

# Do Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 refer to ethnic Jews?

By Craig M. White  
Version 1.1

"... for salvation is from the Jews." (John 4:22, ESV)  
"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16, ESV)  
"So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (Romans 11:11-12, ESV)

## Introduction

The assertion that Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, which states "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the **slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan**" pertains to contemporary Jews (for instance, labelling them as "fake" Jews, Ashkenazi/Khazar descendants, Edomites, or similar conspiracy theories) lacks support from the text itself, its historical context, or established Biblical scholarship. These verses are found in the letters directed to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia which were two distinct first-century Christian congregations located in the Roman province of Asia (present-day Turkey). They address local, contemporary disputes involving slander and opposition encountered by these early, small congregations, rather than about ethnic groups claiming to be Jews, as we shall see.

Having read this view that Jews are satanic in literature since my teens, I find them abhorrent. They give place to persecution and killings without the blinking of an eyelid.

## Scholarly Interpretations:

Scholarly interpretations can be categorised into various perspectives, per the norm.

The phrase may be indicative of local ethnic Jews in Smyrna and Philadelphia who opposed or defamed the Christian believers. John, the author of the book of Revelation, reserves the title of "Jew" (*Ioudaios*) for those who accept Jesus as the Messiah. He is using it as a spiritual appellation in this context, to those Jews who are not part of the body of Christ. In this interpretation, it is non-believing Jews who persecute the churches and who are regarded as "not" true Jews in a theological or spiritual sense (thereby reflecting

Paul's views in Romans 2:28-29 and Philippians 3:3) and are referred to as a "synagogue of Satan" due to their opposition. This represents a strong criticism, rather than a rejection of all ethnic Jews or a commentary on later Jewish people through into the 21st century.

Sources include: Shaye Cohen, "Those Who Say They Are Jews And Are Not': How Do You Know A Jew In Antiquity When You See One?" in Shaye Cohen and Ernest Frerichs, eds., *The Diasporas in Antiquity*, pp. 1-45. Cohen states that: "The simplest and likeliest explanation is that Jews are meant... It is the Jews who are slandering and persecuting." But nowhere does Cohen hold to the view that these are Edomites who converted to Judaism who claim to be Jews and then persecute the Church of God.

Mark Bredin, comes to similar conclusions in "The Synagogue of Satan Accusation in Revelation 2:9," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1998), pp. 160-164.

Another view is that the term pertains to gentile Christians who assert a Hebraic/early Church connection without fully complying with Biblical laws. In this scenario, John dismisses these individuals as "not Jews at all." The term "synagogue of Satan" serves as an *intense* critique of this group of impostors rather than a condemnation of ethnic Judaism.

Sources include: David Frankfurter, annotation on Revelation in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, p. 469. Frankfurter states: "Who are 'those who say that they are Jews and are not,' who are rather a 'synagogue of Satan' (2.9; 3.9)? ... that those Gentile God-fearers who claim an association with Judaism as a foundation for Christ's salvation ... are indeed not Jews at all." He emphasises that John does not oppose Judaism (in the sense of compliance with God's laws) itself and that the phrase has been misappropriated from anti-Semitic uses, but its initial interpretation is a repudiation of impostors. It is a polemic against an assembly or group who are problematic and who are apostates.

Paul Duff, "The Synagogue of Satan': Crisis Mongering and the Apocalypse of John," in David Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (2006), pp. 147-163. Duff interprets the verses as rhetorical "crisis mongering" employed by John to reinforce group boundaries in the face of local persecution in Smyrna and Philadelphia. The adversaries are likely contemporary local figures (probably Jewish or aligned with Judaism).

Yet a another position is that this refers to Jews who are opposed to Christ Himself.

Sources include: Mikael Tellbe, "Relationships among Christ-Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig Koester, p. 161. Tellbe indicates that the phrase "likely refers to a group of non-Christian ethnic Jews in both cities who rejected Jesus Christ. Therefore, from the author's viewpoint, they did not practice the 'true kind of Judaism.'"

### **Counter-arguments to the modern Jew theory:**

There are several reasons this cannot pertain to contemporary Jews:

First of all, the letters addressed to the seven churches are communications directed at actual congregations confronting immediate local challenges (poverty, slander, potential expulsion from synagogues). They are not merely historical, but also contain spiritual and prophetic lessons. Applying these letters to 21st-century Jew exemplifies classic *eisegesis* (imposing modern interpretations onto the text) and disregards the immediate meaning and intended audience.

Secondly, there is no first-century evidence that connects the verse to future theories of 'fake' Jewish identity (such as the Khazar or Edomite theory, etc). These concepts are inventions of the 19th and 20th centuries, lacking any textual or historical foundation in the Book of Revelation.

And finally, the author of Revelation extensively references Jewish prophetic traditions and aligns himself with Israel (for instance, the woman depicted in chapter 12 which can be dual – referring to both Israel and the Church); these anti-Jewish interpretations contradict the Hebraic context of the book itself.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In summary, the verse addresses first-century local adversaries in Smyrna and Philadelphia and whether they were metaphorical 'Jews' who denied Jesus or Gentiles falsely asserting Jewish identity. It is unrelated to modern Jews. Any assertion to the contrary misappropriates the text for ideological purposes rather than adhering to its clear historical-grammatical meaning.

As a matter of duality, it can also refer to the persecution of the sabbatarian Church of God during the Smyrna era and also the apostasy of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century during the Philadelphia Eera.

Note, as I have pointed out for decades, early 20<sup>th</sup> century Church of God leader, Greenberry Rupert asserted that this refers to apostasy.

The following is quoted from the article *Amazing Temple Symbolism found in Revelation chapter 3!*:

"In my original notes I wrote that the pillars appear

"to be definitely taken from Solomon's Temple. Philadelphians are likened to pillars which are steadfast and will not be removed. Why?

(a) because in contrast the pillars in Solomon's Temple were smashed and removed;

(b) because there'll be attempts to throw them out of the spiritual Temple"

In this light I recall the writings of early twentieth century Church of God leader, Greenberry G Rupert's warning ... I had read something fascinating in one of his works concerning the *The Seven Churches* in the early 1980s:

**“Verse 9 shows there is a great apostacy during the history of the Philadelphia church.** Yet there are some few in that age that have kept his word ... How truly all this history is fulfilled before the eyes of those who can see, having eyes anointed to discern truth ... **Now is the time to not be ashamed of his truth and proclaim it.**” (pages 19-20) [emphasis mine]



*Greenberry G Rupert*

Rupert's prediction was rather uncanny and came to fulfilment just over 70 years later! It seems that these verses represent false Christians claiming to be true Christians leading the Church into apostasy historically and in the end-times.

### **Recommended Reading**

- *Jewish Origins* by Craig M White
- *Notes on the Bible and Genetics* by Craig M White.
- *The Sanctity of Nationhood in the Bible* by Craig M White.
- *The Apostasy of the First Century and its End-Time Parallels*
- *The True Roots and Origin of the Scots* by Craig M White.
- *Where are the 'Lost' Tribes of Israel in the Modern World? An Introduction* by Craig M White.

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