he has the final say. In view of this, the existence of the church transcends physical death.

²⁸¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 71.

²⁸² G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publication, 2015), 71.

²⁸³ Ramsey, *The Letters*, 203.

3.3.3 Judgement (2:9)

οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πλούσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγὴ τοῦ σατανᾶ.

The speaker proceeds to pronounce judgement on the ἐκκλησία in Smyrna, which is entirely positive. The praise element of epideictic rhetoric is used to urge the church to persevere in the face of tribulation. The section starts with the knowledge formula (οἶδά) which connotes the perfect and intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ about the condition of the church; the Risen Lord knows their ‘affliction’ (θλίψις), ‘poverty’ (πτωχεία) and ‘slander’ (βλασφημία).

The word θλίψις means ‘affliction,’ ‘distress,’ ‘oppression’ or ‘tribulation.’²⁸⁴ It occurs in two other places in the book of Revelation (2:22; 7:14); in 2:22 it refers to the ‘afflictions’ that will come upon Jezebel and her disciples, and in 7:14 it indicates the persecution suffered by God’s people. In other texts of the New Testament, the word is used for the ‘tribulations’ at the end times (cf. Matt. 24:21, 29; Mark 13:19, 24).²⁸⁵ For this reason, Schüssler Fiorenza contends that the word suggests the “sufferings of the last days, which consist of possible exile, imprisonment, social ostracism, slander, poverty, economic exploitation, violence, and the constant threat of judicial action.”²⁸⁶

The θλίψις experienced by the church is qualified as poverty (τὴν πτωχείαν), since it was the offshoot of persecution which leads to isolation. Mounce comments, “in an antagonistic

²⁸⁴ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 90.

²⁸⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 78.

²⁸⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 50. Osborne maintains that the first term, τὴν θλίψιν, describes the primary problem while ἡν πτωχείαν and τὴν βλασφημίαν constitute its specifications. This view is supported by the text since the exhortation in 2:10 primarily focusses on the affliction the church will suffer in the future. Osborne, *Revelation*, 111.

environment, it would be difficult for the Christian to make a living, and thus many were economically destitute.”²⁸⁷ According to Hemer, the poverty was caused by “the destruction of the property of the saints by both Jewish and pagan mobs, the loss of jobs in a pagan atmosphere, the fact that Christians were often among the poorer classes, and the liberality of Christian giving in times of pressure (cf. 2 Cor. 8:2–5).”²⁸⁸ Beale opines that it was triggered by Roman antagonism towards the church because she did not ‘deify’ the emperor (cf. 13:16-17), and Jewish jealousy about the conversion of Gentile ‘God-fearers’ who were converting to Christianity.²⁸⁹

The author used the word ἀλλά to contrast the physical poverty of the church with its spiritual ‘riches’ (πλούσιος); while πτωχεία has a literal meaning, πλούσιος is employed metaphorically and refers to their spiritual richness.²⁹⁰ The contrast between the church in Smyrna and Laodicea is intriguing: the church in Smyrna is economically destitute but spiritually rich, while the church in Laodicea is economically wealthy but spiritually poor (3:17).

The affliction of the church is further described by the βλασφημία. The word occurs in four other verses (cf. 13:1, 5, 6; 17:3) where it means ‘blasphemy’ against God. It also connotes ‘insult,’ ‘denigration,’ ‘false accusation.’²⁹¹ Osborne observes that the slandering of the disciples is a form of blasphemy against God.²⁹² Collins believes that in this context, it refers specifically to lawsuits instigated against the saints in Smyrna by the Jews,²⁹³

²⁸⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 74.

²⁸⁸ Hemer, *The Letters*, 68.

²⁸⁹ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 240.

²⁹⁰ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 161.

²⁹¹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 35.

²⁹² Osborne, *Revelation*, 111.

²⁹³ Collins, “Vilification and Self-Definition,” 313.

because the slanderers are described in v. 9 as “those who say they are Jews and are not” (τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν) and “but are a synagogue of Satan” (ἀλλὰ συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανᾶ). The author employs the present participle of the verb λέγω to underscore the repetitive nature of the confession of their identity as God’s people. However, the author rejects their confession, and proceeds to clarify that they are not what they claim to be (καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν) because they belong to the “synagogue of Satan (συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανα).

The word Σατάν (Satan) is the Greek transliteration of שָׂטָן (cf. Job 1:6). In the book of Job, Satan connotes a heavenly being, who tests the righteous before God.²⁹⁴ However, in the intertestamental period, the word depicts the enemy of God and his followers who is “supremely hostile, filled with hatred and slander.”²⁹⁵ Mounce asserts that it means ‘slanderer’ or ‘false accuser.’²⁹⁶ As a result, the Jewish people have become one with Satan since they are opposing and slandering God’s ‘true’ people, those who follow Jesus even in time of distress.

From the discussion above, it is evident that faithful followers of God will always suffer affliction, persecution, and opposition from the world since to belong to God is to be different from the world; to internalize the values of the kingdom of God which are contrary to the values of the world. Thus, the faithful eschatological church is a persecuted church; persecution and affliction confirm the faithfulness of God’s people (cf. Luke 6:26).

²⁹⁴ Brown, *Dictionary of New Testament*, 468-69.

²⁹⁵ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 180.

²⁹⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.

3.3.4 Exhortation (2:10)

μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε καὶ ἕξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς.

The Risen Lord proceeds to exhort the church to persevere using three clauses (cf. 2:10), two instructions and one promise. The two exhortations, “do not fear what you are about to suffer” (μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν) and “be faithful unto death” (γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου) employ the present imperatives because they address a present situation.

The church must not fear what she is about to suffer (ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν) which implies that their ‘suffering’ will increase, since they continued to remain faithful to Jesus. In this context, ‘about to’ (μέλλω) connotes impending suffering, and the anticipation of the end (2:10; 6:10–11; 1:9; 12:4–5).²⁹⁷ Using another form of the verb μέλλω, the author clarifies the imminent ‘suffering’ (μέλλεις πάσχειν); some of them will be thrown into prison (μέλλει βάλλειν εἰς φυλακὴν).²⁹⁸ The Romans imprisoned for three reasons namely “coercion against recalcitrance, detention pending trial, and detention awaiting execution.”²⁹⁹ Hemer insists that detention pending trial, and detention awaiting execution best fit this context.³⁰⁰ Thus, the members of the community in Smyrna were going to face martyrdom for their faith.

The verse notes that ‘the devil’ (ὁ διάβολος) in 2:10 is the agent behind the imprisonment, which is another reference to the ‘Satan’ in 2:9. The word ‘devil’ (ὁ διάβολος) is derived

²⁹⁷ H. Balz and G. Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 2: 404.

²⁹⁸ The extent of the suffering awaiting the church is underscored not only by the second μέλλω but also by the introduction ἰδοὺ (behold); Osborne, *Revelation*, 113.

²⁹⁹ Hemer, *The Letters*, 68.

³⁰⁰ Hemer, *The Letters*, 68.

from the verb *diaballō* which means to throw over or across, divide, set at variance, accuse, bring charges, slander, inform, reject, misrepresent, deceive.³⁰¹ Consequently, it means slander, false accuser, divider etc.³⁰²

The aim of the imprisonment is to test the community (ὅνα πειρασθῆτε). The passive voice of the verb connotes a hidden agent. Commentators hold three main positions; while some hold that Satan is implied in the verse, others argue that the frequent use of divine passives in Revelation, coupled with the fact that the verse presents God as one who wields authority over the trial, indicates God as the most probable subject.³⁰³ However, some scholars contend that the passive voice evokes a double meaning. For instance, Beckwith asserts that “it is Satan’s goal to ‘tempt’ them to apostatize, but God’s purpose was to ‘test’ their faith and hence πειράζω carries these two motives.”³⁰⁴ The researcher aligns with those who hold that God is the subject; the expectation of the Risen Lord for the community is faithfulness so that he can give them the crown of life (2:10b). For this reason, it can be concluded that affliction and persecution from the world is one of the ways God refines his people and tests the genuineness of his followers (Jam. 1:2-4). Afflictions do not destroy the church but build her for God’s glory, praise and honour (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7).

The saints in Smyrna will not only experience imprisonment but suffer affliction for ten days (ἐξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα). Different interpretations, both literal and symbolic, of the ‘ten days’ (ἡμερῶν δέκα) have emerged. Nevertheless, four has been dominant. Alford argue that ἡμερῶν δέκα refers to a period that is short but complete (cf. Gen. 24:55; Num.

³⁰¹ Brown, *Dictionary of the New Testament*, 468.

³⁰² Brown, *Dictionary of the New Testament*, 468.

³⁰³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 114.

³⁰⁴ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 454.

11:19; Dan. 1:12),³⁰⁵ while scholars like Osborne hold that it alludes to the ten days period of testing of in the book of Daniel (cf. Dan. 1:12–14), and thus a limited period.³⁰⁶ Other scholars like Mounce maintain that the period is limited but extended enough to designate a significant persecution.³⁰⁷ Additionally, some like Thomas propose that the ‘ten days’ are literal and refer to an unknown persecution within a definite period during the generation to which this message was addressed.³⁰⁸ Examining the varied positions, the researcher holds that ‘ten days’ connotes a limited time with severe persecution. Accordingly, it signifies that the period is in God’s control, even though it will be a terrible time.

In view of the impending affliction, the author exhorts the church to be steadfast (γίνου πιστός); faithful until death (ἄχρι θανάτου). The author continues to motivate the community to persevere by promising them “the crown of life” (τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς). According to Metzger, the crown of life refers to “a victor’s crown, an athletic and military metaphor, linked with the idea of ‘overcoming’ in verse 11 where a garland wreath was placed around the head of the victorious athlete at the games.”³⁰⁹ City ‘crowns’ were also given posthumously to leading citizens which aligns with the death-life antithesis in the verse which implies a comparison between the Smyrneans who bestow their honour on the dead, and the Risen Lord who gives spiritual life to those who die physically for his sake.³¹⁰ Consequently, death is not the end for the saints in Smyrna, they will live again because they belong to the Risen Lord.

³⁰⁵ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, 1976) 4:567.

³⁰⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 114

³⁰⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 81.

³⁰⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 170.

³⁰⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 33.

³¹⁰ Hemer, *The Letters*, 73-75.

3.3.5 Promise (2:11b)

Ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἕκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου.

The message ends with a promise to those who conquer (ὁ νικῶν) in the church in Smyrna. The promise is captured in the negative “will not be hurt by the second death” (οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἕκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου) of what was already promised to the faithful in 2:10b: “I will give you the crown of life.” In view of 20:6, 14 and 21:8, the second death means the “lake of fire,” which is the final eternal death. It connotes eternal separation from the presence of God in pain and anguish.³¹¹ The author, by his reference to this second death, underscores the fact that physical death is temporary and superficial and thus assures the community of eternal life in the presence of God in view of their relationship with the Risen Lord.

3.3.6 Summary

The community in Smyrna was a community in affliction. They were persecuted to the extent of poverty, imprisonment, and death. As a result, the Risen Lord introduces himself to the community as “the first and the last” and the one “who died and came to life.” As “the first and the last,” he is the ever-present, the one who has absolute sovereignty over history; this comforts and assures the community since Jesus is in control of their affliction and he will steer everything to a perfect end. Introducing himself as one “who died and came to life,” Jesus offers himself as a model for the persecuted community; he was tortured and killed but he triumphed over death in his bodily resurrection. As a result, according to the teaching of Jesus, persecution is a mark of being a true disciple who is committed to the mission of Jesus (cf. Luke 6:26; John 15:20).

³¹¹ Hemer, *The Letters*, 73-75.

However, the Risen Lord instructs the church to be courageous and faithful because he overcame death, and he is sovereign over time. They are to be courageous even to the point of losing their belongings and life since as followers of Jesus, they have spiritual ‘riches’ that supersede physical properties. In fact, physical death is not the end for the true disciples of Jesus, because awaiting them in the eschatological world is the crown of life. The church is, therefore, expected to perceive their current affliction as a test from God; its purpose is to refine the genuineness of her faith in God. The church can triumph over this trial since God controls even the extent of affliction.

3. 4 The Message to the Church in Pergamum

3.4.1 Address (2:12a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Περγάμῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον·

The address signals to the reader the beginning of a new message directed to the church in Pergamum. Pergamum is situated about seventy miles toward the northern part of Smyrna. It gained its significance during the third century BCE as a military fortress.³¹² Consequently, it grew to become a powerful city in the Roman province of Asia. The city was known as a major intellectual centre because of its rich library.³¹³ It was also an important political and religious centre in the first century. The people worshipped Zeus (“king of the gods”), Athena (“goddess of victory and patron of the city”), Dionysus (“patron god of the dynasty, symbolized by a bull”), and Asclepius (“god of healing, symbolized by a serpent”).³¹⁴ It was the first city that built a temple for a living ruler,

³¹² Osborne, *Revelation*, 118.

³¹³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 118.

³¹⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 118.

Augustus, in 29 CE and thus became the centre for the worship of Emperor;³¹⁵ consequently, it was named *neōkoros* (warden of the imperial worship). Krodel observes that Christians in the city were persecuted because of ‘imperial cult’ since it is inseparably linked to loyalty and patriotism.³¹⁶ As a result, refusal to partake in it was perceived as rebellion and insubordination.

3.4.2 Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (2:12b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἔχων τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖαν·

The Risen Lord is described as the “one who has the sharp two-edged sword” (ὁ ἔχων τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖαν; cf. 1:16). Ramsay observes that the two-edged sword is the symbol of absolute authority, and therefore, compares Jesus with the official authority of Rome situated in Pergamum.³¹⁷ Nonetheless, scholars like Moyise observe that the imagery alludes to Isa. 11:4 and as a result carries a judgement motive;³¹⁸ he argues that the image presents the Risen Lord as the one who holds “universal judicial authority.”³¹⁹ Swete agrees with Moyise but adds that it combines the force of a warrior defeating his enemies in battle and pronouncing judgment upon them.³²⁰ Thus, the Risen Lord introduces himself to the community as the divine judge who has absolute authority.

This implies that the church is an entity that is accountable only to the Risen Lord. For this reason, it is warned since some members of the community were holding the teaching of

³¹⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 118.

³¹⁶ G. A. Krodel, *Revelation* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 114.

³¹⁷ Ramsay, *The Letters*, 157.

³¹⁸ S. Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 31.

³¹⁹ Moyise, *The Old Testament*, 31.

³²⁰ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 18.

Balaam; the actions and inactions of the church will be judged by the Risen Lord. Furthermore, since the Roman imperial authority was present in Pergamum and afflicting the community; the author comforts, assures and encourages the readers that absolute authority belongs to Jesus alone and not to imperial Rome.

3.4.3 Judgement (2:13-15)

¹³ οἶδα ποῦ κατοικεῖς, ὅπου ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ, καὶ κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἀντιπᾶς ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ' ὑμῖν, ὅπου ὁ σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ. ¹⁴ ἀλλ' ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὀλίγα ὅτι ἔχεις ἐκεῖ κρατοῦντας τὴν διδαχὴν Βαλαάμ, ὃς ἐδίδασκεν τῷ Βαλάκ βαλεῖν σκάνδαλον ἐνώπιον τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα καὶ πορνεῦσαι. ¹⁵ οὕτως ἔχεις καὶ σὺ κρατοῦντας τὴν διδαχὴν [τῶν] Νικολαϊτῶν ὁμοίως.

The speaker proceeds to pronounce judgement on the ἐκκλησία in Pergamum. It includes both praise and indictment which is a rhetorical strategy employed by the author to urge the churches to reject the teaching of Balaam and persevere in their faithfulness to the Risen Lord even to the point of martyrdom.

The judgement begins with the affirmation of the positive characteristics of the church using the knowledge formula οἶδα already familiar to the readers. The Risen Lord knows the pagan environment in which they reside, and the faithfulness and perseverance of the church.³²¹ The text indicates the speaker knows where the church dwells (οἶδα ποῦ κατοικεῖς); a place where Satan dwells (ὅπου ὁ Σατανᾶς κατοικεῖ) and where Satan's throne is located (οἶδα ποῦ κατοικεῖς, ὅπου ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ - 2:13).³²²

³²¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 119.

³²² The verb κατοικέω means to inhabit, live, reside or settle and hence it indicates the place is not a transitory place for them but their home. As a result, both the church in Pergamum and Satan permanently inhabited the same place. The text further notes that the throne of Satan (ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ) is also located in Smyrna. Thrones signify special authority and royal governance in the ancient world, and hence Pergamum is portrayed as 'the seat of satanic power.' Cf. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 160; Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

Although many interpretations have surfaced regarding the meaning of ὁ θρόνος τοῦ σατανᾶ in this context, two have been prominent. The first view holds that it refers to the “idols, altars, shrines, and temples of Pergamum, as well as its extreme paganism.”³²³ This view is not convincing because its proponents fail to consider the fact that most of the cities mentioned in the two chapters practiced idolatry, and yet they were not classified as “the throne of Satan.” The second position holds that the phrase connotes the imperial cult.³²⁴ The researcher finds this school of thought more convincing since Pergamum was the centre of the imperial cult for all the province of Asia and thus it was at the core of Pergamum religion.³²⁵ For example, Osborne notes that it was the emperor worship that most directly occasioned the persecutions under Domitian and Trajan.³²⁶ Furthermore, the book of Revelation maintains that the imperial cult was the reason behind the affliction and persecution experienced by members of the Christian communities (cf. 13; 17).

The opposition of the city to the disciples of Jesus is emphasized by the killing of Antipas (καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἀντιπᾶς, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ’ ὑμῖν). Although there is no information about “the days of Antipas” (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις), his death suggests that the period was marked by violent persecution (cf. 6:9-11; 12:17; 13:10).³²⁷

Although Pergamum is marked by oppression because it is the location of Satan’s throne, the community is commended for holding fast the name of the Risen Lord (καὶ κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου) and refusing to deny the faith (καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου).

³²³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

³²⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

³²⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

³²⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 120.

³²⁷ Aune notes that the central feature of the period is Roman opposition and persecution of Christians. D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997), 183-84.

After praising the church in Pergamum for its strengths, the author indicts them for their weakness. Like the message to the community in Ephesus, this section begins with the formula “but I have this against you” (ἀλλ’ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὀλίγα). The addition of word ὀλίγα (a few things) highlights the seriousness of the problem.³²⁸ The weakness of the community is stated in vv. 14-15: some of its members were holding (κρατοῦντας) the teaching of Balaam (τὴν διδασχὴν Βαλαάμ) and the teaching of the Nicolaitans (τὴν διδασχὴν τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν). The text indicates their attitude using the present participle active of the verb κρατέω (to hold firm or grasp),³²⁹ to underline the commitment and full acceptance of these ‘heretic’ teachings by this group.

Balaam’s cult in v. 14 is associated with the Nicolaitans in v. 15 using the connecting adverb ‘likewise’ (οὕτως) at the beginning of v. 15. This relationship is further emphasized by ‘also’ (καί) and the second ‘likewise’ (ὁμοίως) in the same verse. As a result, it raises a question about the relationship between the two groups. Thomas points out that the frequency of the comparative adverbs in v. 15 is emphatic, and thus the ‘Balaamite’ group and the Nicolaitan movement in vv. 14–15 describe similar but separate movements.³³⁰ Osborne contends that the adverbs do not compare two identical groups, but a single group called the Nicolaitans.³³¹

Consequently, he adds the text merely compares the Jewish tradition about Balaam with the activities of the Nicolaitan movement.³³² The researcher finds Osborne’s view more convincing because in v. 14, the text focusses primarily on the teaching of Balaam as an

³²⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

³²⁹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 113.

³³⁰ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 193.

³³¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

³³² Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

event that took place in the past; the text identified Balaam, Balak, the Sons of Israel, and the teaching of Balaam. As a result, the sect is the Nicolaitan movement, which the author compares with the teaching of Balaam in the Torah.

The text reveals that Balaam taught Balak to put a stumbling block before (βαλεῖν σκάνδαλον ἐνώπιον) the sons of Israel; the language connotes to leading a person into apostasy.³³³ The two aspects of the ‘teaching’ are eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing sexual immorality. Considering the references in the messages to Ephesus and Thyatira, it is likely the group focussed on orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy.

These two sins are also mentioned in the message to Thyatira (2:20) but in a reversed order. For this reason, Hemer argues that the change in position is on account of the wide popularity of the imperial cult in Pergamum, which makes emperor worship (idolatry) the main problem in the city; while sexual immorality is probably the substantive problem in Thyatira, in view of prevalence of its guilds.³³⁴

Πορνεῦσαι (to commit immorality) can be interpreted both literally (cf. 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), and metaphorically to denote idolatry (cf. 2:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9) on the backdrop of the Old Testament imagery of an unfaithful wife ‘whoring’ after other gods (cf. Isa. 57:3, 8; Hos. 2:2–13).³³⁵ However, in this context as in 2:20, its mention with idolatry stresses literal promiscuity; the false teachers taught their followers to practice both idolatry and immorality.

³³³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

³³⁴ Hemer, *The Letters*, 91.

³³⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

The church is called by God to be distinct from the world in worship and lifestyle; she must worship God alone and not engage in immoral sexual behaviour. Further, it is a call to steadfastness in a situation in which ‘compromise’ with the socio-political context appears to be the only possible way to escape persecution, experience social inclusion and economic prosperity. Thus, it was a choice between life and death, both metaphorically, social and economic death, and physically, martyrdom.

3.4.4 Exhortation (2:16)

μετανόησον οὖν· εἰ δὲ μή, ἔρχομαί σοι ταχύ καὶ πολεμήσω μετ’ αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου.

The speaker exhorts the church to repent; employing an aorist imperative (μετανόησον) which conveys the urgency of the command to repent, namely to stop practicing the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The exhortation is introduced by the coordinating conjunction ‘therefore’ (οὖν) which indicates that this repentance is connected to the judgement (vv. 14-15).

The author asserts that if the church does not (εἰ δὲ μη) repent, the Risen Lord will come (ἔρχομαι) and wage war (πολεμέω) against her with the sword of his mouth (τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου). The combination of the futuristic present tense “I am going to come to you” (ἔρχομαί σοι), with ‘soon’ (ταχύ) underscores the imminence of the coming judgment. The verb πολεμέω is a metaphor built on the ‘divine warrior’ theme in the Old Testament (Deut. 9:17; Ps. 136:2; Isa. 11:4; 49:2; 62:2-3; Dan. 2:17; Joel 3:13).³³⁶ The phrases “the sword of my mouth” (τῇ ῥομφαίᾳ τοῦ στόματός μου) in v. 16 and “the two-edged sword”

³³⁶ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 133.

(τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξειαν) in v. 12 convey the same meaning, which is divine judgement.

The exhortation shows that there is hope and future because it implies the Risen Lord believes that the members who went astray can ‘turn,’ convert, change, and embrace the steadfastness which characterizes the ἐκκλησία in Pergamum. The writer employs a ‘prophetic’ perspective; he trusts the community and he believes that people can change.

3.3.5 Promise (2:17b)

Τῷ νικῶντι δώσω αὐτῷ τοῦ μάννα τοῦ κεκρυμμένου καὶ δώσω αὐτῷ ψῆφον λευκὴν, καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ψῆφον ὄνομα καινὸν γεγραμμένον ὃ οὐδεὶς οἶδεν εἰ μὴ ὁ λαμβάνων.

The message to the church in Pergamum ends with the promise to give to the one who conquers some of the hidden manna and a white stone. There are several discussions on the meaning of the “hidden manna;” the researcher shares the opinion of scholars like Mounce and Aune who contend that it alludes to a Jewish legend. Manna was the ‘supernatural’ food that Israel ate in the wilderness in the time of Moses (Exod. 16:4; Neh. 9:15). The manna ceased when the Israelites entered the promise land (Josh. 6:31-32), but a jar was kept in the tabernacle (Exod. 16:32-34). Against this backdrop, the legend posits that the manna was found in the desert and placed in the Ark of the Covenant, and later was hidden underground, at Mount Horeb, by the prophet Jeremiah after the destruction of Solomon’s temple.³³⁷ There is waiting for the eschaton when the Ark will be placed in the

³³⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 84.

new temple by the Messiah.³³⁸ Against this backdrop, the promise is linked to the final feast of the Messiah and connotes the eternal enjoyment in heaven.³³⁹

Majority of scholars agree that the reference to the “white stone” (ψῆφον λευκήν) originates from the practice of giving stones to members of guilds or winners in sport events; which they use to secure entrance to feasts, games as well as free food locations.³⁴⁰ The text shows that the white stone will bear a new name (ὄνομα καινόν) that no one knows except the receiver. This name can either be God’s name (cf. 3:12) or a new name given to the members of the community. Nevertheless, since the name will be known by no one else, a private name seems more likely because it is difficult to comprehend how God’s name will be revealed to only an individual.

It is important to note that the name in the Bible reveal the essence of a person’s character, and his/her mission.³⁴¹ For example, the name ‘Emmanuel’ which means ‘God is with us,’ was bestowed upon the new prince of Judah to be born amid calamities of the Syrio-Ephraimite crisis in late 700 BCE (cf. Isa. 7). Consequently, the name connotes God’s presence with his people during crisis. Also, Eve means “mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20), Abraham means “father of a multitude” (Gen. 17:4-6), and Sampson means “strong” (Judg. 13:24; 16:6). Thus, the new name denotes the bestowal of a new identity and a new mission, a call to the community in Pergamum to embody the character and mission of the Risen Lord.

³³⁸ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 185.

³³⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 185.

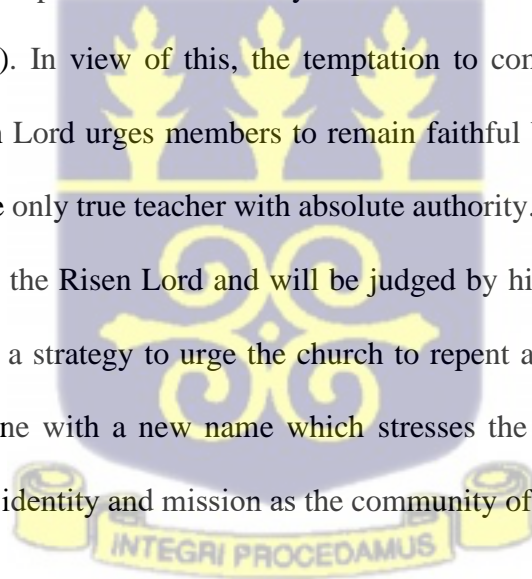
³⁴⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 124.

³⁴¹ Blazenka Scheuer, “Animal Names for Hebrew Bible Female Prophets,” *Literature & Theology* 31, no. 4 (December 2017): 457; doi:10.1093/litthe/frx032.

3.3.6 Summary

The message to the church in Pergamum underscores the fact that the followers of Jesus cannot compromise with their environment because they are expected to embrace a unique identity and mission. Consequently, the Risen Lord instructs the church to refrain from accommodating the values of their surrounding culture; eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality. Hence, the church is called to be coherent with her identity, in worship and lifestyle.

The presence of the imperial cult in this city makes faithfulness to Jesus very costly; it can lead to death (2:13). In view of this, the temptation to compromise is very appealing. However, the Risen Lord urges members to remain faithful by presenting himself as the divine judge and the only true teacher with absolute authority. Consequently, the church is accountable only to the Risen Lord and will be judged by him. The Risen Lord used the judgement motif as a strategy to urge the church to repent and convert; he promises the faithful a white stone with a new name which stresses the need for the community to 'recover' her 'new' identity and mission as the community of Jesus.



CHAPTER FOUR

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF REVELATION 2:18—3:22

4.1 The Message to the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

4.1.1 Address (2:18a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Θυατείροις ἐκκλησίας γράψον·

The address signals the beginning of a new message directed to the church in Thyatira, modern-day Akhisar, a commercial town situated forty miles on the south-eastern side of Pergamum.³⁴² The city's population was mixed, with several different nationalities.³⁴³ It originated as a military base and hence had little peace prior to the arrival of the Pax Romana. Apollo (“the sun god and son of Zeus”) was the main deity worshipped in Thyatira.³⁴⁴ The city's worship was associated with both Apollo's shrine and the guilds. There was little if any emperor worship.

It was located on trade routes and thus had commercial and manufacturing opportunities. For this reason, it had many trade guilds consisting of shoemakers, producers, and traders in dyed cloth, tanners, potters, wool and linen workers, and metal workers.³⁴⁵ The guilds were at the heart of civic life; they were also religious in nature since the guilds have specific deities they worship during their feasts.³⁴⁶ Since guild feasts were essential parts of social and commercial life, refusal to join means social and commercial exclusion.

³⁴² Hermer, *The Letters*, 107.

³⁴³ Hermer, *The Letters*, 107.

³⁴⁴ Koester, *Revelation*, 296.

³⁴⁵ Hemer, *The Letters*, 108.

³⁴⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 208.

4.1.2 Self- Presentation of the Risen Lord (2:18b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ ἔχων τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ ὡς φλόγα πυρὸς καὶ οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ ὅμοιοι χαλκολιβάνῳ·

After the address, the author identifies the Risen Lord as “the Son of God” (ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ). Although the Father and the Son have a unique relationship (1:6; 2:27; 3:5) according to the book of Revelation, this is the only verse in which the title ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ appears.³⁴⁷ It is, however, frequently used in the Johannine Gospel (cf. 1:34; 3:18; 5:25) to emphasize the majesty and divinity of Jesus.³⁴⁸ This notwithstanding, the use in this context may be informed by the presence of Apollo, who is worshipped as the “son of Zeus,” in Thyatira. Consequently, the author portrays the Risen Lord as the true Son of God, rather than Apollo.³⁴⁹

The Son of God is portrayed by two clauses; “who has eyes like a flame of fire” (ὁ ἔχων τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ ὡς φλόγα πυρὸς) and “whose feet are like burnished bronze” (οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ ὅμοιοι χαλκολιβάνῳ cf. 1:14, 15), which are an allusion to Dan.10:6. The description of the “eyes like a flame of fire” signals the penetrating insight and judgment of Jesus,³⁵⁰ while the clause “whose feet are like burnished bronze” connotes the idea of strength and splendour.³⁵¹ Hence, the church belongs to the Risen Lord who is insightful in judgement, glorious in strength and has an intimate relationship with the Father.

The judgement motif underscores Jesus’ belief that the community will repent from tolerating the teachings of Jezebel and be faithful to him. The self-presentation of Jesus as

³⁴⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 128.

³⁴⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 128.

³⁴⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 128.

³⁵⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 128.

³⁵¹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 87.

the one with strength and splendour addresses the issue of strength in Thyatira, which was a Roman military base. Thus, the Risen Lord exhorts the congregation not to put her trust in the military strength of the city because he alone has the true strength and glory, and he alone deserves their trust. Additionally, the Risen Lord calls the community to emulate him by pursuing intimate relationship with God; an intimate relationship that is pure and rejects syncretism.

4.1.3 Judgement (2:19-20)

¹⁹ οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν καὶ τὴν διακονίαν καὶ τὴν ὑπομονὴν σου, καὶ τὰ ἔργα σου τὰ ἔσχατα πλείονα τῶν πρώτων. ²⁰ ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι ἀφεῖς τὴν γυναῖκα Ἰεζάβελ, ἣ λέγουσα ἑαυτὴν προφήτιν καὶ διδάσκει καὶ πλανᾷ τοὺς ἑμοὺς δούλους πορνεῦσαι καὶ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα.

The speaker pronounces judgement on the ἐκκλησία in Thyatira, which highlights their strengths and weaknesses. The section begins with the formula “I know your works” (οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα). The author lists ‘the works’ in 2:19a which include ‘love’ (τὴν ἀγάπην), ‘faith’ (τὴν πίστιν), ‘service’ (τὴν διακονίαν), and ‘endurance’ (τὴν ὑπομονήν).

Scholars like Beckwith assert that the four works constitute two pairs, where the initial two are the motivating factor (“love and faith”) and the last two are the ‘outcome’ (“service and endurance”).³⁵² The researcher finds this view convincing because love and faith are usually presented in the New Testament as the motivation for the actions of the disciples of Jesus (cf. John 14:15; James 2:26).

The love (τὴν ἀγάπην) connotes both love for God and for others.³⁵³ The love present in the congregation in Thyatira contrasts the loss of love experienced by the congregation in

³⁵² Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 465.

³⁵³ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 2.

Ephesus (2:4). The contrast between the two congregations is emphatic since the noun ἀγάπη is used only in the two messages (2:4, 19). The church did not only embody love but also possessed faith (πίστις). The meaning of the word in this context is debated among scholars. While Sweet contends that it connotes ‘faithfulness,’³⁵⁴ Thomas holds that it means ‘belief.’³⁵⁵ Yet still, other scholars like Gingrich maintain that πίστις connotes both faith and faithfulness.³⁵⁶ The researcher aligns with this position and believes that the term implies not only trust in God but also faithfulness to the Risen Lord amid difficult times. The word διακονία denotes first of all service, as caring, helping, and ministering to others;³⁵⁷ the church served one another on behalf of Jesus. Endurance (ὑπομονή) refers to perseverance during difficult times. In this context, it involves steadfastness in the face of open hostility and the pressures of false teaching.³⁵⁸

After listing the works, the author compares the latter and the first works (καὶ τὰ ἔργα σου τὰ ἔσχατα πλείονα τῶν πρώτων) of the church in Thyatira underlining that their “latter works” (τὰ ἔργα σου τὰ ἔσχατα) exceed (πλείονα) their “first works” (τῶν πρώτων). It can be concluded that she has grown in her identity, as the community of Jesus. Despite the persecution, she can stand because she is rooted in love (fraternal communion) and faith (communion with God). Thus, the growth of the church is measured in her capacity to testify love, faith, service, and endurance.

³⁵⁴ J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 94.

³⁵⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 212.

³⁵⁶ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 159.

³⁵⁷ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 49.

³⁵⁸ Koester, *Revelation*, 298.

After praising the church for her strengths (v. 19), the Risen Lord blames her for her weakness (vv. 20-23). This section begins with the usual formula “but I have this against you” (ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ) which expresses the displeasure of Jesus. The main problem with the church consists in tolerating (ἀφίημι) the woman called Jezebel (τὴν γυναῖκα Ἰεζάβελ). In this context, the verb ἀφίημι means to allow, permit, or tolerate,³⁵⁹ and the use of the present indicative active form stresses the presence of the doctrine in the church. While in the letter to Pergamum the verb κρατέω is employed, in this context the use of the stronger verb ἀφίημι underscores the tolerance, the support, and an unwillingness to oppose the teaching.³⁶⁰

Although the identity of Jezebel is unclear, it can be speculated that she was the leader of the Nicolaitan movement at Thyatira. Further, the name Jezebel is probably a shameful name given by the writer as an insult because it may allude to the wife of Ahab who led Israel into idolatry and sorcery (cf. 1 Kings 16:31–34; 2 Kings 9:22). The text, however, provides some information on her identity, “who calls herself prophetess” (ἡ λέγουσα ἑαυτὴν προφῆτιν), and her activities “teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols” (διδάσκει καὶ πλανᾷ τοὺς ἐμοὺς δούλους πορνεῦσαι καὶ φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα). Jezebel calls herself ‘prophetess’ which means she regards her teaching as a message from God.

Her primary activity was ‘teaching’ (διδάσκει) as a means to ‘seducing’ or ‘deceiving’ (πλανᾷ) the servants (δούλους) of God.³⁶¹ Πλανᾷ means “to seduce a person into sin by

³⁵⁹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 31.

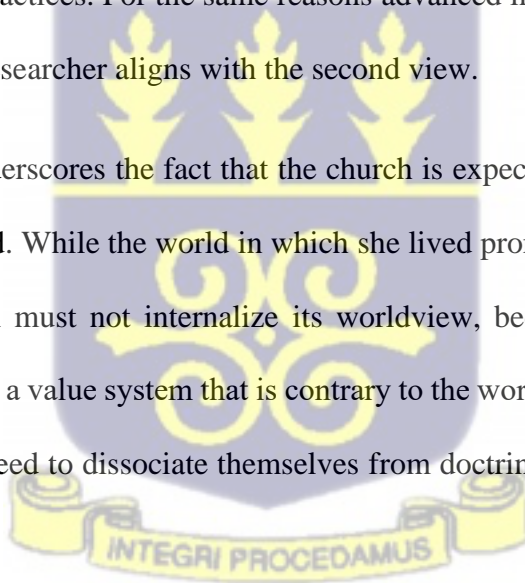
³⁶⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 130.

³⁶¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 130.

leading that him or her into error and thus emphasizes that the instructions from Jezebel were deceptive and incongruent with the accepted teaching of the community.”³⁶² The servants were taught and seduced to “practice sexual immorality” (πορνεία) and “to eat food sacrificed to idols” (φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα).

While the second practice clearly refers to the eating of meat in temples and during religious celebrations like guild feasts,³⁶³ there is scholarly debate about the interpretation of πορνεία. Some scholars propose a metaphorical meaning, idolatry, others opt for sexually immoral practices. For the same reasons advanced in the analysis of the message to Pergamum, the researcher aligns with the second view.

This indictment underscores the fact that the church is expected to be a unique entity, set apart from the world. While the world in which she lived promotes sexual immorality and idolatry, the church must not internalize its worldview, because she belongs to God’s kingdom, which has a value system that is contrary to the world’s value system. In view of this, the members need to dissociate themselves from doctrines that promote idolatry and sexual immorality.



4.1.4 Exhortation (2:21-25)

²¹ καὶ ἔδωκα αὐτῇ χρόνον ἵνα μετανοήσῃ, καὶ οὐ θέλει μετανοῆσαι ἐκ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς. ²² ἰδοὺ βάλλω αὐτὴν εἰς κλίνην καὶ τοὺς μοιχεύοντας μετ’ αὐτῆς εἰς θλίψιν μεγάλην, ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσωσιν ἐκ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς, ²³ καὶ τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς ἀποκτενῶ ἐν θανάτῳ. καὶ γνώσονται πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι ὅτι ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ἔραυνῶν νεφροὺς καὶ καρδίας, καὶ δώσω ὑμῖν ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν. ²⁴ ὑμῖν δὲ λέγω τοῖς λοιποῖς τοῖς ἐν Θυατείροις, ὅσοι οὐκ ἔχουσιν τὴν διδασχὴν ταύτην, οἵτινες οὐκ ἔγνωσαν τὰ βαθέα τοῦ σατανᾶ ὡς λέγουσιν· οὐ βάλλω ἐφ’ ὑμᾶς ἄλλο βάρος, ²⁵ πλὴν ὃ ἔχετε κρατήσατε ἄχρι[ς] οὗ ἂν ἴξω.

³⁶² Osborne, *Revelation*, 130.

³⁶³ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 1: 69.

Verse 21 indicates that Jezebel was given (ἔδωκα) time to repent (μετανοέω) but she did not repent (μετανοέω) of her πορνεία. For her refusal to repent, she will be thrown onto a ‘sickbed’ (κλίνη - 2:22). Commentators hold different views on the meaning of κλίνη. Hort argues that it refers to “a funeral bier” since her followers will be punished with death (v. 23),³⁶⁴ while Ramsay holds that it means “a dining couch” used at guild feasts.³⁶⁵ However, Osborne maintains it is a bed of sickness and pain.³⁶⁶ The researcher aligns with Osborne’s view because ‘bed’ in the Old Testament metaphorically represents severe illness (cf. Exod. 21:18; Ps. 41:3).

In v. 22b and v. 23, the author describes the people associated with Jezebel’s teaching with two clauses; “those who commit adultery with her” (οὓς μοιχεύοντας μετ’ αὐτῆς) and “her children” (τὰ τέκνα αὐτῆς). There is a debate about whether the clauses describe one or two different groups. Commentators like Beasley-Murray, argue that “adulterers” in 2:22 and the ‘children’ in 2:23 refer to a single group since they were all associated with her; the adulterers engaged in her sins, while her children fully accepted her teachings.³⁶⁷ This view, however, is unconvincing for the following reasons.

First, the punishment pronounced on the ‘adulterers’ in v. 22 is conditional in view of the phrase “unless they repent of her works” (ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήσωσιν ἐκ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς) while the punishment declared on the “children” is categorical. Secondly, the punishments for the two groups differ; “great tribulation” (θλίψιν μεγάλην) for the ‘adulterers’ and ‘death’ (ἀποκτενῶ ἐν θανάτῳ) for the ‘children.’ In view of these arguments, the researcher

³⁶⁴ F. J. A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John I–III* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 30.

³⁶⁵ Ramsay, *The Letters*, 351–52.

³⁶⁶ Ramsay, *The Letters*, 351–52.

³⁶⁷ Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (London: Oliphants, 1974), 91.

believes that they represent two different groups, since it is difficult to explain how the same group will suffer two conflicting punishments: while one of the punishments provides a way for repentance, the other is outright death.

As a result, the first group is made up of the members of the community who have been enticed by Jezebel's teaching but are likely to repent.³⁶⁸ This group will be thrown into θλίψιν μεγάλην, which refers to the 'tribulation' that the Risen Lord would send upon them. The goal of the tribulation is that the people will repent from Jezebel's works. The second group, on the other hand, refers to those who are totally committed to her teaching.³⁶⁹ The punishment for this group is death (ἀποκτενῶ ἐν θανάτῳ).

In v. 23b, the author indicates that the goal of the judgement is that "all the churches will know" (γνώσονται πᾶσαι αἱ ἐκκλησίαι) that "the Risen Lord searches the mind and heart" (ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ἐραυνῶν νεφροὺς καὶ καρδίαν), which conveys a warning. The word ἐραυνῶ means to critically investigate or examine something; in this context mind and heart (νεφρός and καρδία).³⁷⁰ As a result, the speaker desires them to know him as one whose judgement is not superficial but in-depth.

After this, the Risen Lord promises to give to each one according to his or her works (δίδωμι ἕκαστος κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν). While τὰ ἔργα may refer to the entire work of the church, its strengths and weaknesses,³⁷¹ it also connotes the specific works of the members of the community.

³⁶⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 132.

³⁶⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 132.

³⁷⁰ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 77.

³⁷¹ Hermer, *The Letters*, 182.

In v. 24, the author exhorts the rest of the community in Thyatira who do not hold the teaching of Jezebel. The conjunction ‘but’ (δὲ) signifies a shift from judgment (on the ungodly) to encouragement (for the godly). This group is identified in contradiction with Jezebel and the other groups using the adjective ‘remaining’ (λοιπός), which denotes those who had not been deceived by Jezebel. They have two characteristics: they do not hold (οὐκ ἔχουσιν) or they reject the teaching of Jezebel and second, they have not learned (οὐκ ἔγνωσαν) the deep things of Satan.

The deep things of Satan (τὰ βαθέα τοῦ σατανᾶ) can convey both literal and sarcastic undertones. Literally, it means to be acquainted with a teaching whose source is Satan³⁷² while it may also be a sarcasm on Jezebel’s claim to “know the deep things of God.”³⁷³

The author asserts that because they were intolerant of the teachings of Jezebel, they do not need to be given any further burden (βάρος) to carry. The word βάρος broadly means “weight, burden,” but “difficult task” or a “weighty” in this context.³⁷⁴ However, its meaning in this context is clarified in v. 25 “only hold fast what you have until I come.” This means that the only ‘burden’ to carry is what they were already doing. Thus, “no other burden” connotes continuing in faithfulness to the Risen Lord in terms of their ‘love,’ ‘faith,’ ‘service’ and ‘endurance.’ Since these people have not compromised by following Jezebel’s teaching, they are only expected to hold fast to their faithfulness.

³⁷² Osborne, *Revelation*, 153.

³⁷³ The verb γινώσκω means to ‘know by experience’ or simply to ‘perceive,’ ‘understand,’ or ‘believe.’ Cf. Hemer, *The Letters*, 183.

³⁷⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 153.

In v. 25, the author employed two verbs ἔχω and κρατέω to underscore how firm they are to hold what they have.³⁷⁵ In this context, ‘what you have’ (ὃ ἔχετε) points to the accepted Christian doctrines which are opposed to the heretical teachings of Jezebel since the aorist imperative ‘hold fast’ (κρατήσατε) is frequently employed in other portions of the New Testament to connote “keeping a firm grip” on the teachings of the faith (cf. Mark. 7:3; Col. 2:19; 2 Thess. 2:15).³⁷⁶ Further, they are to persevere in these truths until the Risen Lord comes (ἄχρι οὗ ἂν ἴξω) in salvation and judgement (cf. Matt. 24:14; 2 Pet. 3:10). In view of this exhortation, the church is an entity that has the responsibility of discerning the true gospel, and distinguishing true and ‘false prophets.’

4.1.5 Promise (2:26-28)

²⁶ Καὶ ὁ νικῶν καὶ ὁ τηρῶν ἄχρι τέλους τὰ ἔργα μου, δώσω αὐτῷ ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν ²⁷ καὶ ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ ὡς τὰ σκεύη τὰ κεραμικὰ συντριβεται, ²⁸ ὡς καὶ ἐλήφα παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου, καὶ δώσω αὐτῷ τὸν ἀστέρα τὸν πρωῖνόν.

The author makes two promises (2:26b-28) to the overcomer. In v. 26, the overcomer is described by the phrase “who keeps my words to the end” (ὁ τηρῶν ἄχρι τέλους τὰ ἔργα μου). The ‘works’ in v. 26 connotes holding on to the accepted Christian doctrine with its corresponding orthopraxy in view of the context (2:25). As a result, the use of the present participle active ὁ τηρῶν suggests that the overcomer is one who does these works to the end (ἄχρι τέλους).

The first promise is “authority over the nations” (ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν). Commentators remark that 2:26-27 is a paraphrase of Ps. 2:8-9, a messianic psalm, in which the Risen

³⁷⁵ The verb ἔχω is in the present indicative active and therefore has a continuous force while κρατέω is in the aorist imperative active and hence connote an urgent command. In view of this, the Risen Lord commands these people to urgently and continually hold on to what they have. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 470.

³⁷⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 135.

Lord replaces the Psalmist's 'inheritance' with the 'authority' (ἐξουσίαν) of conqueror over the nations (τῶν ἐθνῶν).³⁷⁷ Although some commentators contend that τῶν ἐθνῶν refers to the heretical cult, it is likely this eschatological promise refers to ruling over the whole world which is consistent with the theme of the disciples sharing in the final victory and rule of Christ (1:6; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4, 6). This assertion is further supported by other biblical texts. The Tanak indicates that the people of God will reign in the kingdom of the Messiah (cf. Ps. 149:5-9; Dan. 7:14, 18, 27; Isa. 60:14). In the New Testament, Jesus asserts that those who are meek will inherit the earth (cf. Matt. 5:5) and his followers will judge the twelve tribes (Luke 22:30). Further, 2 Tim. 2:12 intimates that the saints will rule with the Risen Lord (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

The writer elaborates on the concept by adding three explanations. First, the authority is described in v. 27 with "shepherd them with a rod of iron" (ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ). While scholars like Hemer interpret ποιμανεῖ as 'rule' in view of its use in 7:17,³⁷⁸ their interpretation is not convincing because the word 'rule' does connote the violence suggested by ποιμανεῖ ("rod of iron" and the 'shattering' of the pottery). Swete opines that the "rod of iron" refers to "a shepherd's club, a large wooden club capped with iron, for killing animals that endangered the sheep."³⁷⁹ Hence, the author utilizes a secondary meaning of ποιμανεῖ which connotes 'to destroy' (cf. Jer. 6:3; Ps. 48:14; Mic. 5:6).³⁸⁰

Second, the speaker also indicates that the nations shall be shattered like vessels of pottery.

The verb 'shatter' (συντριβήσεται) is a future form which portrays "a potter throwing his

³⁷⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 89.

³⁷⁸ Hemer, *The Letters*, 124–25.

³⁷⁹ Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 47.

³⁸⁰ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 210.

jar made of clay on the floor to break.”³⁸¹ This imagery connotes violent destruction of the nations.

Third, the ‘power’ of the overcomer is elucidated by “just as I received from my Father” (ὡς καὶ γὼ εἴληφα παρὰ τοῦ πατρός μου). This phrase underscores the fact that the Son mediates the authority from the Father to the conqueror. Hence, the overcomer partakes in victory by participating in the Messiah’s power. It is worth noting that these descriptions of the power of the Risen Lord connote authoritarianism, violence, and death. However, the power received from the Father by the Messiah is a power of reconciliation and resurrection. It is power ‘other,’ or beyond. For this reason, the war images associated with the power is a rhetorical strategy use by the author to urge the community to remain faithful to the Risen Lord through the emotion of fear. Consequently, the church shares in this power by helping the members of the community who have gone astray to return to God.

The second gift promised the conqueror is “the morning star” (τὸν ἀστέρα τὸν πρωϊνόν) in v. 28. Scholars hold varied views on the meaning of this imagery. First, scholars like Hemer propose that it is a reference to Num. 24:17 (Balaam’s prophecy), where a star and sceptre are used as messianic symbols.³⁸² Second, the metaphor can refer to the use of Venus (planet) as a symbol of sovereignty by generals and emperors in Rome.³⁸³ However, a preferable understanding of the ‘morning star’ is the fact that the righteous will shine as stars in the messianic kingdom since the star of the morning was thought to be the brightest.³⁸⁴ As a result, the glory that will follow conquest over the Messiah’s enemies (v.

³⁸¹ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 210.

³⁸² Hemer, *The Letters*, 134.

³⁸³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 90.

³⁸⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 235.

27) is indirectly in view.³⁸⁵ The researcher finds this position the most convincing in light of the context. Thus, the church will share in the victory and glory of the Risen Lord in the eschatological kingdom.

4.1.6 Summary

The community in Thyatira was also confronted with the issue of false teaching and practice through the accommodation of elements from the culture in which she is situated. As a result, although the church was progressing steadily in love, faith, service, and endurance, she did not escape the indictment of the Risen Lord. Thus, this underscores how serious the problem of ‘accommodation’ is, and for this reason the Risen Lord introduces himself to them as one who is insightful in judgement, glorious in strength, and has an intimate relationship with the Father. The judgment motif serves as a rhetorical strategy to help the community to repent. The emphasis on Jesus’s intimate relationship with the Father serves as a model for the community that is committing ‘immorality’ with her world and not focused on Jesus alone. Thus, it calls the church to pursue intimacy with God, internalize the principles of the kingdom, rejecting any ‘contamination’ with the world. Consequently, the Risen Lord promised the members of the church the privilege of sharing in his victory and glory in the eschatological kingdom.

4.2 The Message to the Church in Sardis

4.2.1 Address (3:1a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σάρδεσιν ἐκκλησίας γράψον·

³⁸⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 235.

The address signals to the reader the beginning of a new message directed to the church in Sardis, a wealthy and powerful city located about thirty to forty miles at the southeastern side of Thyatira.³⁸⁶ It was founded about 1200 BCE;³⁸⁷ it had an acropolis and a fearsome military base. The city accumulated its wealth through commerce and trade. Although the city was destroyed by an earthquake in 17 CE, it was reconstructed with the help of Emperor Augustus. The city had a temple dedicated to Artemis, the city's patron goddess, that rivalled the temple in Ephesus.³⁸⁸ Religion in Sardis focuses on the worship of nature, the fertility cycle, and bringing life out of death.³⁸⁹ There was a significant Jewish presence in the city with many of them holding Roman citizenship.³⁹⁰ The city had many impressive synagogues. There was a synagogue even in the gymnasium complex, which suggests a syncretistic religious environment.³⁹¹ To this powerful city, the Risen Lord addresses his message.

4.2.2 Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (3:1b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἔχων τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας·

In v. 1b, the Risen Lord is described with two clauses (cf. 1:19-20); as the one “who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars” (ὁ ἔχων τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας). It is interesting to note that in 3:1, the author reverts to the verb ἔχων (hold) used in 1:16 instead of the stronger κρατῶν (holding fast) employed in 2:1. This notwithstanding, the meaning of the word ἔχων connotes, as noted, authority and control.

³⁸⁶ Hermer, *The Letters*, 129.

³⁸⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 240.

³⁸⁸ Koester, *Revelation*, 310.

³⁸⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 140.

³⁹⁰ Koester, *Revelation*, 311.

³⁹¹ Hemer, *The Letters*, 137.

Scholars hold varied views on the source and meaning of the metaphor τὰ ἑπτὰ πνεύματα τοῦ θεοῦ. Ramsay argues that it is a symbolic or allegorical way of expressing the full range of exercise of the divine power in the seven churches.³⁹² Sweet contends that it refers to the Holy Spirit³⁹³ while Roloff holds that they are the archangels that stand before the countenance of God.³⁹⁴ The researcher aligns with scholars like Beckwith, Thomas, and Osborne who, against the background of Zech. 4:1-10, hold that it is a reference to the Holy Spirit.³⁹⁵ Hence, the “seven eyes” in Zech. 4:10 is interpreted as metaphor of the “seven spirits” (5:6), which connotes the Spirit’s omniscience. Similarly, the “seven lamps” in Zech. 4:2 means the “seven spirits” in view of 4:5 and stresses the witnessing ministry of the Holy Spirit.³⁹⁶ The Risen Lord is, therefore, represented in the church by the Holy Spirit, who knows all things and whose purpose is to testify through the churches.³⁹⁷ Also, Christ controls the ‘seven stars,’ which according to 1:20 represent the angels of the seven Christian communities. Like the congregation in Ephesus (2:1), the church in Sardis is exhorted to appreciate the sovereignty of the Risen Lord.³⁹⁸

Consequently, the church is very ‘naked’ before the Risen Lord who knows all things through the Holy Spirit. Even if the church pretends to be ‘alive,’ Jesus knows her true state; she is dead. The community in this current state impedes the witnessing work of the Holy Spirit through her. As a result, the church must submit to the sovereignty of the Risen Lord and repent so that the Holy Spirit can testify through her members.

³⁹² Ramsay, *The Letters*, 272.

³⁹³ Sweet, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 98.

³⁹⁴ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 92.

³⁹⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 92.

³⁹⁶ Moyise, *The Old Testament*, 33.

³⁹⁷ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 244.

³⁹⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 244.

4.2.3 Judgement (3:1b, 4)

οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ὄνομα ἔχεις ὅτι ζῆς, καὶ νεκρὸς εἶ.⁴ ἀλλὰ ἔχεις ὀλίγα ὀνόματα ἐν Σάρδεσιν ἃ οὐκ ἐμόλυναν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν, καὶ περιπατήσουσιν μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐν λευκοῖς, ὅτι ἄξιοί εἰσιν.

The judgment section begins with the formula “I know your works” (οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα), which usually introduces the strength of a church. However, in this context, it introduces the weaknesses of the congregation in Sardis, ironically suggesting that there is nothing good to say about the church.

The Risen Lord knows that they have the ‘reputation’ that they are alive (ὄνομα ἔχεις ὅτι ζῆς),³⁹⁹ although they are dead (νεκρὸς).⁴⁰⁰ Osborne observes that the assembly in Sardis depicts a famous necropolis (cemetery) outside the city, with the graves of long-dead kings.⁴⁰¹

The adversative conjunction ἀλλά introduced, however, an important distinction: although the church is ‘dead,’ some members are ‘alive’ because they have not soiled their garments (ἃ οὐκ ἐμόλυναν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν), they have not participated in the ‘sins’ of the congregation. The metaphor derives from the wool industry in Sardis and emphasizes that while their physical garments may be clean, their spiritual garments are unclean.⁴⁰²

Although the term literally means ‘unwashed,’ it can mean ‘defiled’ from a religious perspective (cf. 14:4; 1 Cor. 8:7).⁴⁰³

³⁹⁹ Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 473.

⁴⁰⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 142.

⁴⁰¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 142.

⁴⁰² Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 245.

⁴⁰³ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 130.

The members of the community who have not defiled themselves are promised that they “will walk with Jesus in white” (περιπατήσουσιν μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἐν λευκοῖς). Duvall maintains that this imagery connotes a new life of purity.⁴⁰⁴ However, Hemer holds that it alludes to the practice of celebrating military victories in white clothes in the Roman empire.⁴⁰⁵ In view of this, the overcomers will walk with Jesus Christ in his final triumphant procession in victory.⁴⁰⁶ This is rhetorically effective in a church where many have lost their spiritual fervour. It provides encouragement for the community to repent and be consistent in their walk with the Risen Lord.

The word λευκός in this context connotes purity and holiness in view of the reference to “soiled garment.”⁴⁰⁷ Hence, holiness and purity are important requirements for a church that will walk victoriously with the Risen Lord. The author adds that the congregation will walk with Jesus in white “because they are worthy” (ὅτι ἄξιοί εἰσιν).

4.2.4. Exhortation (3:2-4)

² γίνου γρηγορῶν καὶ στήρισον τὰ λοιπὰ ἃ ἔμελλον ἀποθανεῖν, οὐ γὰρ εὕρηκά σου τὰ ἔργα πεπληρωμένα ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μου. ³ μνημόνευε οὖν πῶς εἴληφας καὶ ἤκουσας καὶ τήρει καὶ μετανόησον. ἐὰν οὖν μὴ γρηγορήσης, ἦξω ὡς κλέπτης, καὶ οὐ μὴ γνῶς ποῖαν ὥραν ἦξω ἐπὶ σέ.

In vv. 2-3, the author used five imperatives to exhort the church, two in the aorist tense and three in the present tense, all of which focus on the need for spiritual vigilance. The author exhorts the community to “wake up” (γίνου γρηγορῶν) by combining the aorist imperative of the verb γίνομαι and the present participle of the verb γρηγορέω to underscore the

⁴⁰⁴ Duvall, *Revelation*, 130.

⁴⁰⁵ Hemer, *The Letters*, 147.

⁴⁰⁶ Hemer, *The Letters*, 147.

⁴⁰⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 145.

urgency and the imperfective force of the exhortation.⁴⁰⁸ The figurative meaning is intended in this context; as Gingrich observes that it connotes being spiritually watchful as a preparation for the return of Christ in the last days (cf. Matt. 24:42; Luke 12:36–38; 1 Thess. 5:6).⁴⁰⁹ The church is additionally exhorted to “strengthen what remains” (στήρισον τὰ λοιπὰ - cf. Acts 14:22; 1 Pet. 5:10), because it is about to die (ἐμελλον ἀποθανεῖν).⁴¹⁰

The text provides a second reason for the command introduced by ‘for’ (γὰρ) which comprises of the fact that the Risen Lord has not ‘found’ (εὑρηκά) the works of the church ‘complete’ (πληρώω) before his God. The word εὑρηκά usually carries a juridical force (2:2; 5:4; 12:8; 14:5; 20:15) and as such connotes indicting a person after concluding an investigation.⁴¹¹ Πληρώω (I complete) is commonly used in Johannine literature to communicate ‘full’ or ‘complete’ (cf. John 16:24; 12:3; 17:13; 1 John 1:4). In this context, it means to measure up to the standards of God (ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ μου), and thus underscores the indictment on the church. In the eyes of their contemporaries, they may have been more than sufficient, but not in the eyes of God.

In v. 3, the author indicates that the church must ‘remember’ (μνημόνευε), ‘keep’ (τήρει) and ‘repent’ (μετανόησον). The present active imperative μνημόνευε (“continue to remember”) means that the congregation must recall continually and perform the truths they had been taught. The church was exhorted to remember her former fidelity to “what they have received and heard” (πῶς εἴληφας καὶ ἤκουσας). The expression elaborates on

⁴⁰⁸ Γρηγορέω literally means to “wake up” and figuratively means to “be watchful or alert.” Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 41.

⁴⁰⁹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 41.

⁴¹⁰ The verb στηρίζω connotes ‘support’ or ‘stand something on its feet’ and carries the concept of making something strong by establishing it. Τὰ λοιπὰ refers to both the ‘few’ that still had life and the spiritual issues that must be corrected. Cf. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 186.

⁴¹¹ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 81.

the channel through which they received the truths of the apostolic tradition ('received') and the instruction from the church ('heard').⁴¹²

The second verb τήρει can be translated as 'keep' or 'guard' or 'obey.'⁴¹³ It, however, does not have a noun in the accusative which makes the truth that they have received and heard its object. As a result, the church is instructed not only to remember the gospel but also to obey it. Finally, the congregation must repent (μετανοήσου), which sums up all the four imperatives.⁴¹⁴ They are to change their ways before God.

The call to repentance is emphasized by the second 'therefore' (οὖν) in v. 3 and connected to the possibility of an imminent end. While the first 'therefore' indicates 'the how,' the second connotes 'the why.' The phrase 'if not' (ἐάν μὴ) which introduces the reason, is more a warning than a condition.⁴¹⁵ The verb 'watch' (γρηγορήσης) repeats the first imperative and then emphasizes the fact that it is the overarching idea in this section. The text shows that if the church does not keep awake, the Lord will come like "a thief in the night." The metaphor appears in a range of New Testament texts (3:3; 16:15; cf. Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2, 4; 2 Pet 3:10). Stanley posits that, as an apocalyptic image, the phrase is uniquely Christian and it has no precedent in the Hebrew Bible or Judaism.⁴¹⁶ He argues that all the occurrences of 'thief' imagery in the Tanak are non-eschatological (Job 24:14–16; Jer. 49:9; Hosea 7:1; Joel 2:9; Obad. 5).⁴¹⁷ Hence, the imagery alludes to

⁴¹² The term 'received' usually connotes the "reception of tradition" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3) while 'heard,' usually means to listen, believe, and act on instruction. Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 143.

⁴¹³ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 199.

⁴¹⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 145.

⁴¹⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 145.

⁴¹⁶ Christopher D. Stanley, "Who is Afraid of a Thief in the Night," *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 469; doi:10.1017/S0028688502000280.

⁴¹⁷ Stanley, "Who is Afraid," 469.

the issue of burglary in the first century, where a particular kind of thief, the house burglar, who is depicted as coming at night while the residents are sleeping.⁴¹⁸ The metaphor connotes the sudden and imminent return of Jesus Christ to execute judgment upon the world.⁴¹⁹

The surprised nature of the coming of the Lord is further emphasized by the addition of “they will not know the hour the Lord will come against them” (καὶ οὐ μὴ γινῶς ποίαν ὥραν ἴξω ἐπὶ σε).⁴²⁰

It has an ethical motive that exhorts Christians to remain steadfast and be on their guard against the corrupting influences of their surrounding culture since God can appear at any moment and call them to account for their conduct. It incites the emotion of fear in the audience which leads to change in attitude. Therefore, the text seeks to elicit repentance from the community in Smyrna using fear and unexpectedness.

4.2.5 Promise (3:5)

Ὁ νικῶν οὕτως περιβαλεῖται ἐν ἱματίοις λευκοῖς καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐξαλείψω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκ τῆς βίβλου τῆς ζωῆς καὶ ὁμολογήσω τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐνώπιον τοῦ πατρὸς μου καὶ ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀγγέλων αὐτοῦ.

The author proceeds with three promises to those who conquer (ὁ νικῶν). The promises include their being clothed in white garments, their names not blotted from the “book of life” and the confession of their names before the Father and the angels. The promises are for both the faithful few in Sardis and those who have soiled their garments.

⁴¹⁸ Stanley, “Who is Afraid,” 469.

⁴¹⁹ Stanley, “Who is Afraid,” 469.

⁴²⁰ The noun ‘thief’ (κλέπτης) appears 16 times in the canonical NT texts, while its cognate verb ‘to steal’ (κλέπτω) is used 11 times; Stanley, “Who is Afraid,” 469.

The first component of the promise “clothed in white garments” is like the promise made to the few who have not soiled their garments in v. 4. The verb ‘to clothe’ (περιβαλεῖται) is futuristic and thus stresses that the promise will be fulfilled in the future. Hence, the overcomers will participate in the triumphal procession with the Risen Lord in the eschatological world.

Second, the name of the overcomers will not be erased from “the book of life” (τῆς βίβλου τῆς ζωῆς). The imagery of “the book of life” originates from both the Old Testament and Hellenistic worlds. In the Old Testament, it was first mentioned in Exod. 32:32–33, where Moses pleads with God to “blot his name out of his book” if he will not forgive Israel. Thus, in the Tanak, the book of life was a register of all those who held citizenship in the theocratic community of Israel.⁴²¹ In the Hellenistic world, the idea refers to losing of citizenship when a criminal’s name was removed from the civic register.⁴²²

The metaphor of “the book of life” in Revelation is linked with predestination (“from the foundation of the world,” — cf. 13:8; 17:8), the record of one’s deeds (20:12), and eternal reward or punishment (20:15).⁴²³ Also, 21:27 refers to it as “the book of life of the Lamb,” while 13:8 links it with the cross.⁴²⁴ Thus, the grounds on which a person’s name is written in the book is Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross and the believer’s faithful perseverance in Christ.

Finally, Christ promises to acknowledge the ‘name’ of the overcomer before his Father and the angels (v. 5). This is a reference to Matt. 10:32: “Whoever acknowledges me before

⁴²¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴²² Kiddle and Ross, *The Revelation of St. John*, 47.

⁴²³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴²⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 146.

men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven (cf. Luke 9:26; 12:8; Mark 8:38).”⁴²⁵ ‘Ὁμολογήσω which means ‘to confess’ in this context carries a juridical force and so portrays the Risen Lord as the judge and jury who proclaims a person’s acceptance or rejection.⁴²⁶ The ‘name’ represents the primary characteristic of an individual.⁴²⁷ As a result, in the Apocalypse, to possess God’s name (cf. 3:12; 22:4) means to belong to him, and to possess the “name of the beast” (13:17, 14:11) is to belong to Satan. The ‘name’ is written in the “book of life” and then confessed in the divine court (3:5). As a result, the church will have a ‘new identity,’ ‘new citizenship’ and ‘divine approval’ in the eschatological kingdom.

4.2.6 Summary

The community in Sardis was engulfed in deception; they believe to be ‘alive’ but, in reality, they are ‘dead.’ In other words, their perceived identity contrasts their real identity, known only to God. This connotes hypocrisy, and the loss of identity and mission as a community of Jesus. Accordingly, the author used the knowledge formula to introduce their weakness instead of their strength. Considering the community’s condition, the Risen Lord indicates that he continues to live in the community through the Holy Spirit who knows everything about the church; he knows the secrets that the community was able to hide in deception from anyone else. For this reason, he calls the congregation to repentance and vigilance leading to holiness and purity. Thus, the exhortation was underscored by the

⁴²⁵ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 94.

⁴²⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴²⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 146.

promise of a ‘new identity,’ ‘new citizenship,’ and ‘divine approval’ in the eschatological kingdom.

4.3 The Message to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

4.3.1 Address (3:7a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Φιλαδελφείᾳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον·

The address signals the beginning of a new message directed to the church in Philadelphia, located thirty miles southeast of Sardis on the main trade route from Smyrna and hence well known for commerce.⁴²⁸ It was founded around 189 BCE. It had a fertile volcanic soil suitable for growing grapes and therefore prospered agriculturally⁴²⁹ but it was prone to earthquakes. As gratitude for Roman support, the city mounted a monument in Rome, and established a cult to honour the adopted son of the emperor, Germanicus.⁴³⁰ Philadelphia had a syncretistic religion although its main god was Dionysus.⁴³¹ The information in the message indicates the presence of some Jews in the city.⁴³²

4.3.2 Self- Presentation of the Risen Lord (3:7b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἅγιος, ὁ ἀληθινός, ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ, ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει·

After the address, the author describes the Risen Lord with two adjectives ‘holy’ (ὁ ἅγιος) and ‘true’ (ὁ ἀληθινός), and a clause; “the one who holds the key of David” (ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ). God is frequently described as ‘the holy one’ (ὁ ἅγιος) in the Old Testament

⁴²⁸ Duvall, *Revelation*, 136.

⁴²⁹ Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed. *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 3387.

⁴³⁰ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3387.

⁴³¹ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3387

⁴³² Duvall, *Revelation*, 136.

(cf. Ps. 16:10; Isa. 37:23; Hab. 3:3), the ‘wholly other’ and ‘worthy of worship.’⁴³³ The Risen Lord presents himself to this church as God, the ‘wholly other - worthy of worship.’

The second adjective ‘the true one’ (ὁ ἀληθινός) is understood in two ways. While scholars like Chilton maintain that it means to be ‘genuine,’ and hence it was used in this context to challenge Jewish claims that Jesus is a false messiah,⁴³⁴ some commentators like Hort contend that it refers to the Risen Lord’s ‘faithfulness’ in stark contrast to the ‘unfaithfulness’ of the emperor.⁴³⁵ However, the Risen Lord’s faithfulness or reliability derives from the fact that he is the ‘genuine’ one.⁴³⁶ In view of this, the two interpretations are possible in this context. The ‘genuineness’ of Jesus contrasts the deception of the Jews while his ‘faithfulness’ is reflected in the faithfulness of the Philadelphian church.

The Risen Lord is further described as “the one who holds the key of David.” This key makes him the “one who opens, and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens” (ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει). This description is an allusion to Isa. 22:22 in which Eliakim was given the key of David’s house and “what he opens none shall shut and what he shuts none shall open;”⁴³⁷ it connotes the exercise of authority over Hezekiah’s house (22:21). The Risen Lord presents himself as one who has authority to open or shut the gates of heaven, which challenges the claim of the Jews that they have exclusive access to the kingdom of David.⁴³⁸ Consequently, Jesus alone has the power to admit into or exclude from God’s kingdom. The church belongs to the Risen Lord who is

⁴³³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 150.

⁴³⁴ D. C. Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth: Dominion, 1987), 126.

⁴³⁵ Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John I–III*, 34.

⁴³⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 275.

⁴³⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 96.

⁴³⁸ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 96.

set apart, worthy of worship, genuine, faithful and who alone has power to admit or exclude from the kingdom of God.

To sum up, the Risen Lord introduces himself to the Philadelphian community as the holy and true one, who has received power for the sanctification of members of the community and all churches. This self-introduction gives the community assurance to wait for the gifts promised by Jesus Christ.

4.3.3 Judgment (3:8-10)

⁸ οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα, ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ἐνώπιόν σου θύραν ἠνεωγμένην, ἣν οὐδεὶς δύναται κλείσαι αὐτήν, ὅτι μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν καὶ ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου. ⁹ ἰδοὺ διδῶ ἐκ τῆς συναγωγῆς τοῦ σατανᾶ τῶν λεγόντων ἑαυτοὺς Ἰουδαίους εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ ψεύδονται. ἰδοὺ ποιήσω αὐτοὺς ἵνα ἤξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου καὶ γνώσιν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἠγάπησά σε. ¹⁰ ὅτι ἐτήρησας τὸν λόγον τῆς ὑπομονῆς μου, κἀγὼ σε τηρήσω ἐκ τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ τῆς μελλούσης ἔρχεσθαι ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης πειράσαι τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

The author introduces the judgement section with the usual formular “I know your works” (οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα). The judgement however begins with the promise of a gift, introduced by the word ‘behold’ (ἰδοὺ), which appears three times in this section, which is a rhetorical strategy the author uses to draw attention to a critical issue.

The gift is an open door (θύραν ἠνεωγμένην) that none can close. Scholars have offered varied interpretations to this image. Commentators like Mounce contend that θύραν ἠνεωγμένην refers to a missionary opportunity based on Paul’s use of the term ‘wide door’ to refer to his evangelistic work among the Gentiles (cf. 1 Cor. 16:9; Acts 14:27).⁴³⁹ Kiddle notes that it refers to martyrdom as the ‘door’ to God⁴⁴⁰ while commentators like Moffatt

⁴³⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 97.

⁴⁴⁰ M. Kiddle and M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St. John* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), 49.

and Sweet hold that it refers to Christ as the ‘door’ to salvation (cf. John 10:7-9).⁴⁴¹ The researcher aligns with scholars who assert that the metaphor has a missionary motif; the immediate context suggests, in fact, that even though the community is little, she has power of attraction of other Jews, who will come and prostrate to her (3:9). It depicts a non-self-referential church, an outgoing church; open and attractive to the world, to draw it to Christ.

The reason for this gift is introduced by the word ‘because’ (ὅτι), which mentions three characteristics of the church, namely “you have little power” (μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν), “yet you have kept my word” (καὶ ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον), and “and you have not denied my name” (καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου).

Some scholars suggest that ‘little power’ refers to the small spiritual vitality of the members in the congregation, noting that the expression obviously falls short of a full commendation.⁴⁴² This perspective is, however, not convincing because it contradicts the positive context of the message. Other scholars argue that ‘little power’ means the church had minimal influence in the city because it was small, disregarded, and persecuted.⁴⁴³ The researcher supports the second in view for the obvious weakness of the first. Although the church had small membership and little influence, she kept the words of the Risen Lord and did not deny his name (ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου).⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 103.

⁴⁴² Kenneth L. Gentry and Thomas Ice, *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 112.

⁴⁴³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁴⁴ The two clauses in v. 8b underscore the attitude of the church by employing two aorist verbs which summarize the faithfulness of the church. Osborne, *Revelation*, 152.

The word of Christ (μου τὸν λόγον) refers to his revealed truths; the gospel message.⁴⁴⁵

The verb τηρέω connotes both guarding from error and obeying the gospel amid severe persecution. The clause “you have not denied my name” (οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου) is an allusion to Matt. 10: 32-33, where ‘deny’ is used as the opposite of ‘acknowledge.’ In view of this, the church acknowledged the name of Jesus or its association with Jesus amid persecution.

A second word, ἰδοὺ (v. 9), introduces a new promise which deals with the vindication of the church before the Jews. The author described the Jews as “the synagogue of Satan” (τῆς συναγωγῆς τοῦ σατανᾶ); people who always call themselves (λεγόντων ἑαυτοὺς) Jews and are really not (οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ ψεύδονται). The description of the Jews as a “synagogue of Satan” aligns with the theology of the book of Revelation, in which, the ‘totality’ of the true people of God comprises of Jews and Gentiles who recognize Jesus as the Messiah. As a result, to be a true Jew means to recognize Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God; anyone who falls short of this is outside the will of God and where God is not present, there Satan is. As Mounce states the Jews are considered liars, who belong to Satan notwithstanding their confession to be God’s people because they rejected the Messiah and persecuted his followers (cf. 1 John 1:10; 2:4).⁴⁴⁶

The speaker promises to make the Jews “come and fall at the feet of the church” (ἵνα ἕξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου). Προσκυνήσουσιν connotes submission and not worship; the phrase is an allusion to Isa. 60:14, “The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet”

⁴⁴⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁴⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 97.

(cf. Isa. 2:3; Ezek. 36:23). While the Old Testament intimates that Gentiles will pay tribute to the Jews at the ‘eschaton,’ the text suggests the opposite.⁴⁴⁷

The Jews will not only pay homage to the church in Philadelphia but will also know that the Risen Lord loved the church; the text combines the personal pronoun ἐγὼ with the first-person singular of the verb ἀγαπάω to emphasize Christ’s love for the community. In view of Jesus’ love for the church, there is a sort of identification between the community and the Risen Lord (cf. Matt. 18:20). Even the smallest, persecuted, rejected community is the *locus* where it is possible to experience and worship the Risen Lord since the church is the extension of his humanity on earth.

In v. 10, the author promises to ‘keep’ (τηρήσω) the church from the hour of trial because she has kept the word of endurance.⁴⁴⁸ However, this verb combined with ἐκ in this context generates a debate about whether it means to ‘protect from’ or ‘remove from.’ Commentators like Hemer argue that it means protection within a trial.⁴⁴⁹ This view is built on John 17:15, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”⁴⁵⁰ Gundry maintains that it conveys a localized thrust which means to protect “out from within” trial.⁴⁵¹ Hence, its force is not ‘the exemption’ but protection ‘within’ trials.

However, other commentators like Winfrey contend that John 17:15 has a different background and therefore the preposition does not hold a localized force but means

⁴⁴⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 97.

⁴⁴⁸ The verb τηρήσω carries the meaning ‘to keep’ or ‘to protect’ them, Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 199.

⁴⁴⁹ Hermer, *The Letters*, 164-65.

⁴⁵⁰ Hermer, *The Letters*, 164-65.

⁴⁵¹ R. H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 55-60.

“preservation after removal from the period.”⁴⁵² The researcher finds the first view probable since there is no evidence in the text that the community will escape the trial by being taken away from the earth. Rather, the author indicates that their faithfulness is the basis for not experiencing the trial. Hence, the disciples will be exempted even if they are on earth.

4.3.4 Exhortation (3:11)

ἔρχομαι ταχύ· κράτει ὃ ἔχεις, ἵνα μηδεὶς λάβῃ τὸν στέφανόν σου.

The speaker indicates that he is coming soon (ἔρχομαι ταχυ). Although this is not the only reference to the ‘coming’ of the Risen Lord in these seven messages,⁴⁵³ it is the first time that it carries a positive connotation, similar to its use in 22:7, 20. For instance, the Risen Lord’s return would mean the removal of the lampstand for the church in Ephesus, the judgment with the sword of the Risen Lord’s mouth for Pergamum (2:16), and unforeseen judgment like “a thief in the night” for Sardis (3:3). Conversely, it would mean vindication and reward for the community in Philadelphia.

In view of the ‘coming’ of the Risen Lord, the congregation must “hold fast to what they have” (κράτει ὃ ἔχεις). The present imperative form of the verb κρατέω suggests that the church must continually remain faithful until Jesus comes. They must hold fast to what they have to prevent them from losing their crown (ἵνα μηδεὶς λάβῃ τὸν στέφανόν σου). In view of this, perseverance and faithfulness are what guarantee the church its rewards in the eschatological kingdom.

⁴⁵² David G. Winfrey, “The Great Tribulation: Kept ‘Out of’ or ‘Through?’” *GTJ* 3, no.1 (Spring 1982): 5-10.

⁴⁵³ The promise to ‘come’ appears seven times in the literary unit.

4.3.5 Promise (3:12)

¹² Ὁ νικῶν ποιήσω αὐτὸν στῦλον ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ θεοῦ μου καὶ ἔξω οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃ ἔτι καὶ γράψω ἐπ’ αὐτὸν τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ μου καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς πόλεως τοῦ θεοῦ μου, τῆς καινῆς Ἱερουσαλήμ ἢ καταβαίνουσα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ μου, καὶ τὸ ὄνομά μου τὸ καινόν.

The speaker makes two promises to the one who conquers (ὁ νικῶν). The overcomer will be made a “pillar in the temple of God” (στῦλον ἐν τῷ ναῷ τοῦ θεοῦ). Στῦλον metaphorically refers to stability, security, and permanence;⁴⁵⁴ the promise assures the members that they have a permanent place in the eschatological kingdom.⁴⁵⁵ This permanency is further emphasized by the clause “never shall he go out of it” (ἔξω οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃ ἔτι). Thus, although their lives are characterized by uncertainty in view of the frequent earthquakes, and persecution from the Jews, they will have the security in both their present challenges and the final kingdom. The syntagm ‘of my God’ (τοῦ θεοῦ μου) occurs 4 times in v. 12 and conveys the close relationship between the Risen Lord and the Father (cf. 1:6; 3:2).

The speaker promised to give the overcomer three ‘names.’ The first name, (τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ μου) indicates belongingness.⁴⁵⁶ The second name, “the city of God” (τῆς πόλεως τοῦ θεοῦ μου), which refers to the new Jerusalem (τῆς καινῆς Ἱερουσαλήμ), alludes to the Roman practice of citizenship, where individuals are attached to cities which gives them a new social identity,⁴⁵⁷ for example, the reference to apostle Paul as ‘Paul of Tarsus’ (Acts

⁴⁵⁴ Hemer, *The Letters*, 166.

⁴⁵⁵ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3390.

⁴⁵⁶ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3390.

⁴⁵⁷ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3390.

9:11; 21:39; 22:3). In view of this, Adeyemo maintains that it refers to ‘citizenship’ in the new kingdom of God.⁴⁵⁸

The last gift is the new name of the Risen Lord (καὶ τὸ ὄνομά μου τὸ καινόν). While this new name is not stated by the author, Mounce suggests that it will encapsulate the full revelation of Jesus’ character during the second coming (cf. 19:12).⁴⁵⁹

4.3.6 Summary

The community in Philadelphia is one of the seven communities that has internalized the key characteristics of the followers of Jesus Christ. As a result, the Risen Lord notes that they have kept his word and have not denied his name. They have been faithful and committed disciples of the Risen notwithstanding the fact they have little power. The extent of their commitment to Jesus is further emphasized by the fact that they were being persecuted by the Jews. Thus, their faithfulness is not affected by the challenges they faced in their environment.

To this exemplary community, Jesus introduces himself as one who is faithful and genuine. In light of this, the church mirrors the features of their Lord. The text shows that the faithfulness of the church positions her for missions. The witness of their lives will attract people including their enemies to the Risen Lord. Consequently, the Risen Lord exhorts the community to remain faithful because she is an expression of their identity as God’s people.

⁴⁵⁸ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 3390.

⁴⁵⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 99.

4.4 The Message to the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

4.4.1 Address (3:14a)

Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ ἐκκλησίας γράψου·

The last message is directed to the community in Laodicea, a city located in the Lycus Valley, about sixty miles southeast of Philadelphia and a hundred miles west of Ephesus.⁴⁶⁰

It came under Roman control around 133 BCE. It was located at the intersection of a major east-west route from Ephesus and roads leading north to Philadelphia and south to the Mediterranean coast.⁴⁶¹ Accordingly, both Greek and Roman merchants made the city their home. The major source of revenue for the people was trade in soft black wool. Because of this, the professional groups included those in the textile and garment industries.

The city was rebuilt by the natives after suffering a major earthquake in 60 CE without Roman assistance although it had a strong relationship with Rome. It was well-supplied with water brought by an aqueduct and distributed through a water tower and fountains.

The inhabitants worshipped Zeus, who was often called the Saviour, Hermes his messenger and Dionysus.⁴⁶² Laodicea had its own municipal cult to Domitian, which emphasized the ideology of power and victory.⁴⁶³

4.4.2 Self-Presentation of the Risen Lord (3: 14b)

Τάδε λέγει ὁ ἀμήν, ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός, ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ·

⁴⁶⁰ Duvall, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴⁶¹ Duvall, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴⁶² Duvall, *Revelation*, 146.

⁴⁶³ Duvall, *Revelation*, 146.

The Risen Lord introduced himself with three terms: the amen (ὁ ἀμήν), the faithful and true witness (ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός), and the beginning of God's creation (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ).

The first title ὁ ἀμήν is a transliteration from Hebrew. It was originally an adjective (trustworthy, sure, etc.) derived from the verb *'mn* used to describe the feeling of the child who is secure in the mother's embrace (2 Sam. 4:4; Isa. 49:22; 60:4; etc.).⁴⁶⁴ By extension, it connotes 'stability; trustworthiness; truthfulness.' It occurs in the book of Revelation eight times mostly in a liturgical setting; although, in this context, it has the function of a Christological title, underscoring the truthfulness of Christ.⁴⁶⁵ In the New Testament, it is a *hapax legomenon*: the nearest term is the definition of Jesus as ναί in 2 Cor 1:20. Nonetheless, it can be an allusion to Isa. 65:16, where YHWH is referred to twice as "the God of truth."

The second clause ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός further emphasizes the truthfulness or trustworthiness of the Risen Lord. The syntagm 'faithful witness' occurs three times (1:15; 2:13; 3:14) in the Apocalypse, out of which two apply to Jesus. Πιστὸς (faithful) is an adjective expressing Christ's entire trustworthiness as a witness.⁴⁶⁶ Jesus, therefore, presents himself to the community as a model witness (cf. 1:5; 2:13; 11:3; 17:6) in 'perseverance' and 'faithfulness' during suffering.

The author's reference to Jesus Christ as the true (ἀληθινός) witness presents him as the genuine and perfect witness in whom all the highest conditions of a witness are met, one

⁴⁶⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁶⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 152.

⁴⁶⁶ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 99.

whose testimony never falls short of the truth.⁴⁶⁷ Consequently, Jesus is presented as the yardstick of a witness that the lukewarm and unfaithful Laodicean community must emulate.

Lastly, Jesus is described as “the beginning of God’s creation” (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ). The beginning (ἡ ἀρχὴ) has been interpreted differently. It is interpreted with a passive connotation which means ‘one who begun’ and hence implies that Jesus Christ was the first created being and, therefore, not God.⁴⁶⁸ However, this view has many weaknesses considering the context of the book. It fails to explain how a created being could embody the degree of faithfulness outlined in the message to Laodicea. Also, it is unable to account for how a created being could make such far-reaching promises that are extended to the repentant one and the overcomer in all the seven messages. Further, this viewpoint contradicts various verses in the book such as 1:18 and 2:8; where Christ is described as eternal, and 5:13, 14; where the lamb and the Father is distinguished from every created thing as an object of worship, since creatures are not worthy of worship (cf. 19:10).

Considering the apparent weaknesses of this view, interpreting ἡ ἀρχὴ in an active sense is preferable; it connotes ‘beginner,’ ‘originator,’ or ‘initiator’ of God’s creation, a meaning supported by Christ’s use of the word in 22:13.⁴⁶⁹ The reference to Jesus’ relationship to the creation emphasizes the trustfulness of the testimony and his omnipotence. Thus, the Risen Lord introduces himself to the church as the dependable mediator that the community

⁴⁶⁷ Duvall, *Revelation*, 147.

⁴⁶⁸ Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 488-89.

⁴⁶⁹ Duvall, *Revelation*, 147.

needs to trust even if his message is harsh. Further, the reference also underscores Jesus Christ's pre-eminence over all things.

4.4.3 Judgement (3:15-17)

¹⁵ οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα ὅτι οὔτε ψυχρὸς εἶ οὔτε ζεστός. ὄφελον ψυχρὸς ἢς ἢ ζεστός.
¹⁶ οὕτως ὅτι χλιαρὸς εἶ καὶ οὔτε ζεστός οὔτε ψυχρὸς, μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐκ τοῦ στόματός μου. ¹⁷ ὅτι λέγεις ὅτι πλούσιός εἰμι καὶ πεπλούτηκα καὶ οὐδὲν χρεῖαν ἔχω, καὶ οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ ταλαίπωρος καὶ ἐλεεινὸς καὶ πτωχὸς καὶ τυφλὸς καὶ γυμνός,

Like the other messages, the judgement section is introduced by the syntagm οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα. However, the use of this introduction in this context is similar to its use in the letter to Sardis, where its thrust is ironic. Accordingly, the Risen Lord asserts that the only positive things about the community are the 'negatives;' the church is "neither cold nor hot" (οὔτε ψυχρὸς εἶ οὔτε ζεστός).

According to archaeological studies, this metaphor stems from Laodicea's water supply system. Laodicea did not have its own source of water and therefore depended on Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis was known for its hot springs or streams noted for their healing qualities which made the city a well-known health centre, while Colossae was known for its cold, pure drinking water.⁴⁷⁰ Water piped from the hot springs of Denizli through the aqueducts arrived 'lukewarm' (χλιαρός) in Laodicea; Porter notes that both the temperature as well as the minerals made the water undrinkable.⁴⁷¹ Because of this, Jesus was adverting to the 'uselessness' of the Laodicean church. They are not 'hot' to provide medicinal values like the water in Hierapolis and neither are they 'cold' like the water in Colossae for refreshment. The Risen Lord points out that his desire is that the community

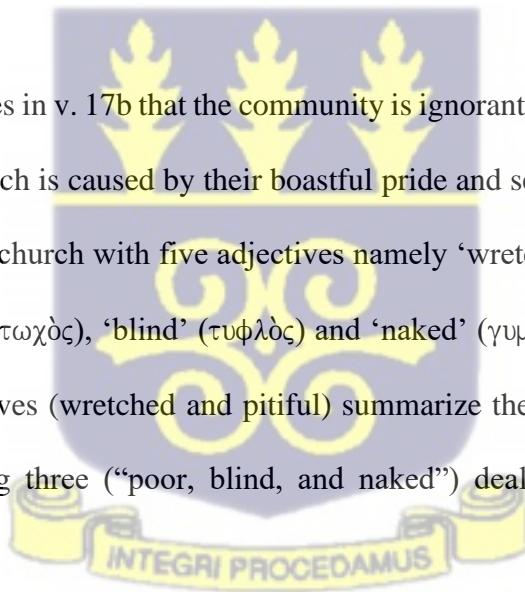
⁴⁷⁰ Hemer, *The Letters*, 187–91.

⁴⁷¹ S.E. Porter, "Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water (Revelation 3:15–18)," *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987): 144–46.

will be either ‘cold’ or ‘hot.’ For this reason, he will vomit the church out of his mouth (μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐκ τοῦ στόματός μου) since she is lukewarm.⁴⁷²

The author continues to specify the self-glorifying confessions of the Laodicean church which is the exact opposite of their actual state from the perspective of the Risen Lord. This attitude confirms their unwillingness to acknowledge their true state. The church is saying (λέγεις) that she is ‘rich and wealthy’ (πλούσιος καί πεπλούτηκα), and needs nothing (οὐδὲν χρεῖαν ἔχω). Therefore, the congregation considers herself self-sufficient and complacent.

The speaker indicates in v. 17b that the community is ignorant (καὶ οὐκ οἶδας) of the reality of her situation, which is caused by their boastful pride and self-sufficiency. He described the true state of the church with five adjectives namely ‘wretched’ (ταλαίπωρος), ‘pitiful’ (ἐλεεινός), ‘poor’ (πτωχός), ‘blind’ (τυφλός) and ‘naked’ (γυμνός). Osborne intimates that the first two adjectives (wretched and pitiful) summarize the situation of the community while the remaining three (“poor, blind, and naked”) deal with the specifics of their situation.⁴⁷³



Ταλαίπωρος connotes being ‘miserable,’ or ‘wretched.’⁴⁷⁴ Ἐλεεινός occurs twice in the New Testament; in this context and 1 Cor. 15:19, where it was used to describe the pitiable

⁴⁷² As already noted, μέλλω indicates the imminence of the judgement (2:10, 3:2, 10). Hence the Risen Lord will soon ‘vomit’ the congregation out of his mouth because their current state makes him sick; Osborne, *Revelation*, 164.

⁴⁷³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 164.

⁴⁷⁴ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 169.

state of a person did not believe in the resurrection.⁴⁷⁵ Therefore, it portrays a person who deserves extreme pity because he is in peril of eternal death.

Πτωχός conveys beggarliness or destitution that results from begging⁴⁷⁶ and since the church is materially rich, it means being poor spiritually. Τυφλός refers to the inability to see spiritual values and this implies that the Laodicean church was blind despite the popularity of the city's medical centre and medicine (salve).⁴⁷⁷ Γυμνός connotes spiritual nakedness⁴⁷⁸ which has a strong rhetorical effect since the city was known for its woollen garments.

4.4.4 Exhortation (3:18-20)

18 συμβουλεύω σοι ἀγοράσαι παρ' ἐμοῦ χρυσίον πεπυρωμένον ἐκ πυρὸς ἵνα πλουτήσης, καὶ ἱμάτια λευκὰ ἵνα περιβάλῃ καὶ μὴ φανερωθῇ ἡ αἰσχύνῃ τῆς γυμνότητός σου, καὶ κολλ[ο]ύριον ἐγγρῖσαι τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς σου ἵνα βλέπῃς. 19 ἐγὼ ὅσους ἐὰν φιλῶ ἐλέγχω καὶ παιδεύω· ζήλευε οὖν καὶ μετανόησον. 20 Ἴδου ἔστηκα ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν καὶ κρούω· ἐὰν τις ἀκούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς μου καὶ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν, [καὶ] εἰσελεύσομαι πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ δειπνήσω μετ' αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς μετ' ἐμοῦ.

After judging the church for her 'uselessness,' boastful pride and self-sufficiency, the author exhorts the church to repent. The exhortation is introduced by 'I counsel you' (συμβουλεύω σοι), which underscores the seriousness of the situation. The speaker counsels the church to buy three things from him namely 'gold refined by fire' (χρυσίον πεπυρωμένον ἐκ πυρὸς), 'white garment' (ἱμάτια λευκὰ) and 'salve' (κολλύριον); the reasons for which the church must purchase these things is indicated by three ἵνα phrases.

⁴⁷⁵ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 62.

⁴⁷⁶ Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon*, 175.

⁴⁷⁷ Hemer, *The Letters*, 196–99.

⁴⁷⁸ Hemer, *The Letters*, 196–99.

The first, χρυσίον πεπυρωμένον ἐκ πυρός is the solution to their spiritual poverty identified in 3:17b. Interestingly, the text indicates that it will make the church rich (ἵνα πλουτήσῃς). For this reason, Mounce notes that the ‘gold’ is spiritual wealth that has passed through the refiner’s fire and has been found to be totally trustworthy.⁴⁷⁹ Therefore, the metaphor means spiritual wealth; quality relationship with God and one another. This is the true riches that the community must seek.

The second, ἱμάτια λευκὰ is the solution to their nakedness. The author indicates that the white garment will cover the shame of their nakedness (μὴ φανερωθῆ ἡ αἰσχύνη τῆς γυμνότητός σου). In the Old Testament, ‘nakedness’ is an imagery for judgment (cf. Isa. 20:1–4; Ezek. 16:36).⁴⁸⁰ Hence, Osborne comments that the primary reference of ‘shame of nakedness’ is the disgrace which results from divine judgment.⁴⁸¹ Further, ‘nakedness’ also connotes a paradigm for loss of identity. Contrary to this, to receive fine new clothing indicated honour in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 41:42; Esth. 6:6–11).⁴⁸² Consequently, the church needs ‘white garments’ which symbolize righteousness (3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14), purification by the lamb’s blood (7:13–14), and honour or splendour in the eschatological kingdom (4:4) to cover their shame or disgrace.⁴⁸³ The community needs to receive a new identity, given not by their self-sufficiency but by God.

Last, the church is exhorted to buy salve (κολλύριον) so that she may see (βλέπω), which is the solution to their blindness (τυφλὸς - v. 17). Barnes asserts that the local reference of

⁴⁷⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 103.

⁴⁸⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 165.

⁴⁸¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 165.

⁴⁸² Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 110.

⁴⁸³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 103.

this word κολλύριον was to the Phrygian powder used at the medical school at Laodicea.⁴⁸⁴

Consequently, the salve pictures the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit as the cure for spiritual blindness.⁴⁸⁵

In v. 19, the speaker points out that his reprove (ἐλέγχω) and discipline (παιδεύω) stem from love. The author combines εγὼ with the first person singular φιλῶ to emphasize Jesus's love for the community. The verb ἐλέγχω means to rebuke with the goal of pointing out a weakness and convincing the person to change the situation while the verb παιδεύω connotes to correct or punish with the aim of training and guiding (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:6).⁴⁸⁶ Since (οὖν) the reason for the reprove and discipline is love, the church is commanded to be zealous (ζήλωσον) and repent (μετανόησον).

After this, the speaker states that he stands at the door and knock, which he introduced by the word ἰδοῦ. It is interesting to note that the writer did not employ verbs that connote violence like κοπτεῖν, πατασσειν, αρασσειν and επαρασσειν but the verb κρουεῖν that implies gentleness and care. Consecutively, the Risen Lord asserts that he will come and eat (εἰσελεύσομαι πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ δειπνήσω μετ' αὐτοῦ) with the one who hears and opens the door (ἐάν τις ἀκούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς μου καὶ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν).

The eating metaphor is used positively in this context. The fact that the verbal form δειπνέω is a cognate of the noun δεῖπνον, 'meal,' 'supper,' confirms its connection to the all-important eschatological last supper (Luke 22:20; John 13:2, 4; 21:20) and communion

⁴⁸⁴ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 316.

⁴⁸⁵ Thomas, *Revelation 1—7*, 316.

⁴⁸⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 166,

meal (1 Cor. 11:20, 21, 25).⁴⁸⁷ Hence, the feast metaphor implies eating and drinking, which symbolizes joy, tranquillity and peace.⁴⁸⁸ Thus, the members of the community who listen will experience joy and peace in their relationship with the Risen Lord. Considering the call to repentance in v. 19, this metaphor is a rhetorical strategy used by the author to challenge the members to return to the Risen Lord in fellowship.

In order to feast with the Risen Lord, the community must listen to his voice and open the door. This listening motif is similar in meaning to the appeal to listen to the Spirit present in the seven messages (cf. 2:7,11,17) and as a result is an exhortation to the community to heed the call to repentance.

4.4.5 Promise (3:21)

²¹ Ὁ νικῶν δώσω αὐτῷ καθίσαι μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ μου, ὡς καὶ γὰρ ἐνίκησα καὶ ἐκάθισα μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς μου ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ αὐτοῦ.

The overcomer is promised the privilege of sitting with the Risen Lord on his throne (δώσω αὐτῷ καθίσαι μετ' ἐμοῦ ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ μου). The promise is eschatological and connotes victory and consequent exaltation.⁴⁸⁹ The author adds that the victory and exaltation of the overcomer is like the victory and exaltation of the Risen Lord, who also overcame and sat down with his Father on the heavenly throne. Furthermore, the reference to the throne is important because it anticipates the second part of the Apocalypse (4—22).

⁴⁸⁷ Gerald A. Klingbeil “‘Eating’ and ‘Drinking’ in the Book of Revelation: A Study of New Testament Thought and Theology,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16, no. 1 (2005): 12.

⁴⁸⁸ Klingbeil “Eating and Drinking,” 12.

⁴⁸⁹ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 104.

4.4.6 Summary

The Risen Lord presents himself to the community in Laodicea as the one who is trustworthy, genuine, and the perfect witness of God's kingdom. This self-introduction is a call to the community to emulate him because the community has internalized the principles of the world instead of the values of the kingdom. The church has become carnal; focused on the things of the world. She imbibed the attitude of self-sufficiency from the environment and measured her success by her physical acquisitions and status which is in stark contrast to the values of the kingdom.

The followers of Jesus are called to depend on him (cf. John 15:5); their success is not measured by material prosperity but 'spiritual' riches (embodying the values of the kingdom). The condition of the church is aggravated by the fact that they have been blinded by their surrounding culture. As a result, Jesus urged them to come to him for 'healing.' The community needs a change of perspective that will lead to a change in their pursuits.

4.5 The Ecclesiology of the Messages to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2—3

4.5.1 Introduction

The Rhetorical Analysis of Rev. 2—3 has revealed some features about the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία. They include: the church is on a journey of continuing conversion (*semper reformanda*); she is eschatological; the eschatological church is a persecuted church; Jesus Christ loves his church; she is defined by love; her identity is not defined by its organizational structure (church government) but by the quality of its relationship with the Risen Lord and one another; the church is the locus where God's presence is experienced, and she is a spiritual entity. The aim of this section is to discuss these ecclesiological features as a model for contemporary Christian communities in Ghana.

4.5.2 The Church is on a Journey of Continuing Conversion

The call of the church is to become the extension of the humanity of Jesus Christ, who is the lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world (cf. 5:6, 13:8). The Risen Lord is presented in the apocalypse as the faithful witness of God's kingdom (1:5), and the 'holy' and 'true' one (cf. 3:7; 6:10). The community of disciples are called to emulate the Risen Lord in living as witnesses of the kingdom of God. The Risen Lord did not demand 'success' from the churches but faithfulness, steadfastness, and unwillingness to compromise. He did not require perfection from the communities but commitment to follow him with constancy and faithfulness no matter the cost.

However, the seven churches are at different stages in this journey. Two of the churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, have incarnated better what it means to follow Jesus or become like him since they are not explicitly indicted by the Risen Lord for any challenge (cf. 2:8-11; 3:7-13). Four of the churches (Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis), although indicted for their sins, are also praised for their good works (cf. 2:1-7, 12-17, 18-29; 3:1-6). The Laodicean church is the only church indicted for her sins without the presentation of any good works (cf. 3:14-22).

For instance, the church in Ephesus is indicted for losing her first love (cf. 2:4), the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira for accepting false doctrines (cf. 2:14-16; 20-21), the church in Sardis for being deceptive and sinful (cf. 3:1c-4) and the church in Laodicea for being materialistic and self-reliant (cf. 3:17). This demonstrates that these communities have a long way to walk on their journey to become like the lamb. Also, while there are no clear indictments on the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, the exhortations in the

messages indicate that they have not yet reached the destination and won the ‘price.’ They need to persevere in their journey of conversion.

4.5.3 The Church is Eschatological

The church ‘participates’ in two worlds; she is living in the ‘present world’ but is also prophecy of the ‘world to come,’ waiting for the eschatological world, as it is evident by the many promises that the Risen Lord made to the seven churches. Examples include the promise of the tree of life to the congregation in Ephesus (cf. 2:7b), not experiencing the second death (cf. 2:11), the hidden manna and white stone, white garment (cf. 2:17), and being made a pillar in the temple of God (cf. 3:12). As a result, the *ekklēsia* of Rev. 2—3 is an eschatological community, placed in the horizon of the New Jerusalem (21—22). Consequently, it does not live for herself, for her own organization and survival, but for the service of the Kingdom, constantly awaiting its coming. This awareness of temporariness demands a personal and communal path of conversion, of creaturely relocation, of discovering and accepting one’s own limitation and therefore one’s own need to be saved. The proof and stimulus to the seriousness of this commitment is the relationship with one another (‘love’ - Ephesus, 2:4,5) lived in humble and steadfast faith, through which human weakness can be clothed with the very power of God.⁴⁹⁰

4.5.4 The Eschatological Church is a Persecuted Church

The church is persecuted by the world as she seeks to live as a faithful witness of the kingdom of God; underscoring the fact that living for the kingdom comes at a cost. This is because the ‘world’ hates and persecutes those who are not of the ‘world’ (John 15:18-20).

⁴⁹⁰ Gatti, ...*perché il «piccolo» diventi «fratello»*, 300-302.

The Roman empire is presented as an enemy of God and his followers (12—13). They persecuted and killed the Risen Lord (5:6), who is the example and standard for the church, and for this reason the church will also be persecuted.

Persecution is evident in the messages to the churches in Smyrna, Pergamum, and Philadelphia. For example, the church in Smyrna is persecuted by the Roman authorities and slandered by the Jews to the extent that the members have become poor (2:9), and a greater persecution was imminent (2:10): some will be imprisoned while others will be put to death for their faith. Antipas, a faithful witness of the Risen Lord had already been killed in the church in Pergamum (2:13). Many have also been slaughtered for the word of God and their witness about the kingdom (cf. 6:9; 20:4). In view of this, it can be concluded that there was intense persecution, leading to the death of some members of the Christian community.

The eschatological church is persecuted as she lives as a witness of the Risen Lord and the kingdom of God, because the values of the kingdom of God are in sharp contrast to the values of the world. Tracing, in fact, the history of the community of disciples from the New Testament era till today, we see that he who was prophesied as a “sign of contradiction” (Luke 2:34) has continued and continues to be so within the different historical epochs, cultures and human communities.⁴⁹¹ This is why the fathers of the church speak of a fifth theological note of the church: one, holy, universal apostolic and persecuted.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ Cf. N. Gatti, “Missione e persecuzione (Lc 10,1-20),” *La Parola* XXXVII, no. 2 (2022): 3-6.

⁴⁹² Cf. Gatti, “Missione e persecuzione,” 3-6.

4.5.5 The Church is Loved by Jesus Christ

As evident in the rhetorical analysis of the text, the Christian communities mentioned in the literary unit are not perfect. They are marked by various challenges including false teaching: sexual immorality and eating foods offered to idols (cf. 2:14-15, 20-22), pride and arrogance resulting from material wealth and influence (3:16-17), and lack of love for one another (2:4). However, this did not diminish the love of the Risen Lord for them; his love for them was demonstrated in the fact that he died for them (1:5; 5:9, 12), chose them, was with them, and entrusted to them his presence in the world.

Also, the Risen Lord, having perfect understanding of the circumstances of these communities, invites them to repentance so that they will not be destroyed in the lake of fire (cf. 2:11; 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). Furthermore, Jesus' love for the churches is also evident in his encouragement to them during persecution (2:8-11; 3:7-13). As a result, he promised them gifts that are found in the eschatological world to assure them that tribulation and death in this world was not their end since there exists an 'afterlife' for the church in the 'new Jerusalem' that is more fulfilling and satisfying (21—22). The life in the eschatological world is marked by intimacy with God (21:3), devoid of pain, disease, sickness, sorrow, and curse (21:4). Thus, irrespective of the churches' current frailties, the Risen Lord is committed in his love for her whom he purchased with his own blood (1:5). The Risen Lord never gives up on the church.

4.5.6 The Church is Defined by Love

While the communities in the seven cities were facing persecution and other internal issues (syncretism), the Risen Lord expects them to live a life of love. The centrality of love is proven by the situation in the community in Ephesus. The Ephesian church was

commended for resisting false apostles and their teaching (2:2, 6). She had good works and had been a faithful witness of the Risen Lord (2:3). However, having been indicted of losing her first love, the Risen Lord indicates that the church would be removed from her place if she does not repent. This makes 'love' a critical and definitive feature of the community. Therefore, the absence of love means the non-existence of the church. The church herself was created by the love of God (cf. John 3:16) and belongs to the God, who is love (1 John 4:8). Also, the key marker of the followers of Jesus is love (John 13:34-35). Hence, the community of Jesus is expected to embody love in all her dealings. She must emulate God's love and the love of the lamb: without fraternal love, there is no church.

4.5.7 The Church's Identity is not Defined by her Organizational Structure but the Quality of her Relationship

The prophetic messages to the seven communities in Asia Minor made no reference to organizational structure of the Christian communities because the author's focus is on the Risen Lord (1:9-20). He seeks to draw the readers into a transforming relationship with the Risen Lord which will in turn affect their relationship with the neighbour. In essence, the *ekklēsia* is configured as the "relational space" in which it is possible to experience the presence of the Risen Lord by means of the dynamic process of discipleship. In it, the disciple of every generation is placed in contact with Christ, to be educated to take on his values, attitudes, and ideals, in order to re-propose his presence through teaching, actions and, above all, sharing the same destiny. It is, in short, a path of gradual 'christification,' finely analysed by a witness of our time, Bonhoeffer:

The presence of Christ as Word is community because the communication, and therefore the reality, of that presence through proclamation and sacrament are themselves forms of communication within community. That is why the Church is not simply the place where

Truth can be heard, where the presence of Christ is witnessed to; it actually is the presence of Christ for us, “Christ existing as community.”⁴⁹³

This Christological and theological focus leads the author to consider the concrete organisation of the community, offices, and institutions, as a somewhat secondary element, on which he does not dwell. His primary objective is to lead his reader to Christ, so that he chooses to place himself with unconditional trust in the footsteps of the Lamb.

4.5.8 The Church is the Locus where God’s Presence is Experienced

The author of the Apocalypse addressed the question: where is God present on earth? The text maintains that the Risen Lord is present in the church. The apocalypse indicates that the Risen Lord walks in the midst of the golden lampstands, which are the churches (1:13; 2:1b) and this connotes the abiding presence of Jesus in these communities. As a result, the Christian communities are presented as the locus where the presence of the Risen Lord and by extension the presence of God is experienced in the world.

This ecclesiological viewpoint is similar to the Matthean ecclesiology.⁴⁹⁴ In the Matthean gospel, Jesus states that he will be in the midst of his followers when they come together in his name to pray (Matt. 18:20) and that he will be with them as they go out into the world to make disciples of others (Matt. 28:20; cf. 10:40).

4.5.9 The Church is a Spiritual Entity

The church is spiritual in nature and focus. While the church lives in a physical world and, therefore, needs the resources of this world to survive, the messages to these seven

⁴⁹³ D. Bonhoeffer, *Christologie und Ethik* (München; Kaiser 1966), 36; cf. Gatti, *...perché il «piccolo» diventi «fratello»*, 303.

⁴⁹⁴ Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 114.

Christian communities emphasize the fact that their primary focus must be spiritual, embodying the values of the kingdom of God.

This assertion is supported by the fact that the accusations of the Risen Lord focus on the spiritual deterioration of communities rather than their physical destitution. The church in Ephesus was indicted for losing her love, the church in Pergamum for doctrinal decay and sinful behaviour, the church in Sardis for living a sinful and deceptive life etc. However, the poverty of the church in Smyrna and the 'little power' (influence) of the church in Philadelphia are not condemned by the Risen Lord (cf. 2:9; 3:8). Also, while faithfulness to the Risen Lord may lead to physical death (2:13), the martyr is promised eternal life in the eschatological world.

Wealth and affluence (cf. Laodicean Church) which leads to independence from Christ, pride, and complacency are condemned by the Risen Lord. Strikingly, he asserts that a physically rich, wealthy, prosperous church is wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (cf. 3:17). Hence what constitutes the church's wealth is not physical prosperity but spiritual prosperity. In other words, the focus of the church's mission is the quality of the Christian communities and not quantity or worldly influence.

This is evident in the fact that the two communities, Smyrna and Philadelphia, which have no indictments are those with low numerical strength and physical influence. The text indicates that the church in Smyrna does not have economic resources and political power (2:9), yet the Risen Lord did not find any negative thing in the community. Furthermore, he did not reprimand them for being poor but praised them since his reference to their poverty falls under the judgment section of the message and is introduced by the knowledge

formula. The poverty of the church did not affect her faithfulness as witnesses of the kingdom of God and the Risen Lord.

The church in Philadelphia has a small numerical strength and thus little influence in the city but kept the words of the Risen Lord and did not deny his name (3:8). Again, the Risen Lord did not indict this church for her low numerical strength and physical influence in the city but praises the church for being faithful despite her condition. It is instructive that it is only the two churches with little financial influence and numerical strength that have not been indicted by the Risen Lord.

However, the community in Laodicea, which has a lot of wealth and influence was the most indicted; underscoring the fact that Jesus demands quality from his communities and not just numerical growth and influence.

4.6 Conclusion

The features of the church discovered from the analysis of Rev. 2—3 can offer a model, challenging contemporary congregations in Ghana to reflect on what it means to be Jesus' community since they are also faced with similar challenges comparable to seven communities addressed by the author. For this reason, the portrayal of the church in the Apocalypse of John raises many questions concerning the Christian communities in Ghana. They include: What is a church? What are the features of a community of Jesus? What is the mission of the communities of Jesus? How are these communities supposed to relate with the world around them?

These questions are critical in view of the situation of contemporary Ghanaian Christian communities. Some of them highlight numerical growth, economic influence, and

relevance. They are marked by over-emphasis on human founders instead of the Risen Lord, who redeemed the church with his own blood (cf. 1:5). The problem is worsened by the influx of the prosperity gospel (health and wealth gospel) in most of the Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations since the 1970s. This has led to an over-emphasis on miracles and ‘breakthroughs,’ making worship a transactional enterprise where offerings and other forms of service in these communities are seen as a means of twisting God’s hands to bless the members of the congregation.

This understanding of the ‘church’ leads to the erroneous belief that God exists solely for the church; to do her bidden in this world. This idea is dangerous because it ‘deifies’ the church and makes God her ‘servant,’ shifting the focus of the communities from intimate and quality relationship with the Risen Lord and one another, and living as true disciples of Jesus Christ, which are the defining features of the ἐκκλησία depicted in the book of Revelation. It is evident that Jesus Christ is not at the centre of some of these congregations.

As a result, this text challenges these churches to rethink what it means to be a community of Jesus and make appropriate adjustments. They must stop the over-emphasis on material possession, economic power, relevance, human founders etc. and pursue a Christ-centred spirituality that is eschatological in outlook.

Also, there is the presence of competition among some of the Christian communities in Ghana. This rivalry is evident among the pastors and the members of the congregations. They compete in the following areas: size of auditorium, numerical and economic power, number of travels made overseas to preach, and the affiliation to ‘big men’ or politicians both in and outside Ghana. This has made many ‘prophets’ in this country focus their

prophecies on political figures since the fulfilment of these prophecies increases their pedigree as men of God. Contrary to this, the church is portrayed in the Apocalypse as a community whose distinctive feature is love. The churches are not called to compete with one another but to love one another and build one another up. The essence of the church is love and without love the church is non-existent (2:5). Thus, the communities in Ghana must repent and pursue 'brotherly' love and focus on building one another up in the Lord.

Furthermore, some of the communities in Ghana are characterized by the problem of segregation along the lines of economic power, social status, and spiritual position. The poor in the communities are not treated fairly with respect and favour. The rich are the influential part of the communities. Also, social standing plays in key role in the way the communities relate with their members. Some pastors even assume absolute authority over the members, who are expected to do everything these leaders demand without hesitation; these pastors assume the position of God in the lives of these congregants. Some of these pastors are literally 'worshipped' by the members of their communities. Interestingly, these unchristian behaviours are termed loyalty. This kind of stratified and hierarchical community contradicts the identity of the disciples of Jesus projected in the book of Revelation where all the members of the community are all equal in God's sight because they were all redeemed by the blood of Jesus (1:5). This understanding must lead to a relationship of love and mutual respect and not authoritarianism. The communities in Ghana must learn to 'gather' only around the Risen Lord and to follow him alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The chapter is divided into three sections: the summary, the conclusion, and the recommendations. The summary provides a brief overview of the research, guided by the problem statement, research questions, and theoretical framework. The findings are organized as response to the research questions. The implications for contemporary Christian communities are part of the findings and open a horizon for further studies. Academic and Pastoral recommendations are finally provided.

5.2 Summary

The research aimed at investigating the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία through an exegetical and theological analysis of Rev. 2:1–3:22. This helped to ascertain the features of the first communities of Jesus which serve as a benchmark for contemporary congregations in Ghana considering their fragmentation and conflicting orthodoxy and orthopraxy. To examine the issue, the study explored the following questions:

1. How does Rev. 2—3 present the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία?
2. Which rhetorical devices did the writer use to describe the characteristics of the ἐκκλησία?
3. What is the perlocutionary effect of Rev. 2—3 on the original readers?

To answer these questions, the research was guided by Holladay's theological conversational model as its theoretical foundation. Consequently, the research was

organized in two-steps, namely textual analysis, and theological synthesis of the text. The six-steps of rhetorical analysis proposed by Kennedy was employed to exegete the text. The first five (5) steps constitute the textual analysis, and the last step entails the theological synthesis of the text.

The first step of the textual analysis is the determination of the rhetorical situation, which encompasses a discussion about the author, recipients, date, prevailing circumstances, and structure of the book of Revelation. The author of the book of Revelation is explicitly identified as John, described as a ‘servant’ of God and ‘brother’ of the Christians addressed in the book (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). He was a Christian prophet who was active among the prophets in Asia Minor (1:3; 10:10-11; 22:7, 9-10, 18-19). Also, the author’s frequent use of the Old Testament and the knowledge of the Hebrew language (9:11; 16:16) suggests that he had a Jewish background.

The book was written to congregations in Asia Minor (1:4), located in seven cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11; 2—3). The Christian communities in Asia Minor had a mixed population comprising Jews and Gentiles.

The book is dated by several commentators to the latter years of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 CE), a period in which Rome colonized Asia minor. The colonization led to imperial rule with the worship of emperors (imperial cult) as its offshoot. Consequently, the period was marked by the building and dedication of temples and statues to the emperors. Although participation in the imperial cults was not strictly imposed, lack of participation made life difficult for the congregations because the imperial

cult was a significant part of civic life in Asia Minor. Further, the region was populated by gods and goddesses which were believed to oversee governance, education, family life, commerce, and worship and a constellation of deities were associated with the seven cities the book was written to.

The determination of the rhetorical unit was the second step. There is agreement among scholars that the literary unit under consideration ends in 3:22. However, scholars hold three different views on the beginning of the literary unit. The first hypothesis maintains that the literary unit begins at 1:4 and ends at 3:22.⁴⁹⁵ The second hypothesis holds that it begins at 1:9 and ends in 3:22. The proponents of this hypothesis, including Koester and Leithart, contend that the apocalypse of John consists of six vision cycles, that are sandwiched between a prologue and an epilogue.⁴⁹⁶ As a result, the larger context of the text under study is the vision of the glorified Christ (cf. 1:9—3:22). The third hypothesis maintains that the literary unit begins at 2:1 and ends at 3:22. The researcher aligns with this view because of the following reasons.

The literary unit is made of seven messages written to seven Christian communities which consist of distinctive stereotypical features which make the unit distinct from any other section of the book. The characteristics include the address, the self-presentation of the Risen Lord, the judgment, the exhortation, the appeal to listen to the Holy Spirit, and the promise. Another reason is that the various stereotypical features consist of key repetitive expressions which make the unit distinct. For example, *Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας γράψον* (2:1a) vs. *Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας γράψον* (2:8a, 12a, 18a; 3:1a, 7a, 14a) repeats in

⁴⁹⁵ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 276-277.

⁴⁹⁶ Koester, *Revelation*, 112.

the address, *τάδε λέγει* (2:1b, 12b, 18b; 3:1b, 7b, 14b) in the self-presentation of the Risen Lord, *οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου* and *ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σου* (2:2-4, 9, 13-15, 19-20; 3:1c, 8, 15) in the judgement, *Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις* (2:7a, 11a, 17a, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) in the appeal to listen to the Spirit and *τῷ νικῶντι* (2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26; 3:5, 12, 21) in the promise.

The third step is identifying the rhetorical problem which is the issue the author seeks to address by the text. There is scholarly consensus that the author addressed different issues in the literary unit under consideration which can be categorized into external issues and internal issues. The external issues include persecution and suffering while the internal issues include loss of first love, laxness, self-sufficiency (complacency), syncretism (false teaching), and materialism.

The determination of the rhetorical species is the fourth step. The study revealed that the literary unit is made of deliberative and epideictic rhetoric. Deliberative rhetoric is used when the author seeks to persuade his audience or readers to take some action in the future. For example, the congregation in Ephesus is instructed to return to its 'first love' (2:4-5), the church in Smyrna is exhorted to remain steadfast to the point of death despite an imminent increase in hostile opposition (2:10), the congregation in Pergamum and Thyatira is cautioned to stop tolerating false doctrines (2:14-16, 20-23).

Epideictic Rhetoric, on the other hand, seeks to persuade an audience to hold or reaffirm some point of view in the present, by celebrating or denouncing a person or quality. For example, the author praises the churches by indicating their strengths through the

knowledge formula and blames them through the specific indictments on the various communities.

The actual exegesis of the text is the fifth step. The seven messages were analyzed independently; however, due to the common rhetorical devices employed by the writer, the first message which is addressed to the church in Ephesus was examined in detail. The internal structure of the various messages was analysed as follows: the address, the self-presentation of the risen Lord, the judgment, the exhortation, the appeal to listen to the spirit, and the promise. The various compositional structural elements of the text, including words, phrases, clauses, key expressions, and grammar, were analysed with the appropriate tools for biblical research. The objective was to determine the rhetorical functions of these elements and how they portray the church's identity and mission.

The second step of the methodology is the theological synthesis of the text which stems from the analysis of the literary unit and focuses on the ecclesiology. In view of the research topic, the identity and mission of the ἐκκλησία, the theological reflection focuses on the ecclesiology, the image of the church that emerged from the text. The analysis revealed that the church is spiritual in nature and eschatological in perspective; she is loved by Jesus and is herself defined by love, and the quality of her relationship with the Risen Lord and one another. She is persecuted as she remains a faithful witness of the kingdom of God; and functions as the locus where God's presence is experienced. These ecclesiological characteristics highlight the church's primary mission, which is being transformed to become like Jesus; the faithful witness (1:5).

5.3 Conclusion

The following are the main findings of the thesis which are organized as response to the research questions.

5.3.1 How Revelation 2—3 Presents the Identity and Mission of the ἐκκλησία

The research revealed that the church a spiritual entity which is crafted by God's love (cf. 1:5; Eph. 5:25), as a result she is designed and shaped to love God, members of the Christian community and those outside their communities. She does only participate in this 'present world' but the 'world to come' and therefore is expected to incarnate the values, principles, and priorities of the eschatological world which are in direct contrast with the world's principles. All these features mentioned above about the church find their highest expression in the Risen Lord himself, who is the faithful witness (cf. 1:5); thus, the church is on the journey of continuing conversion to become like the lamb, who was slain for his witness about the kingdom of God (5:6). This continuous transformation makes the church the locus God's presence is experienced both by her members and the world at large.

The identity of the church expatiated above makes the church the representative of God's kingdom on the earth. As such, she is called to mediate the love of God to the world; she must live as the conduit of God's eternal love for the whole of humanity, which is only possible when she is God centred and not self-referential. She must incarnate the values of the kingdom of God and not compromise by focussing on earthly prosperity and influence. She must consistently focus on affecting the world with the principles of God's kingdom. She must remain faithful and unsoiled by the world even when confronting with persecution.

5.3.2 Rhetorical Devices the Writer Used to Describe the Characteristics of the ἐκκλησία

The research revealed the various rhetorical devices the author employed to describe the characteristics of the church. They include: the recipient formular (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας), the graphon imperative (γράψον), the *tade legei* formular (τάδε λέγει), the descriptive phrases about Jesus Christ, the knowledge formular (οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου), the indictment formular (ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ), the exhortative formular, the proclamation formular (ὁ ἔχων οὗς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις) and the promise of victory formular (τῷ νικῶντι).

The recipient formular consists of the recipient, an angel (τῷ ἀγγέλῳ) which is a narrative angel used by the author to reproach the churches without humiliating them and it is association with the particular city in which the church is situated. The graphon imperative is a command given to the author by the Risen Lord to write to the angel of the respective churches. It appears in all the seven messages; it connotes the Risen Lord's authority over the Christian communities.

The τάδε λέγει formular is steeped in the Old Testament and introduces the Risen Lord as YHWH addressing the congregations and hence emphasizes his authority over them. The descriptive phrases about Jesus Christ used by the author reveal various aspects of Jesus to the communities in light of the prevailing issues in a particular community. For example, in the church in Smyrna, the Risen Lord is presented as the 'continuous,' 'present' and sovereign one over human history and the one who has authority over death and the future. This presentation addresses the historical context of the church since it was being severely persecuted. Hence it served as comfort and encouragement to the community to persevere

in their faithful witnessing of the Risen Lord since he alone has ultimate power over death and the future. He is present with them in all their struggles.

The knowledge formular praises the communities for their good works and thus serves as encouragement to the members to continue in these works. For example, the Ephesian church was praised for her toil and endurance in resisting the infiltration of false teaching and practice in the community. The indictment formular, on the other hand, blames the community for the negative things the church was doing which the Risen Lord abhors. It serves as an exhortation to the community to repent. For instance, the community in Ephesus is indicted for losing her love; love for the members of the community.

In the exhortation section, the author instructs the communities to repent using verbs in the imperative mood. The exhortation is reinforced by a warning. To illustrate, the community in Ephesus was instructed to remember, repent and do the first works. The warning for this community includes the removal of the community's lampstand from its place.

The proclamation formular underscores the importance of the community to listen carefully (2:7a, 11a; 3:6, 13) and obey the instructions of the Risen Lord while the promise of victory offers specific promises to the communities, which will be realized in the new heaven and new earth (2:7b, 11b, 17b; 3:5, 21; 21:1-4) and serves as a motivation for obeying the instructions. For instance, the community in Laodicea is promised the possibility of sitting with the Risen Lord on his throne (3:21).

5.3.3 The Perlocutionary Effect of Revelation 2—3 on the Original Readers

To begin with, the text exhorts its readers to pursue brotherly love, as a defining characteristic of the community of Jesus. This instruction is consistent with the emphasis

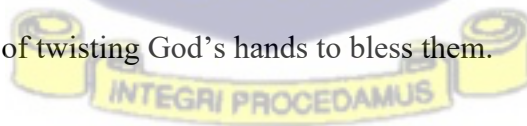
of Johannine literature, of which the book of Revelation is a part. This literature indicates that God is love and members of God's community are supposed to express their love to him by loving one another (cf. 1 John 4:8, 20). Additionally, it maintains that the main feature that distinguishes the disciples of Jesus from any other community is love for one another (John 13:34-35). As a result, the author calls the Ephesian church to return to her love for one another with a very striking warning in case they do not obey the instruction. At the core of the church is her love for one another and without love, no entity qualifies to be called a community of Jesus Christ.

Also, the literary unit offers comfort and encouragement to its readers, as well as a call to a life of perseverance in a crisis. Evidence in the book suggests that some members of the community have been martyred for their commitment to Jesus (2:12; 6:9-10) while there is the possibility of increased imminent suffering that will lead to deaths in the communities (2:10). Moreover, the members of the communities have also suffered from social and economic alienation for refusing to accommodate the culture of their environment. Considering this, the messages comfort and encourage the communities to persevere by remaining faithful even to the point of death.

Furthermore, the text exhorts the communities to resist false teaching. Three of the churches, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira were faced with the issue of false teaching leading to practices that are inconsistent with the character of a disciple of the Risen Lord, which is the primary goal of the communities. The teachings propose an accommodating stance of the communities to the practices and ideologies of the environment in which they lived, including eating food sacrificed to idols and engaging in sexual immorality. While the community in Ephesus resisted the false teaching with its attendant practices, the

communities in Pergamum and Thyatira accommodated it. Consequently, the Risen Lord urges the communities to resist the infiltration of these false teachings and practices.

The call to action of the literary unit is not only relevant for the original readers but also for contemporary congregations in Ghana since they are also besieged with similar challenges that the first communities of Jesus faced. The portrayal of the church in the Apocalypse of John raises many questions concerning the Christian communities in Ghana. They include: What is a church? What are the marks that define a church? These questions are critical because many contemporary Christian communities in Ghana highlight numerical growth, economic influence, and relevance. They are marked by competition and over-emphasis on human founders instead of the Risen Lord who redeemed the church with His own blood (1:5). The problem is worsened by the influx of the prosperity gospel (health and wealth gospel) in most of the Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations. This has led to an over-emphasis on miracles and 'breakthroughs,' making worship a transactional enterprise where offerings and other forms of service in these communities are seen as a means of twisting God's hands to bless them.



This situation invariably has led to a shift in focus from intimate and quality relationship with the Risen Lord and one another, as well as living as true disciples of Jesus Christ, which are the defining features of the ἐκκλησία depicted in the Apocalypse of John. It is evident that Jesus Christ is not at the centre of these congregations. As a result, these text challenges these churches to rethink what it means to be a community of Jesus and make appropriate adjustments. In light of the above discussion, the researcher offers the following recommendations.

5.4 Recommendations

At the end of the study, the researcher wishes to provide both academic and pastoral recommendations. From an academic standpoint, the research identifies some areas that require additional investigation. They include the following;

1. The findings of the research should be contextualized in selected Christian communities in Ghana. This will highlight the departure or resemblance between contemporary Christian groups in Ghana and Jesus' first communities in the Bible. Also, it will assess how Jesus's communities have evolved historically beyond the first century in terms of their identity and mission.
2. There is also the need to study the development of the identity and mission of the church in the entire book of Revelation. This is because the 20 occurrences of the word ἐκκλησία in the Apocalypse is distributed as follows; 4 in chap. 1, 15 in chaps. 2-3 and 1 in chaps. 4-22. Even though there is a concentration of the term in the first part of the book (1-3), there is the need to investigate how the concept of the ἐκκλησία develops in the second part of the book, which constitute the future visions (4-22).

For pastoral purposes, the researcher proposes that the communities in Ghana should commit to the effective training of their leaders. The training should focus on raising competent and faithful pastors who reject any fundamentalist reading and offer an informed understanding of the Scripture based on competent exegesis of the text (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-4), who are focused on Jesus Christ, clearly understand the identity and mission of the church, and embody the servant attitude of Jesus relevant for nurturing a community that loves the Risen Lord and one another. Further, the churches should refocus on their

mission, which is making committed disciples of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 28:18-20) avoiding any form of unbiblical teaching and false promises of prosperity. This will help produce transformed and matured disciples who will transform their homes, workplaces, communities etc. with the principles of the kingdom of God.



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