Local References in the Letter to Smyrna (Rv 2: 8–11), Part 4: Religious Background

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The worship of the Emperor was an important part of Smyrna’s culture from early in Rome’s rise to power. Kistemaker writes that in order to make the spirit of Rome concrete throughout the empire,

Romans presented the emperor as its embodiment, and thus worship of the emperor arose. Although some of the first emperors disparaged this worship, the population energized it to the point that the emperor was considered to be divine (2001:121; cf. Barclay 1957:32; Blaiklock 1983:5.462).

The origin of the goddess Roma cultus can be traced in the Greek world to the city of Smyrna, modern Izmir, Turkey, because of her need to invent and maintain a relationship with Rome (Potter 1992:6.74; Mellor 1975:14–15). In 195 BC, while Antiochus III (223–187 BC) was at the height of his power, Smyrna was the first Ionian city to establish a templum urbis Romae (Latin “temple to Roma,” Tacitus 1989:4.37-8; Ramsay 1979:253–54; Barclay 1957:30–31; Yamauchi 1980:57–58; Kistemaker 2001:121; Grant 1963:927), the center of the imperial cult. Mellor points out that

after more than two centuries, the temple of Roma at Smyrna still served its original function: to flatter Rome and thereby secure favors for Smyrna (1975:14).

In AD 26, according to Tacitus, the Commune Asiae (Latin) decreed a second temple (Cadoux 1938:239; Tacitus 1989:4.56) to the goddess of Rome (Dea Roma, Latin), resulting in envoys from 11 cities vying for the privilege of construction. Tiberius heard the arguments and narrowed the decision down to Sardis and Smyrna (Tacitus 1989:4.55; Mellor 1975:14; Ramsay 1979:254; Friesen 1993:15–16; Aune 1997:160; Cadoux 1938:239; Swete 1957: lxi). Tacitus goes on to describe the arguments of the Smyrnaean orators:

The envoys from Smyrna, after tracing their city’s antiquity back to such founders as either Tantalus, the son of Jupiter, or Theseus, also of divine origin, or one of the Amazons, passed on to that on which they chiefly relied, their services to the Roman people, whom they had helped with naval armaments, not only in wars abroad, but in those under which we struggled in Italy. They had also been the first, they said, to build a temple in honour of Rome, during the consulship of Marcus Porcius Cato, when Rome’s power indeed was
Statue of a priest of the imperial cult at Smyrna. (30 BC-AD 395, Archaeological Museum of Izmir, Turkey)

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Emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138). Hadrian had the Trajaneum enlarged and completed in Pergamum to worship the emperor. At his death his successor Antoninus convinced the Senate to deify Hadrian as a Roman god. (Antalya Museum, Turkey)

great, but not yet raised to the highest point, inasmuch as the Punic capital was still standing and there were mighty kings in Asia. They appealed too to the testimony of Lucius Sulla, whose army was once in terrible jeopardy from a severe winter and want of clothing, and this having been announced at Smyrna in a public assembly, all who were present stript their clothes off their backs and sent them to the legions. And so the Senate, when the question was put, gave the preference to Smyrna (Tacitus 1942:4.56).

Smyrna dedicated this temple to Emperor Tiberius together with his mother Julia and took pride in boasting that she was the first city to construct a temple to emperor worship (Banks 1949:4.2818). The fact that Smyrna was chosen over other cities demonstrates the wealth and status of this city (Friesen 1993:19). Without a social welfare system the contrast between the wealthy and poor would be evident (Rv 2:9).

The presence of a provincial cult within a city would indicate a close relationship between the city and Rome. Smyrna was a faith-ful ally of Rome going back first to 43 BC when Cicero declared that they were “our most faithful and most ancient allies”
(1903:11.2.5) and even farther back to 195 BC when Smyrna first built the temple to Rome (Tacitus 1989:4.56). Smyrna’s city calendar also conveyed an allegiance to Rome as the month from late February to March was named Philosebastos (Greek), “friend to the emperor” (Lane Fox 1987:476–77).

When Pionius was first asked and refused to sacrifice to the gods (“the golden image,” Musurillo 1972: Mart. Pionii 4.24; 5.2), Poleman the temple warden (neokoros, Greek), asked him to “make a sacrifice at least to the emperor” (Musurillo 1972: Mart. Pionii 7.2; 8.4; cf. Lane Fox 1987:477). For Poleman, a leading pagan in Smyrna, to use the term “at least” indicates that the emperor was not on the same level as the gods. Certainly, the cult of the emperor was present in Smyrna,

but not even the prosecutors saw it as the most divisive issue. It was a cult, they felt, which allowed a compromise. Unlike the other pagan gods, a living emperor had no divine anger, no power to cause droughts or tremors (Lane Fox 1987:477).

However, for Christians, the worship of both gods and emperors was unthinkable (Musurillo 1972: Mart. Pionii 7.2; 8.4).

In AD 197 when Smyrna and Lampsacus refused to submit to the advances of Antiochus, Lampsacus appealed to Rome for assistance based on her past history. Unfortunately, Smyrna had no history with Rome and “so invented one: the deification of the city of Rome—thea Rome (Greek)” (Mellor 1975:15; Potter 1992:6:74; Livy 1960:33.38.3; 34.59.4; 35.17.1; Polybius 1979:18.52.1).

The imperial cult may well have played a significant role in the mistreatment of Smyrnaean Christians by Jews. The gradually growing awareness by the Roman authorities that Christians did not fit under Judaism’s exemption from the ban on religious practices outside of the cult of the emperor led to persecution of Christians (Osborne 2002:131; Collins 1986:313). Kiddle
Caesar Augustus (31 BC-AD 14). In the East (Asia Minor). Augustus was worshiped as a god, although reluctantly. Augustus would publicly reject divine honors or request that they be joined with Rome. However, his name means “revered one” and he did not object to his essence (genius) being recognized as divine. Several temples and cult centers were erected at Lugdunum in Gaul and Cologne on the Rhine for his worship. (Archaeology Museum, Istanbul, Turkey)
Livia Drusilla (58 BC-AD 29). Livia was the mother of Tiberius and wife of Augustus. She was one of the first women to be actively involved in Roman politics, albeit behind the scenes, influencing almost every decision of Augustus. She was also deified by her grandson Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), who gave her the title of Augusta, achieving another first in Roman history. (Selçuk Archaeological Museum, Turkey)

provides an excellent overview of the historical background for the role of the imperial cult in the persecution of Christians in Smyrna:

And in cities like Smyrna, where the Imperial cult had been enthusiastically fostered for many years, it must have been an easy matter to urge the authorities to action. It was part of the Imperial policy to respect the religion of its subjects’ nation, the Jews, who were legally excused from actual worship of the emperor on condition that intercession was offered for him in synagogues. But Christians had no national name to protect them, and consequently no legal privileges. Once disowned by Judaism, of which to the casual eye of the pagan they might seem merely an eccentric and troublesome sect, they were at the mercy of the prejudices of local administrators. And certain Jews were not content with disowning and ridiculing their opponents; there is reason to believe that they would on occasion traduce them, laying malicious accusations at their charge—accusations, for example, of disloyalty and positive sedition (1952:17.27).

The Jews would have sought to
dissociate themselves from the Christian movement, and, on the other hand, to enlist and support local authorities in the removal of this threat to the status quo (Mulholland 1990: 360).

Jewish persecution is the context within which the Jewish synagogue in Revelation is to be understood as a “synagogue of Satan.”

The historical context for this animosity is best understood before the Jewish revolt of 66–70 AD, after which the Romans removed the special status of the Jews and the Jews, themselves, faced persecution from the Romans (Grant 1963: 927).

**Religion**

The city of Smyrna was also home to other religions, with temples to “Sipylene Cybele and the local Zeus” (Swete 1957: lxii), and Asclepius (Pausanias 2003: 2.36.9; 7.5.9; Tacitus 1989: 3.63). Other temples to the Neokorie, Nemesis and Tyche are depicted on the coinage of Smyrna (Klose 1987: 38; Price 1977: 215, 268). In the account of martyrdom of Pionius, Sabina and others “throw themselves on the ground to avoid being dragged to the temple” (Greek, *eidolaion*, idol temple; Musurillo 1972: *Mart. Pionii* 15.7). Pagan temples provided a climate of clashing worldviews and set the stage for persecution of the Christians in Smyrna.

**Emperor Tiberius Caesar Augustus** (42 BC-AD 37). In AD 26, according to Tacitus, the *Commune Asiae* (Latin) decreed a second temple to the goddess of Rome (*Dea Roma*, Latin), resulting in envoys from 11 cities, Pergamum
being one of them, vying for the privilege of construction (1989:4.55-56). Tiberius heard the arguments and narrowed the decision down to Sardis and Smyrna with the privilege given to Smyrna. (Selçuk Archaeological Museum, Turkey)

**Imperial cult priest.** This position was usually held by the local aristocracy, providing them a means of social advancement and political status. This provided an opportunity for wealthy freedmen, who were otherwise excluded from holding office, to climb the social ladder. Notice the cord (crown) around his head indicating his status. (Second century AD, Antalya Museum, Turkey)

**Martyrs Of Smyrna**

The central message to the church in Smyrna is centered on suffering and martyrdom (Rv 2:9–10). While much of the suffering within Smyrna would be difficult to document, there are a number of famous martyrs who have suffered for their faith, both ancient and modern.

**Polycarp—Martyred in AD 155**

Of coincidental significance, but interesting nonetheless, is the meaning of the name of the first recorded martyr of Smyrna. Polycarp (polycarpos) means “fruitful,” evident through his life’s work. According to Pionius, Polycarp was an orphan raised by a woman named Callisto, who was directed by an angel to purchase him and raise him. Pionius tells us that he was “a native of the East...during the time of Bucolus” (Lightfoot 1989: V ὑ. Polyc.1.3). With
the death of Polycarp in approximately AD 155\(^7\) (Potter 1992:6.75), under the governance of Statius Quadratus (Behr 1968:98), he won the martyr’s crown of immortality (Eusebius 1998:4.15.40, 45). The martyrdom of Polycarp bore much fruit, as is evident from the advice he was called upon to give to the Philippian church 300 mi (483 km) away (Pilhofer 2003:9)\(^9\) and the churches named in his honor still in existence today.

**Pionius—Martyred in AD 250**

Pionius was a priest of Smyrna who, according to the *Acts of Pionius*, was martyred in about AD 250. The *Acts of Pionius* is generally accepted by most scholars as historically accurate in most of its content. It is filled with historical details that collectively point toward a historically “reliable document” (Cross 1966).\(^12\) Meinardus gives the account that,

> Euktemon, the bishop of Smyrna, apostatised and surrendered to the demands of the government and offered sacrifices to the gods. Pionius, however, remained true to his faith and died a martyr’s death (1979:68).

The *Martyrdom of Pionius* states that his martyrdom took place when Julius Proculus Quintillian was proconsul of Asia, under the consulship of Emperor Gaius Messius Quintus Trajan Decius Augustus for the second time and Vettius Gratus, on the fourth day before the Ides of March according to the Roman calendar, and according to the Asiatic reckoning on the 19th day of the sixth month, Saturday, at the tenth hour (Musurillo 1972: *Mort. Pionii* 23.1).
Seat of Honor from the theater. Constructed of marble flanked by griffins. (Second century BC, Archaeological Museum of Izmir, Turkey)
Stained glass window depicting Polycarp (AD 69–155), now residing in the back entrance of St John Anglican Church, Izmir. He is shown with a wound over his heart.

While martyrdom was a very real possibility within the early church, it is significant that by the time of Polycarp’s death, according to the Martyrdom of Polycarp (Musurillo 1972: Mart. Pol. 19.1), “11 Philadelphia Christians died as martyrs with Polycarp of Smyrna” (Aune 1997:235; Downing 1988:117).
Modern Martyrs of Smyrna

It is impossible to list the names of all the Christians of this city who laid down their lives for their commitment to Christ following the example of St. Polycarp, but the Greek Orthodox Church commemorates many. Most of these “New Martyrs” were poor people who had embraced Islam for various reasons, but later repented and publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ. Athanasius of Attalia (January 7), who lived most of his life in Smyrna, was said to have embraced Islam, but in 1653 when he returned to his Christian faith he was decapitated. In 1675 Nicholas of Karaman (December 6), in a moment of anger swore he would become a Muslim and when he refused to fulfill this oath he was hanged. Dioscorus of Smyrna (May 11) experienced a similar fate. Demus of Smyrna (April 10) was accused by his Turkish master of insulting Islam and was beheaded in 1763. Alexander of Salonica (May 26) had even become a hadja, but as he preached the crucified Christ he was martyred in Smyrna in 1794. Other new martyrs of Smyrna include Procopius the New Martyr (June 25), who was killed in 1810; Agathangelus the New Martyr (April 19), who suffered martyrdom in 1818; and Nektarius the New Martyr (July 11) who was hanged in 1820 (Meinardus 1979:73–74). Athanasios of Smyrna was martyred in 1819 (Clogg 1973:28–36).

St. Chrysostom—Martyred in AD 1922

On September 9, 1922, St. Chrysostom, Greek Metropolitan of Smyrna, was tortured, mutilated, and killed by a Turkish mob in front of the military headquarters (Horton 1953:99; Dobkin 1988:133; Bierstadt 1924:24–25). The general Noureddin requested the prelate’s presence, but refused to shake his hand. Instead, he sent Chrysostom into the hands of the waiting crowd, shouting from the balcony, “Treat him as he deserves!” The crowd dragged him down the street to a Jewish barber and demanded, “Give him a shave!” (Dobkin 1988:260 n. 133).

They tore out the Prelate’s beard, gouged out his eyes with knives, cut off his ears, his nose, and his hands. A dozen French marines who had accompanied Chrysostomos to the government house were standing by, beside themselves. Several of the men jumped instinctively forward to intervene, but the officer in charge forbade them to move. “He had his hand on his gun, though he was trembling himself,” one of the men said later, “so we dared not lift ours. They finished Chrysostomos there before our eyes.” The Archbishop’s murder was reported to Admiral Dumesnil aboard the French flagship. He shrugged his shoulders: “He got what was coming to him,” he said (Dobkin 1988:134).

An Overview of Smyrna’s Christian History after the Early Church Era

In the fifth century

the Christian community grew in strength and numbers and Smyrna became one of the more important archbishoprics in Asia Minor (Meinardus 1979:68).

During the Byzantine era Smyrna was under the control of Emperor John II Ducas Vatatzes of Nicaea, who refortified and beautified the city. In 1097 a Turkish fleet of sailors under the leadership of Tzach as murdered 10,000 Smyrneans. It is unknown how many of these citizens were Christians. A Turk called Morbassan attacked Smyrna around 1332,
laying siege to it for three months, and eventually slaughtering all the Christians living there (Arundell 1834:381). It was taken back by the Knights of

St. John in 1344, only to be captured in the 14th century by the Arabs. Meinardus states:

in 1402 Tamerlane sent a message to the Knights summonsing them to embrace Islam and threatening them with death if they refused. The Knights rejected the ultimatum and Tamerlane besieged the city, capturing it on December 17, 1402. The Knights escaped with their galleys, but the Smyrnaean Christians were massacred. (Meinardus 1979:69; Vailhé 1913:60).

The Moslems occupied Smyrna in the 13th century causing the church to lose its “power and prestige,” but not its presence (Meinardus 1979:69). Meinardus indicates that, we have no record of a metropolitan of Smyrna after 1389 but the church survived the conquest by Tamerlane and appears in the 15th century catalogue of metropolitan sees (Meinardus 1979:69).

Among the first missionaries to settle in Smyrna were the Franciscans, Jesuits, Anglicans, and Dutch Reformed in the 15th and 16th centuries (Meinardus 1979:69). McDonagh explains,

according to Kinglake it was called Glaour Izmir (“Infidel Smyrna”) by the Turks because of the large number of foreigners who lived and worked here (2001:174).

One of the first Western travellers to provide us with a description of medieval Smyrna is Father Pacifique. In 1622 he listed one or two Greek churches, one small Catholic church, one synagogue, and four mosques (Meinardus 1979:70).

In 1671 Thomas Smith witnessed that the Greeks had two churches, and retained the dignity of the Metropolitical seat, two Jewish synagogues, and 13 mosques (1678:270). There was an increase in Muslim and Jewish buildings, but not Christian churches.

In 1694 the Turks sat in the Gulf of Smyrna ready to take all Smyrnaean Christians as hostages. Through diplomatic intervention of the British, French and Dutch consuls the Turks were persuaded to leave. In 1770 Russia called on the Greeks to revolt and the Turks took revenge, killing more than 10,000 Greeks in Smyrna alone (Meinardus 1979:73).

In 1797, a fire swept through Smyrna destroying 4500 homes. During this period, many Christians lost their lives. They have been identified as the “New Martyrs” and commemorated by the Greek Orthodox church (Meinardus 1979:73).

According to Vailhé,

in 1818 Pius VII established the Archdiocese of Smyrna, at the same time retaining the vicariate Apostolic, the jurisdiction of which was wider...The archdiocese had 17,000 Latin Catholics, some Greek Melchites, called Alepi, and Armenians under special organization (1913:60).
Emperor Trajan (AD 98–117). Trajan had the Trajaneum built in Pergamum to worship the emperor. (Antalya Museum, Turkey)

There were 26 priests in the archdiocese, four of which were in Smyrna at this time (Vailhé 1913:60). Arundell reports in 1822,

   The Greeks have three churches; the Armenians one; the Latins two; the Protestants two (1834:415).

Prior to a massacre in 1922 in which as many as 50,000 Christians were killed (Meinardus 1979:75),
Smyrna was a predominately Christian city with 135,000 Greeks, 11,175 Catholics, 8,500 Armenians (Meinardus 1979:75).

The Greeks maintained over 55 churches and before 1922 the Armenians built the Cathedral of St. Stephen, one of the most beautiful churches in Turkey (Meinardus 1979:75). There were

St. John Anglican Church, Izmir.

Over 100,000 Christians in Smyrna at that time. Several Christian congregations have survived to the present day.

**Conclusion**

The identification of local references (social-historical setting) within Revelation 2:8–11 is evident from the etymological background of Smyrna’s name, her primacy (first of Asia), persecution at the hands of the Jews and role of the imperial cult in fostering numerous martyrs. Consistent with the prophecy of Revelation 2:8–11, Smyrna continues to experience severe suffering, even to modern times. The local cultural settings of Biblical cities, often illuminated by archaeology, numismatics, and epigraphy, must not be ignored in the examination of the Biblical text as they may provide helpful insight into its meaning. Thus, archaeology is just one of many disciplines that must be employed to shed light on the text. This does not place local references outside the Biblical text as more authoritative than the inspired Word, but rather illuminates the text so we can better understand Scripture.
Admittedly, Smyrna’s archaeological evidence is limited due to the encroachment of the modern city. The artifacts, coins and inscriptions that are available, however, provide fragments of evidence to illuminate the text. These data, plus historical references, bring into sharper focus the message of suffering and martyrdom experienced by the Church at Smyrna.

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