

PHILADELPHIA

Do you remember our mentioning King Eumenes when we were talking about the letter to Pergamum? Egypt had cut off the supply of papyrus to Pergamum because Eumenes had tried to entice Aristophanes to come from Alexandria and be the librarian at Pergamum. Anyway, that is why parchment, “the sheet of Pergamos,” was developed. And Pergamum continued to house one of the greatest libraries of the ancient world.

In this story, there are perhaps lessons about initiative and responding to problems with creative new solutions, and perhaps something about not trying to steal other people’s librarians in the first place. Personal history and world history are dotted with illustrations of people holding on to the past and shriveling up – or moving into the challenge and changes of life with new approaches. Are we merely studying history, or are we trying to learn from it?

Later (one hundred and ten years later, in 150 B.C.), Eumenes II became king of Pergamum. Politically speaking, Greece was in its twilight period and Rome was gathering power. (Third Punic War: Carthage was destroyed in 150-146 B.C.; Corinth was destroyed in 146 B.C.) But in terms of culture and ideas and religion, Hellenism was still sweeping the world. All old ideas and all local gods were being reinterpreted in the Greek mold. Eumenes II ruled an old Pergamene Empire, but he thought of himself as an enlightened Hellenist. The excitement of the world was turning to the Greek Way, and part of the concept of the Greek Way was the notion that all separate cultures and religions could come together in Hellenism and thus provide a basis for world peace.

Naturally, many people fought to preserve the old ways against the encroaching Hellenism. Not everybody in the Pergamene Empire was pleased with Eumenes and his zeal for Hellenistic ways. It was no great surprise, then, when word came back that enemies had followed Eumenes when he went to visit Greece and that he had been assassinated there. His younger brother, Attalus II, was crowned king in Pergamum.

Months later, however, Eumenes returned to Pergamum alive and well. Obviously the reports of his assassination had been greatly exaggerated. The enemies of Eumenes had been shrewd and cautious. Why go to a lot of trouble and danger? So they had faked the reports of the assassination, made sure nobody could trace them to their source, and

got Attalus firmly established on the throne. They figured that when Eumenes returned, nature would take its course and that would be the end of Eumenes. Nobody gives up a throne, right? Why take risks when a few well-placed lies can do the job? Satan's oldest ploy.

To everyone's amazement, and to some people's regret, Attalus immediately and joyfully welcomed his brother home and turned the throne back over to him – lock, stock, and backrest.

For years afterward, Roman representatives tried from time to time to persuade Attalus to lead a rebellion and take the throne for himself. He had much popularity, and Rome promised to back and support him with weapons and soldiers. In fact, Rome promised that with its aid, he would become king of all Asia.

But Attalus, so far as anybody knows, never seriously considered any of these offers or temptations. Eumenes had a long and influential reign. His only serious rival was a brother who loved and supported him with unshakable loyalty. So the kingdom stayed strong and unified. The factions that might have plagued or unseated Eumenes instead turned loyal because of his brother. Throughout his life, Attalus remained true and loyal to Eumenes. It won for him the nickname "Philadelphus" – lover of his brother. It was an unusual phenomenon, B.C. or A.D. Rome conquered and built its empire as much by intrigue and splitting its neighbor empires from within, as it did by straight military might. But while these brothers lived, Rome was unable to do that in Pergamum.

Someday, when I get time, I'm going to do a study of the world's great brothers. Lots of people have studied the Cain and Abel types, but I don't know of a good study of the Moses and Aaron pattern. Perhaps it has never been done because of insufficient material. Brotherly love, though a familiar phrase, is not a particularly frequent reality.

Anyway, Attalus became like a "Secretary of State" for his brother. At the request of Eumenes, Attalus spent his time spreading the Greek Way throughout the kingdom, trying to persuade neighboring kingdoms to consider and adopt Greek ideals, that there might be peace throughout the world.

Ten years later (140 B.C.), Eumenes founded a city on the border of his kingdom. It was built to be a kind of missionary outpost to the wilds of Phrygia. It was to be a "Peace Center" – an open door to the Phrygians, and a base from which to spread Hellenistic ideas and culture. It was

named “Philadelphia” in honor of Attalus. Later it was nicknamed “Little Athens” because it so represented everything Greek, with its many temples, games, and theaters.

Philadelphia, then, was the newest of the seven cities on John’s list. It had no long history. It was not the center of great battles. It was not yet a great city. Twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis, Philadelphia sat on a small hill in the vale of Cogamis, a tributary to the Hermus Valley. Three thousand feet above sea level, Philadelphia was on the edge of a great plain called “katakekaumene” – the burnt land. It was a volcanic plain and extremely fertile. Economically, Philadelphia was prosperous, and it was destined for far greater prominence and prosperity. With vineyards lush and rich, the “katakekaumene” became famous for producing some of the world’s best wine. Contrary to some later opinions, that was not why they called it “the city of brotherly love.”

People in our area probably are not interested in such things, but volcanoes and earthquakes are sometimes related. Moreover, such areas seem to go through dormant periods and then reactivate. Philadelphia, it turned out, was built very close to a great fault line. You remember from last week that in 17 A.D., Sardis was devastated by an earthquake. The same earthquake hit Philadelphia. In this case also, Tiberius canceled taxation for five years and gave a large contribution toward the rebuilding of Philadelphia. But Philadelphia was closer to the center of the fault line and, for years afterward, earthquakes and aftershocks were a constant menace. (Strabo recounts that from 17 to 20 A.D., shocks hit almost daily.)

Without huge stone blocks and a whole army of laborers, there were no materials or technology to build buildings that could resist such shaking. Walls and buildings of normal stones, stacked on each other, came tumbling down. So, running out of town each time an earthquake hit became a way of life in Philadelphia. Many citizens set up tents and camped outside of town, waiting for earthquake season to pass. By the time of the Revelation letter, the area had quieted down again. But Philadelphians still lived in fear of a major earthquake – the “day of trial,” they called it. Many thought the city should be abandoned, and considered its citizens foolish to go on living there. But the vineyards were marvelous and the Philadelphians loved their city. In actual fact, earthquake season *was* over, for a while at least, and Philadelphia went on to become the most famous, faithful, and important of all the seven cities – the last center of Christendom in Asia.

Two other details that may have a bearing on John's letter:

1.) The citizens of Philadelphia were so grateful to Tiberius for his help that they renamed their city "Neocaesarea." Fortunately, the name only stuck for about twenty years and then reverted back to its original. It says something, nevertheless, about loyalty to the emperor, and the attitude in Philadelphia toward Christians unwilling to burn incense to the emperor.

2.) About the only thing they could do, in the first century A.D., to make buildings stronger against earthquakes was to build more pillars for support. It did not work very well, but it was the best they could do. Maybe with enough pillars, it would not all shake down, or at least not all at the same time. For years, the Philadelphians were doing everything they could to buttress and support their buildings, especially to save their temples. It became the custom to name a new pillar in honor of some citizen who had given special service to the community. Some of you may remember the phrase "a pillar of the church." Now you know where that phrase comes from. (Also from Galatians 2:9.)

That illumines the end of the letter: "*He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.*" It sounds cold and unlovely to modern ears. Who wants to be turned into a pillar? Only, it does not mean "make him into a pillar." It means make a pillar *for* him – make a pillar *in his honor*. And "*He shall never leave it.*" This does not mean that a person is unable to leave. It means no more running out of town to avoid falling buildings. The spiritual temple John cares about will be safe and secure, and it will never fall or shake down on the people's heads. We are getting familiar with John's love of new names to symbolize new understanding, new identity, new reality. He goes wild this time. The name will incorporate the name of God, the name of the city, and Christ's new name – total newness, total spiritual understanding ... and *far* surpassing the importance of Tiberius, and Rome itself. And this time the new name will stick! Not like the new name "Neocaesarea," which lasted for only a few years.

Philadelphia receives unmitigated praise. Among the seven churches, only poor, persecuted Smyrna and weak, powerless Philadelphia receive unmixed praise and appreciation. What do you make of that? Both congregations are under serious fire not only from their pagan surroundings but also from the influence of a powerful Jewish synagogue in the community. Both letters try to strengthen the churches against the claims

of Jewish contenders that Christianity is a false and blasphemous religion. “*These are the words of the holy one, the true one*” – that is, the genuine Messiah. In time, promises the letter to Philadelphia, it will become clear that the Lord loves His church, though there is not much outward evidence of it in Philadelphia when John writes this letter.

How we long for vindication! It is a desire full of hazards and danger, but it is still one of the great themes and motives of life. Someday, somebody should know what we were trying to accomplish, how much we cared, how hard we tried, what we went through trying to be faithful. We long for a day of vindication – a day when the real picture will come clear – and we will no longer look so stupid, or be chided by associates, or be misunderstood or lied about ... even by some of the very people we cared about the most. But who knows when, if ever – and it is not likely in this world, right? Well, it depends on which part of our living we happen to be thinking about at the moment. In any case, John is happy with the Philadelphians because they “hang in” regardless. So he gives strong encouragement and appreciation. Maybe we can take some encouragement and appreciation from him too.

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Christ has the key of David. He possesses the power to open or shut the gates of Heaven. By this time, Jews who have converted to Christianity have been shut out of the synagogue. That is part of the backdrop. Philadelphia had been built as an open door to Phrygia – a missionary city. That is doubtless also behind John’s choice of images. Only, access to God’s Kingdom is far more important. And while it is an important part of John’s message that Christ is able to open or shut the gates, the message is that the doors *are* open and *nothing* can shut them. Christ has the authority to open or shut the gates, but He chooses to throw them open.

Perhaps in Philadelphia, many people have been turning to the Christian Faith. At least John sees them as the church of the open door – probably with more depth to it than that phrase has usually carried in recent times. Mind you, the *Philadelphians* have not opened the door. Only Christ can do that. But they have acknowledged and cooperated with Christ, and that is sufficient. A bit of ancient wisdom we are forever forgetting.

Of all the seven letters, I hope the one to Philadelphia will become your favorite, and be the one you identify with most and feel the most kinship with. I know; I said it was *your* choice – and it is. But did I say I couldn't have any hope?

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A few side comments. I do not wish to make a lot out of them; just some interesting things to muse about. John praises two churches far beyond the others – Smyrna and Philadelphia. Ephesus was clearly the greatest city in Asia in Paul's day. We would expect it to be the most prominent church as Christianity spread and became prominent. But Ephesus was moved to a new location, as the letter suggested it would be. The new site did not solve its problems for long (the river still kept silting up), and Ephesus never regained its prominence. But I suppose we do not have time for such details about each of the cities. Let me say simply that John's portrait of the seven cities, and the character of the churches he portrays, holds an uncanny general accuracy for about a thousand years.

Smyrna and Philadelphia were to become the most distinguished "Christian cities" in Asia during the coming millennium. And they were the most faithful Christian centers under Turkish/Muslim rule. When Islam swept across Asia Minor, Philadelphia, far from the most easily defended site, stood as the last bastion of Christianity in all Asia. (And where was Sardis? Sardis that nobody could conquer? Still asleep, and uncaring. Where was Pergamum, the great citadel that no one could storm?)

Actually, Philadelphia, though besieged many times by the Muslims, never did fall from weakness or lack of courage. She was betrayed by *the Christians* in Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul), who were jealous of Philadelphia's prestige and honor. The city of brotherly love was finally betrayed by Christian brothers. (How comforting it would be to believe in Hell ...)

That really hurts. It speaks, but it hurts. "*Let no one rob you of your crown.*" Thirteen hundred years later, the brotherhood of the faith betrayed the city of brotherly love. "*A man's foes shall be those of his own household,*" said Jesus. Nobody hurts the church as much from the outside as the church hurts itself from the inside. Still, a thousand years of sterling witness and loyalty and faithfulness is not a bad record for any city – or church.

Fascinating, isn't it, that it is the Book of Revelation that reminds us: Cities and towns, like churches and individuals, have a character, a destiny, a unique individuality of their own. Each has its own part to play, and much depends upon how we each play our part within it. So there it is: Seven letters to seven churches. One more, and it will be your turn to discern what the Spirit is saying to our church, and to each one of us. But whatever you decide, and however it comes out, we are still, these many years later, sharing the communion meal of our Lord.