HISTORY
OF THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

An ancient city on the west coast of Asia Minor, situated at the head of the gulf into which the Hermus River flows. It was located 40 miles north of Ephesus on the border between Aeolis to the north and Ionia to the south (Yamauchi, New Testament, 55). The site of Smyrna is the present day Turkish city of Izmir.

In the book of Revelation, Smyrna was one of the seven cities to which the prophet John (Rev 1:1; 2:8) sent messages. It was one of the seven postal districts—situated on a circular route—that made up the most crucial part of the Roman province of Asia Minor (Ford, Revelation, 382). Paul or one of his companions may have introduced Christianity to Smyrna (see Acts 19:9–10, 26).

History and Culture
Smyrna was famous for its beauty, as ancient writers noted. Apollonius of Tyana marveled at how Mount Pagus was crowned with a circle of beautiful public buildings—although he then advises the Smyrneans that it would be better to take pride in a “crown of persons” (Philostratus, Vit. Apoll. 4.7). The historian Strabo remarked on the city's beauty, wealth, and fine wines (Strabo, Geogr. 14.1.15).

During the Graeco-Roman period, the city had a population over 100,000, including a Jewish presence (Yamauchi, New Testament, 55). Some people in the Jewish community in certain cities of Asia Minor may have collaborated with Rome against a Christian minority. There is evidence that Jews in Smyrna participated in the Martyrdom of Polycarp, which occurred several decades after Revelation was written (Mart. Pol. 13.1, 17.2).

In AD 29, seven cities competed for the right to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. Smyrna was chosen, and became the “temple warden” (Tacitus, Ann. 4.55–56). It acquired another temple under the emperor Hadrian. Archaeologists have discovered coins portraying Nero, dedications to the emperors Titus and Domitian, and statues of Domitian, Trajan, and Hadrian (Yamauchi, New Testament, 58). These artifacts all demonstrate Smyrna's devotion to the emperor.

Commerce
Smyrna was the most important seaport in Asia Minor because of its location on the edge of the trade route that went east into the surrounding areas (Ford, Revelation, 394). Throughout the Roman period, Smyrna excelled in medicine and science (Strabo, Geogr. 12.8.20). It was home to guilds of basket-fishermen, tanners, silver-smiths, and goldsmiths (Harland, “Sphere of Contention,” 55). Membership in these guilds included sacrificing to a pagan deity—and likely to the emperor as well. Also required was participation in a common meal dedicated to a pagan deity (Kraybill, Imperial Cult, 196).

- Holman Christian Study Bible
“Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: “The First and the Last, the One who was dead and came to life, says: 9 I know your affliction and poverty, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. Look, the Devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you, and you will have affliction for 10 days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 “Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor will never be harmed by the second death.

Keyword

“Synagogue” / Greek: “synagōgē”

Phonetic Pronunciation: soon-ag-o-gay

Definition: An assembly of Jews formally gathered together to offer prayers and listen to the reading and expositions of the scriptures; assemblies of that sort were held every sabbath and feast day, afterwards also on the second and fifth days of every week; name transferred to an assembly of Christians formally gathered together for religious purposes. The buildings where those solemn Jewish assemblies are held. Synagogues seem to date their origin from the Babylonian exile. In the times of Jesus and the apostles every town, not only in Palestine, but also among the Gentiles if it contained a considerable number of Jewish inhabitants, had at least one synagogue, the larger towns several or even many. These were also used for trials and inflicting punishment.

Questions to consider

1. How does John describe Jesus?
2. Where was the persecution coming from?
3. How loyal to Christ should we be?
4. What is the second death?

Additional passages

Revelation 20:6, Revelation 6:9-11
Observations / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO KNOW?

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Commands / WHAT DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO?

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Promises / WHY DOES GOD WANT ME TO DO THESE THINGS?

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Principles / examples

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Practical application

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Sermon notes / journal