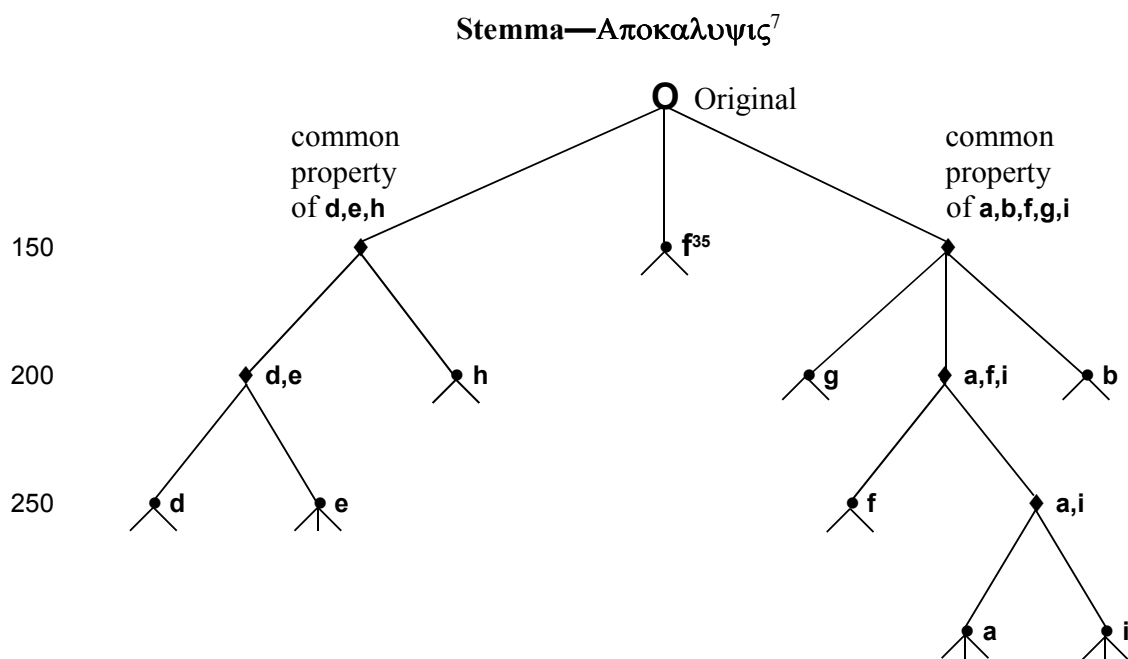


A Historical and Geographical Understanding of the Lines of Transmission of the Apocalypse¹

Wilbur Pickering, building on Herman Hoskier's collations,² formulated a stemma positing three main lines of transmission for the Apocalypse of the Apostle John.³ One might wonder if there are any historical or geographical dependencies or associations among the seven churches such that three lines of transmission might have resulted instead of seven.⁴ Very few first century travelers would loop through the seven churches in the order mentioned in The Revelation,⁵ though John probably did many times as apostolic overseer of the churches in the Roman Province of Asia.⁶ Instead, those who traversed this central region of the Empire would have navigated through three major inland arteries from the coast. These travel routes could help explain why three lines of transmission might have developed instead of seven.



Comment: As illustrated by this stemma, I [Pickering] posit three main lines of transmission. It follows that if **h** agrees with **f³⁵** against **d,e** (and **a,b,f,g,i**) then in 150 we could have two lines against one. Similarly, if **g** or **b** agrees with **f³⁵** against the rest, then in 150 we could have two lines against one. In such an event there would have to be comparison going on—in the first case either **h** assimilated to **f³⁵** (if the rest have the true reading) or **d,e** assimilated to **a,b,f,g,i** (or **f³⁵** did the assimilating).

¹ By Michael C. Loehrer, ThM, EdD, PhD.

² Hoskier, Herman C. *Concerning the Text of the Apocalypse: Collation of All Existing Available Greek Documents with the Standard Text of Stephen's Third Edition Together with the Testimony of Versions, Commentaries and Fathers*. 2 vols. London: Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., 1929.

³ Justin Martyr maintained (ca. middle of the second century) that John the apostle wrote the Revelation.

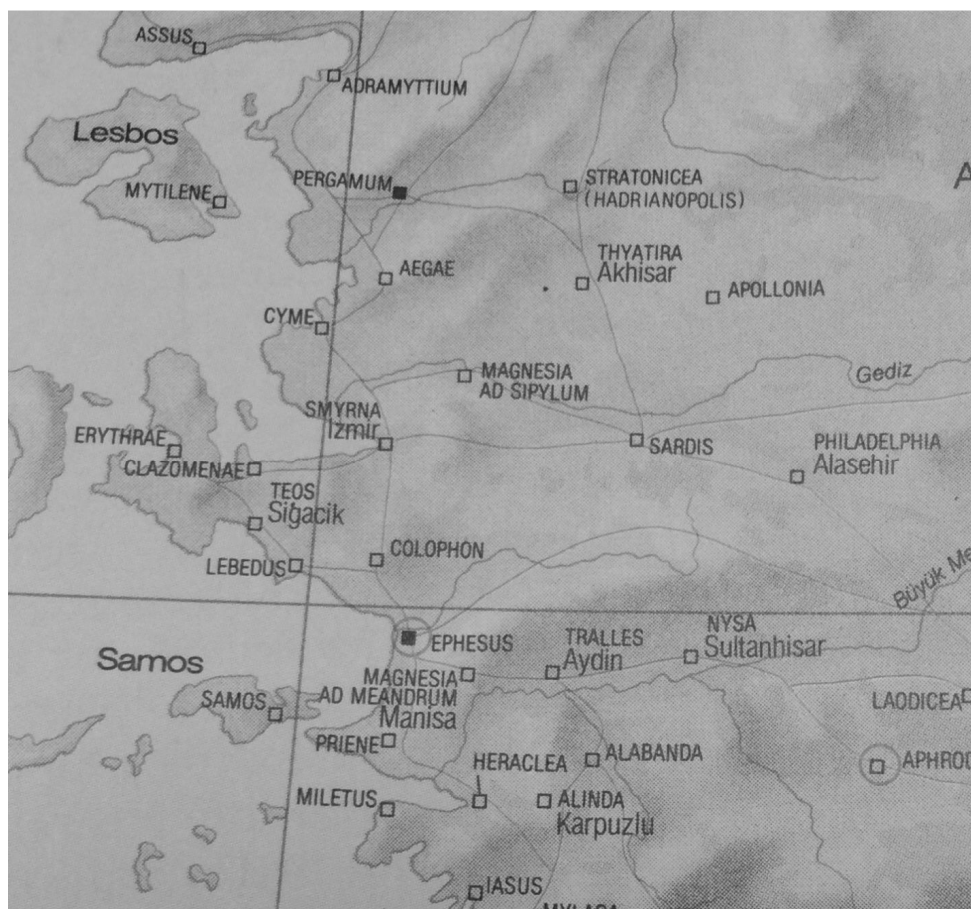
⁴ A simple scenario would be to imagine seven lines of transmission, one for each of the seven churches, since they each would have their own copy.

⁵ Revelation 1:11; 2:1-3:22.

⁶ The Roman Province of Asia, now known as Asia Minor, is located in the western portion of modern day Turkey.

⁷ Pickering, Wilbur N. *The Greek New Testament According to Family 35*. San Bernardino, California, 2014, p. 519.

Roman roads directly connected three coastal cities to four inland counterparts: Pergamum⁸ through the hills to Thyatira; Smyrna⁹ through the interior to Sardis and Philadelphia; and Ephesus¹⁰ up the valley to Laodicea. These principal cities of the Roman Province of Asia vied for the designation, Chief City of the Province, because each headed a thoroughfare for trade and travel between east and west. Four main roads moved through Pergamum and Thyatira forming a northern artery to the Near East. Three roads and a seaport fed the central artery to the inland from Smyrna to Sardis and Philadelphia. Two coastal roads and a seaport fed into the city of Ephesus and moved eastward toward Laodicea forming the southern artery to the Near East. These three main thoroughfares converged as they worked their way from the Roman Province of Asia into the region of Galatia toward the East.



Map of the Roman Province of Asia¹¹

⁸ Pergamum was located 16 miles east of the Aegean Sea on a promontory on the north side of the river Caicus. Thyatira was a wealthy city in the northern part of Lydia on the river Lycus of the Roman Province of Asia. It was 38 miles from Pergamum to Thyatira.

⁹ Smyrna, the capital of Ionia, opened the way into the valley of the Hermus, in which lay the rich city of Sardis some 45 miles east. Philadelphia was some 25 miles further east of Sardis.

¹⁰ Ephesus headed the inland eastern trade route from the Aegean Sea to the Euphrates River through the Cayster River Valley to Laodicea 100 miles away.

¹¹ Cornell, Tim and Matthews, John, *Atlas of the Roman World*. New York: Checkmark Books, 1982, p. 150.

What follows forms a reasonable possibility of how John might have fulfilled his responsibility¹² of sending the book to the seven churches. John likely had contacts throughout the province, since he relocated from Jerusalem to Ephesus around AD 67, and since he provided apostolic oversight to the province until his death around AD 100. If John had the freedom and the means while on Patmos,¹³ he could have simply called representatives from the churches to each come and make their own copies from the original. However, this does not explain the command to “send” the book to the seven churches, nor would it likely result in three lines of transmission.

Close examination of Revelation 1:11 yields additional insights that confirm John had the means to pen the scroll, as well as the opportunity to send it.¹⁴ However, he was instructed to send the book right away—not to keep the original on Patmos, not to make additional copies, and not to hold the original until others from the seven churches could arrive and make their copies. John had to entrust the autograph with someone who could take it from Patmos to its intended destination, likely Miletus.¹⁵ Since these were times of intense persecution,¹⁶ John would have

¹² Revelation 1:11.

¹³ Patmos, one of the volcanic islands called Sporades, in the Icarian Sea, was directly off the coast of Miletus (37 miles), which was half the distance to Ephesus (60 miles). Since the island was so isolated, barren, and rocky, it served as a “penal isle” in John's day when Domitian banished him there in AD 94.

¹⁴ The Divine author chose *pempo* not *apostello* (cf. 1:1 with 11), indicating that the carrier need not be entrusted with the contents of the message. Also in 1:11, He employs the aorist active imperative repeatedly: “...*grapson eis biblion kai pempson*,” literally, “start writing into a book and start sending it,” but A. T. Robertson indicates that here the aorist active imperative translates better as instantaneous action (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930, VI:291), which could be rendered, “write and send the book immediately.” This construction indicates that God knew John had the materials on hand to write the book. Papyrus scrolls approximately 10 inches tall and 12 feet long were commonly made and commercially available at this time (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*). Such a scroll would have been large enough to accommodate The Revelation if both *recto* and *verso* were used. This construction also indicates that God had prepared someone who would immediately transport the book to the mainland for John.

¹⁵ If the times were peaceful, John would have sent the original to Ephesus and had the overseer there call representatives from the other churches to come and make their copies from the original, but this almost certainly would not have yielded three lines of transmission. Besides, the harbor of Ephesus was nearly twice the distance from Patmos than was the harbor of Miletus. Miletus thrived with trade in the first century and was a regular stop for ships travelling up and down the coast (cf. Acts 20:15-38; 2 Timothy 4:20, which indicate that Miletus was a common stopping place). After Paul's ministry in nearby Ephesus resulted in the evangelization of the entire province of Asia (Acts 19:10, 20; 1 Corinthians 16:9), it is likely that a small Christian community was established in Miletus. There was no direct Roman road from Miletus to either Ephesus or Laodicea, which made the port somewhat isolated from the major cities of Asia by land, and perhaps made Miletus a safer place to meet and make copies. The choice of Miletus would also bring to mind the idea of just having the overseers from the coastal cities (i.e. Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum) quickly travel by ship down the coast. To invite the inland counterparts (i.e. Laodicea, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Thyatira) would extend the time it would take and complicate the process.

¹⁶ Emperor Domitian was a cruel tyrant. He slew his own brother, and put to death some of the Roman senators. He also attempted to exterminate the lineage of David, likely to deal with the constant trouble between Christians and Jews. He killed Simeon (brother to James and half brother of Jesus), overseer of the church of Jerusalem. In the same way that he banished John to Patmos, he banished Flavia, the daughter of a Roman senator, to Pontus. Following Nero's local persecution in Rome that outlawed Christianity, Domitian extended the application of this law stating, “No Christian, once brought before the tribunal, should be exempted from punishment without renouncing his religion.” Such a hostile setting would prompt suspicion and scrutiny of believers by the citizenry. There were numerous martyrs who suffered during this persecution. The Revelation itself indicates that the churches were in the middle of intense persecution (Rev. 2:10, 13). According to Christian tradition, John appointed Antipas overseer of Pergamum where he was martyred in AD 92 (see Alaharasan, V. and Antony J. *From Patmos to Paradise: John's vision of heaven*. New York: Paulist Press, 2009, p. 40).

prayerfully pondered how best to send his Apocalypse to the seven churches,¹⁷ and he doubtless would have desired his original to reside at his home church in Ephesus. Therefore, constructing a hypothesis in a hostile setting seems not only to favor the facts but readily offers an explanation of why Pickering's three lines of transmission might develop. Consider the following scenario based on guarded guesswork:

- John pens the original on Patmos and immediately sends it from the isle with a guard¹⁸ reassigned to Adramyttium.¹⁹ The Roman soldier only knows he is delivering John's mail to a single recipient at each of the four stops en route to his new duty station.
 - After completing The Revelation, John entwines the scroll and secures it with three seals in preparation for dispatch with his guard.
 - Next John writes four one-page notes, then folds, entwines, seals, and sequentially numbers the exterior of each note. Each note contains brief instructions for the respective recipients at Miletus, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum.
 - Then John gives the guard the scroll and four small notes, instructing him to deliver the scroll and the first note at Miletus, then the other three at Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.
- The guard lands in Miletus and delivers the scroll and the note to John's designated scroll keeper and leaves.
 - After the Roman soldier leaves, the scroll keeper opens and reads note number one.
 - The note directs him to wait for three copiers to come, allowing each to open one seal once they show their note.
 - Should they arrive at different times, they must wait until the others are present.
- The guard continues travelling via ship up the coast to Ephesus and delivers the second note to the person specified by John and spends the night in Ephesus.
 - The overseer from Ephesus opens his note, which tells him to travel to Miletus and proceed to the home of the scroll keeper and show him his note from John.
 - Additionally, his note specifies him to oversee the process of copying the scroll and to retain the original at Ephesus.
- The next day the guard boards a ship and travels up the coast to Smyrna and delivers the third note to the individual identified by John and leaves.
 - The overseer from Smyrna opens his note, which tells him to travel to Miletus and proceed to the home of the scroll keeper and show him his note from John.

¹⁷ Revelation 1:11; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19 indicate the book was completed on Patmos prior to John's release. The commonly accepted year is AD 94-95. The early church was fairly unanimous in its belief that the book was written after 70 AD, attested by Irenaeus, Origen, Victorinus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Hegesippus, and Jerome. It strains credulity to suggest that all these writers merely followed Irenaeus without independent reasons.

¹⁸ As with Paul on his travels to Rome, it is easy to imagine John befriending a guard whom he could ask to deliver his mail (Acts 28:16 et al.). Such a Roman soldier would not be suspected or searched by port authorities. Anyone else doubtless would have been searched with the manuscript confiscated and used for evidence against him.

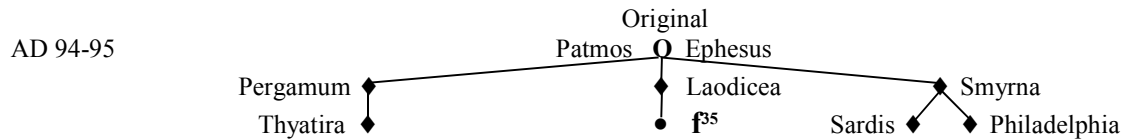
¹⁹ Adramyttium was part of the province of Asia under Roman rule and was a maritime commercial center of considerable importance, since it had a good harbor and lay on the Roman road that passed through Pergamum down to Ephesus. The ships of Adramyttium made many stops up and down the coast of Asia. In Acts 27:2 Paul boarded a ship belonging to the sea-faring trade of Adramyttium.

- The guard then travels by land via the Roman road to Pergamum and delivers the fourth note to the person specified by John and spends the night before continuing on to Adramyttium, his next duty assignment.
 - The overseer from Pergamum opens his note which directs him to travel to Miletus and proceed to the home of the scroll keeper and show him his note from John.
- The overseer from Ephesus arrives first in Miletus, proceeds to the home of the scroll keeper, shows him his note from John and waits until the other two arrive the next day.
 - The three overseers open their seals and take turns reading the book aloud until they finish.
 - The overseer from Ephesus claims possession of John's scroll and tells the others his plan for copying and distributing the book to all seven churches.
 - To expedite the process and preserve the scroll, he dictates the contents of the scroll to the overseers from Smyrna and Pergamum, while making a copy for the church from Laodicea, preserving the original for Ephesus.
 - Once the three scribes finish making their copies, they board ship and return to their respective homes.
- The overseer from Ephesus arrives home first, leaves the original in Ephesus, and personally carries the copy he made to the church of Laodicea.
 - This Ephesus-Laodicea line of transmission will be more frequently copied since these cities are along the major thoroughfare of the province.
 - This line will also be more accurate since Ephesus holds the autograph and since Laodicea's copy is closer to the autograph than either Smyrna's or Pergamum's. As the overseer from Ephesus made Laodicea's copy, he simultaneously looked at the text while he recited to the others.
 - This first line of transmission will likely be characterized as more numerous and more homogenous than the other lines of transmission.
- The overseer from Smyrna arrives home later that day, and sends for the overseers from the churches of Sardis and Philadelphia.
 - After a few days, they arrive and the overseer from Smyrna assigns the overseer from Philadelphia the task of dictating the text to the overseer from Sardis, while making his own copy.
 - Thus the Sardis and Philadelphia copies not only differ from the original, but also from each other, yet they remain close to the Smyrna exemplar, establishing a second distinct line of transmission.
- The overseer from Pergamum sends for the overseer from Thyatira who comes and makes his copy.
 - The Pergamum overseer decides to dictate from his copy to the overseer from Thyatira to expedite the process and preserve the scroll from excessive handling.
 - Thus Thyatira's copy not only differs from the original, but remains close to the Pergamum exemplar, establishing a third distinct line of transmission.

Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that believers travelling the trade thoroughfares would readily propagate the Apocalypse throughout the Empire, whether under persecution or

not.²⁰ Thus, by the time of John’s death in Ephesus, at the turn of the century, the future of his Apocalypse was ensured. From the perspective of studious conjecture and informed imagination, it’s readily conceivable that the transmission of the text from copies delivered to seven churches could result in three distinct archetypes. Hopefully, this scenario demonstrates that positing three lines of transmission is not a stretch of the imagination.

Lines of Transmission of the Apocalypse



²⁰ Domitian’s persecution ended with his death on September 18, AD 96. His successor, Marcus Cocceius Nerva, began his brief and peaceful reign by releasing those who had been imprisoned by Domitian and recalling those exiles not found guilty of serious crimes—including the Apostle John—who returned from Patmos to Ephesus.