

The "Ten Days" of Rev 2:10

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For many commentators "ten days," as used in Rev 2:10, is merely a figure of speech. Of course this could be, but what if it is not? The question is what the words mean here. In some passages (Gen 24:55 ["ten days or so"]; 1 Sam 25:38 ["About ten days later"]; Acts 25:6 ["eight or ten days"]) it is obviously a figure of speech, because the writer makes that type of intent clear.

Interestingly, there are no references to 2 Chr 36:9 in the corpus, although the expression "ten days" is used there. One commentator or another cites every other passage which contains the expression, but no one cites this one. Jehoiachin reigned in Jerusalem "three months and ten days." Did Jehoiachin reign three months plus a short but indeterminate period? No, he reigned three months and ten days. Commentators don't reference the verse, not because they are unaware of it, but because it doesn't illustrate the point they wish to make.

I think the same type of intent that we find in 2 Chr 36:9 comes through also in Neh 5:18 ["every ten days"]; Jer 42:7 ["Ten days later"]; and in all three passages from Daniel (1:12, 14, 15). Each of the above passages is quite capable of being taken at face value. Even in Num 11:19 ("You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, . . ."), the impression God is trying to convey comes from the sequence of numbers, not from the fact that one of them is ten.

In any event, accompanying this introductory note is a list of commentaries on Rev 2:10. With more than fifty to go on, it is possible to form certain hypotheses, to see commentaries as falling within categories. Three offer a definite historical application. One (Metzger, 1993) goes beyond the first century to mention Polycarp, a citizen of Smyrna. But most confine themselves to the first century and for this reason are unable to explain the passage.

My problem with the available commentaries cited is that, with 2000 years of hindsight to work with, most avoid offering a specific application. They speak as though the prophecy were still future, which it isn't. In my view, the problem does not lie with the investigator, but with the model that binds them. The model is the limiting factor.

During John's day it might have been acceptable to say, as Gaebelein does say, "The 'ten days' may be ten actual days. Or it may be a Semitism for an indeterminate but comparatively short period of time (cf. Neh 4:12; Dan 1:12)." But by now, with this much time as hindsight, I don't think that such an approach as this tentative is still an option. If John had anything specific in mind we need to find out what it was. At present, it is as though the events never happened, or remain undocumented in history. This is unacceptable.

A problem is a majority assume that in Rev 2:10 "ten" must be understood figuratively and "days" literally, or that both are figurative. To his credit, one of the commentators (Gregg) deals with this issue, stating: "History has not recorded any period of ten days that was endured by these Christians, though surviving records are very limited."

But this is not the case! It was recorded. Only it was not ten days, it was ten years, and it happened later than the time under review. The application I have in mind is not poorly documented, or obscure, or historically insignificant. On the contrary, it's something that any student of church history knows all too well. This was the Great Persecution of Diocletian (AD 303-313).

Why don't more commentators draw a connection between the "ten days" of Rev 2:10 and the ten years of persecution under Diocletian? Because of limitations imposed by the model. What if we were to make different assumptions, instead of applying "ten" figuratively and "day" literally, applying "ten" literally and "day" figuratively? Three commentators in the corpus do this (Clarke, Doukhan, Jorettag). Each of the three points out that the persecution which took place under Diocletian lasted literal ten literal years.

Once we take this step (applying "ten" literally and "days" figuratively), which requires going not only to the second century with Metzger but to the fourth with Clarke, doing so opens a different chronological landscape throughout the series of churches. If Smyrna is already in the fourth century, could it be that other passages in Rev 2-3 take place in centuries after that?

At issue is whether the book of Revelation is a book of prophecy, or a book of contemporary political reflection. I suggest John was not merely commenting on the events of his day, but was writing a prophecy. As such, he was looking to the future. There is a second coming and it is part of actual history. Otherwise we are waiting for a dream. But it is not a dream. Jesus will come. The series does not end in John's day, but in ours.

One clue that Diocletian may be intended here is that each power in Daniel tried in turn to benefit God's people:

Babylon	Disabused Israel of its idols	Captivity
Medo-Persia	Sent Israel home without them	Return
Greece	Gave Israel an international language	War among Greeks
Rome IVa	Forced the fighting to stop	Peace (<i>pax romanum</i>)
Rome IVb	Gave the church 200 years to develop freely (Dan 11:40-43)	

And to remove a knowledge of God from the earth:

Babylon	On the Plain of Dura, where only three were left standing.	Dan 3
Medo-Persia	During the days of Esther.	Esth 6-8
Greece	During the days of Antiochus.	1 Macc 1-4
Rome IVa	During the days of Diocletian.	Rev 2:10
Rome IVb	During the days of the last King of the North.	Dan 11:44

Diocletian is an important part of the process. There is more here than the first century.