Local References in the Letter to Smyrna (Rv 2: 8–11), Part 3: Jewish Background.

David E. Graves, PhD, Liberty University
Local References in the Letter of Smyrna
(Rv 2:8-11), Part 3:
Jews in Smyrna


David E. Graves

There was a considerable Jewish population in Smyrna, which was hostile to the early church. They opposed the early Christians and promoted the persecution of Christians (Rv 2:9–10). In the Revelation to John, they are described as calling themselves Jews but really belonging to the synagogue of Satan. As Walvoord points out, the Christian persecutors were not only pagans, who naturally would be offended by the peculiarities of the Christian faith, but also hostile Jews and Satan himself (1983:61).

Actual Jews

However, were these ethnic Jews who were not religious Jews, or Gentiles pretending to be Jews, or ethnic Jews who were rejecting the truth in Christ (Stern 1992:795–96; Michaels 1997:74)? The general consensus of commentators is that Ιουδαίοις (Greek) refers to anti-Christian ethnic Jews (Trench 1861:137; Charles 1963:1.57; Osborne 2002:131; Robertson 1934:6.302; Lenski 1963:97; Thompson 1998:68–69; Gregg 1997:67; Düsterdieck 1979:138; Alford 1968:4.566). To the early Christians, these were Jews in name only (see Mt 3:9; Jn 8:33; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:4ff.). Paul and Clement both put forth this view (Rom 2:28–29; Roberts and Donaldson 1994, Recognitions of Clement 5.34). It is evident that this idea was a general perception in the early church. In all probability these were ethnic Jews who, though religious, rejected Jesus and their true “Jewishness” in Him.

Presence in Smyrna

The source of the Jewish presence in Asia Minor can be traced back to the time of the Seleucids, as early as 200 BC (Ramsay 1895:668n.4) when Antiochus the Great (261–248 BC) imported 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon to improve his grip on this territory (Josephus Ant. 12.125; Ramsay 1895:668). These Jews were given land, guaranteed privileges, and a separate government. It has also been documented that there was a large Jewish population from the time of Cicero settling in every city in Asia and particularly in western Asia Minor (Smallwood 1976:121; Roberts and Donaldson 1994, Cicero Pro Flacco 68; Philo Legum allegoricae 1.245; Philo 1993:1929). By the first century the Jewish population in Asia Minor reached in excess of one million (Horst 1989:106–107). From these data, Ramsay rightly concludes that,

we cannot doubt that this large Jewish population exercised a great influence on the development of the district and of the cities (1895:668).

The persecution of Christians by the Jews during the first two centuries was frequent and also present in Smyrna (Rv 2:10). Frend points out that
In the persecutions which were to wrack Asia in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the Jew was often in the background (1965:259).

Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180). The Jews were often in the background during the persecutions against the Christians in the reign of Marcus Aurelius. (Istanbul Archaeological Museum)

Third century AD gymnasium at Sardis, as seen from the Jewish Synagogue. The close proximity of the synagogue to the gymnasium suggests that the Jewish population at Sardis enjoyed a privileged status.

Lieu challenges this view in her article on Jewish persecution, stating that it is easy to show that the Jewish persecution of Christians must “rely more on rhetoric than on wealth.”
of evidence” (1998:279). She argues away the predominance of Jewish involvement stating that it was less fact than the Christians’ imagination. Her major premise focuses on the illusion of persecution:

> What is beyond dispute is that Christians perceived and presented themselves as persecuted...That Justin was seriously convinced of Jewish hostility to Christians is not to be doubted; however, the frequent repetition of the theme owes as much to its function within one (or more than one) theological schema, as it does to its historical primacy (1998:280, 182–23).

However, even given Lieu’s best efforts to argue away the evidence, there appears to be sufficient justification for claiming a predominant Jewish influence in early Christian persecution. Frend goes so far as to say that,

> In the last resort, the troubles of the early Church were due as much to the virulence of the Christian-Jewish controversy as to any other cause (1958:156).

Waal also recognizes that “the great dispute in Revelation is between ecclesia and synagoga; it is there that the antithesis lies” (1990:125). There is sufficient evidence to support the claim of a significantly hostile Jewish community in Smyrna in the first
Miletus theater capable of seating 15,000 in ca. AD 100. In addition to theatrical performances, it was also used for gladiatorial combat and animal fights.

Jews in Other Cities

The presence of Jews in other nearby cities also supports the idea that there was a strong Jewish presence in Smyrna. A number of the other seven cities were also influenced by the Jews. Both Smyrna and Philadelphia were warned of the activities of the “Synagogue of Satan” (Rv 2:9; 3:9). This strong Jewish influence is indicated from the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. In Philadelphia, Christians were at risk from continuous Jewish preaching (Roberts and Donaldson 1994, Ignatius To the Philadelphians 6.1).
Inscription on the seat of the Miletus theatre. It reads, “Place of the Jews, also called ‘God-fearers.’”
Painting of the martyrdom of Polycarp on the ceiling of the St. Polycarp Roman Catholic Church, the oldest Catholic Church in Izmir. He was burned to death after refusing to deny Christ, saying “86 years I have served Him and He never did me any injury, how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?” (Mart. Pol. 9:5). Permission to build a chapel to Polycarp was granted in 1520 by Suleyman the Magnificent, sultan of the Ottoman Empire 1520–1566.

In Sardis, just 50 mi (80 km) east of Smyrna, a large second century synagogue has been discovered which contains “more Jewish inscriptions than any other Diaspora centre except Rome” (Smallwood 1976:509; Kroll 2001:5–55). The prominent location of the Jewish synagogue near the gymnasion in Sardis indicates the centrality of Jewish society in the life of the city. The elaborate mosaics and richly decorated table indicate the wealth and prominence of the Jewish citizens of Sardis. An inscription on a theatre seat in Miletus (approximately 100 mi [62 km] south of Smyrna) reads “place of the Jews also called the God-fearing,” indicating a large prominent Jewish community able to procure permanently marked seating in the theatre (McDonagh 2001:245).

**Jewish Involvement in the Martyrdom of Polycarp**

There is little doubt that not only were many Jews living in Smyrna in the first and second centuries, but they were also active in the persecution of the Christian church as evidenced in the martyrdom of both Polycarp and Pionius. Although there is evidence for a Jewish community in first and second century Smyrna, it wasn’t until the middle of the second century that the Jews of Smyrna made an “impact on recorded history” (Smallwood 1976:507) when they joined with the residents of Smyrna against the Christians to martyr
Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (Lightfoot and Harmer 1989, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.13). He was the bishop of Smyrna for many years. In his old age as he stood before the proconsul he was given the choice of cursing Jesus’ name and living, or confessing his name and dying. Polycarp replied: “86 years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” (Roberts and Donaldson 1994, Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15.25). At this point the proconsul sentenced him to die by being burned at the stake. The record indicates that the Jews were foremost in gathering wood for the fire. Even though it was the Sabbath, they deliberately carried burdens of wood and transgressed the law (Lightfoot and Harmer 1989, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.1; 13.1). When the persecution broke out in Smyrna in this period, the Jews were not directly involved initially (Lightfoot and Harmer 1989, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2), but the Jews became involved when the focus was placed upon Polycarp:

Gentiles as well as Jews living in Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable anger and with a loud shout: “This is the teacher of Asia [or of impiety], the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many not to sacrifice, or worship (Lightfoot and Harmer 1989, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2).

Lieu doubts that Jews spoke these words, arguing:

These we cannot pursue except to note that it is irrelevant, albeit true, that the words are unlikely to have been found on Jewish lips—they would not have claimed the city gods as “theirs” nor ventured to accuse someone else of avoiding their worship without running the risk of having the same charge turned against themselves. It is equally pointless to allocate the cries to the groups involved, so that the Jews contribute only the first two affirmations, or to debate the “orthodoxy” of the Jews involved or the official nature of their involvement. From the point of view of the narrative Polycarp’s clear testimony must have a universal audience and he himself must stand alone against the gathered forces of the opposition (1998:285–86).

Musurillo ascribes the Jews’ remarks to different groups in the crowd (1972:11 n. 16). Regardless of the suspected motives, evidence of Jewish involvement in persecution of the early church is found throughout the Acts and in the accounts of the early church fathers to indicate that this was not out of character in Smyrna.

Banks and others have pointed out how deeply rooted the convictions of the Jews were in their actions against Polycarp. He states,

it seems that the Jews of Smyrna were more antagonistic than were the Romans to the spread of Christianity, for it is said that even on Saturday, their sacred day, they brought wood for the fire in which Polycarp was burned (1949:2818).

Ramsay also points out that the Jews were not present at the spots in the stadium. He argues that,

many who would abhor to appear as spectators of the games on a Sabbath would feel justified in putting to death an enemy of their faith on that day (1979:273).
Smallwood observes that, even if common hostility rather than positive friendship lay behind this possibly temporary alliance, the part played by the Jews in the story and the fact that the day of the martyrdom is given in Jewish terms as “a great Sabbath” speaks for the Jews’ importance in Smyrna at the time (1976:507).

The consensus of scholars favors the Jewish community playing a significant role, even if they did not instigate the attack on Polycarp (Lightfoot and Harmer 1989, Martyrdom of Polycarp 12–18).

**Jewish Involvement in the Martyrdom of Pionius**

The attitude of Jews toward Christians can be further illustrated from the trial of Pionius, a priest in Smyrna, during the Decian persecution in AD 250 (Potter 1992:6.75; Zincone 1992:2.688-89).

In a public *apologia*, Pionius directs his defense speech to the Jewish community when he addresses, “Greeks, Jews and women” (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 3.6). Pionius specifically refers to Jews when he says, “those among this audience who are Jews, listen while I make my brief discourse” (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 4.2). He refers to the Jews again, and notes their ridicule of those who deserted the faith:

I understand that you [Jews] laughed and rejoiced at those who deserted and considered as a joke the error of those who voluntarily offered sacrifice (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 4.3).

Then he addresses the men of Judea and appeals to Moses and Solomon, quoting from Deuteronomy 22:4 and Proverbs 24:17 (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 4.4–6). During his discourse, Pionius “mentions Jewish proselytizing efforts among Christians and attempts to discredit Christian doctrine” (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 2.1; 3.6; 4.2; 13.1; 14.1). According to Smallwood, this would indicate an active community of Jews, “enjoying good relations with their gentile neighbours and considerable freedom of action” (1976:508).
Bronze libation bowl with decorative handle. Liquid offerings (libations), such as wine, oil or milk, were poured out on altars or the ground in honor of the gods. Libation bowls traditionally had a raised center (omphalos) and many examples, especially Greek, had no handle. Christians were compelled to either offer a libation to the imperial cult or face martyrdom. (Roman, first-second century AD, British Museum)

Pionius acknowledged that,

even if, as they [Jews] claim, we are their enemies, we are at any rate men, and men who have been treated unjustly (Musurillo 1972, Martyrdom of Pionius 4.8).

Pionius indicates a strong hostility between the Jews of Smyrna and the Christian community, whom the Jews call their enemies.
Lane Fox makes several conclusions from the evidence in *Martyrdom of Pionius*. His first conclusion stated that there was, “a Jewish community of some size and rank.” Second, that Jews and gentiles lived in close proximity to each other. Third, the Jews had “contacts in the city’s life.” Finally, “the Christian church was a poor relation to the strong Jewish community” (1987:481–82). Even Doughty, who challenges most of Lane Fox’s conclusions, agrees to at least these conclusions (2003: n. p.) The historical evidence from the martyrdoms of Polycarp and Pionius concurs with the statement about Jewish persecution in Revelation 2:9.

**Persecution by Jews of Jewish Christians**
Ramsay argues that the Jews expressed their strongest hatred against converted Jews: “It was the Jewish Christians, and not the pagan converts, whom the national Jews hated so violently” (1979:272). The Jews had no interest in converted pagans, but focused on those who owned strong convictions in leaving Judaism, like the apostle Paul (Ramsay 1979:272; Grant 1963:927). The animosity from the Jewish quarter within Smyrna may additionally be based on Christianity winning God fearers (McDonagh 2001:245) from the synagogue.

**Bibliography**

Alford, Henry  

Banks, Edgar J.  

Barclay, William  

Beale, Gregory K.  

Beagley, Alan J.  

Charles, Robert H.  

Cimok, Fatih  

Cicero, Marcus T.  

Doughty, Darrell J.  

Düsterdieck, Friedrich  

Exell, Joseph S.  
Frend, William H. C.

Grant, Frederick C.

Gregg, Steve, ed.

Horst, Pieter W. van der

Josephus, Flavius

Kistemaker, Simon J.

Kroll, John H.

Lane Fox, Robin J.

Lenski, Richard C. H.

Lieu, Judith M.

Lightfoot, Joseph B., and Harmer, John R.

McDonagh, Bernard

Michaels, J. Ramsey

Musurillo, Herbert, ed.

Osborne, Grant R.
Philo  

Potter, David S.  

Ramsay, William M.  

Roberts, Alexander, and Donaldson, James, eds.  

Robertson, Archibald T.  

Silberschlag, Eisig  

Simcox, William H.  

Smallwood, E. Mary  

Stern, David  

Swete, Henry B.  

Thompson, Leonard L.  

Trench, Richard C.  
1861 Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches of Asia. London: Truebner.

Unger, Merrill F.  

Waal, Cornelis van der  

Walvoord, John F.  
Zincone, S.


David E. Graves is director of Computer Services, and Information Security Officer at Atlantic Baptist University, Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada, and also teaches archaeology at the ABU-Oxford program, Oxford, England.