

Come, Lord Jesus

A Study of Revelation

Mark Braaten



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Dedication

To Mom and Dad

for all the years of support, love, and guidance

To Amber, Christopher, and Cassaundra

for giving me a new depth of joy

And most of all to Karen

for walking with me, loving me, for deepening my life

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Foreword

This project began as an attempt to find a book on Revelation for my father. My dad is a well-read lay member of the church. For years I've been passing on to him theology and biblical study books that I thought he would enjoy. Also for years he has asked me to find for him a good introduction to the book of Revelation. I had trouble finding such a book. I found many wonderful scholarly books on Revelation, with excellent interpretations and insights. But most of these books are written in a theological language that lay people do not have the training to understand. And yes, there are many popular books on Revelation. They are often easy to read, but too many of those books contain theology and interpretations that I find questionable and inaccurate. I was having trouble answering my dad's request for an introduction to Revelation.

I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1999 with the intent of studying Revelation and writing a study guide that my dad and others could use. I have spent a good number of years immersed in the study of Revelation, and it has been a fascinating study. The focus of my work was to study the best scholarship on Revelation, then draw from that scholarship to write a study guide that is directed to lay people and congregational use. That study guide has taken shape as this book. My hope is that this book will serve as a bridge between academic study and the ongoing life of the people of God.

I need also add that in the course of my studies, I have come to see Revelation as a tremendous gift and as a powerful proclamation of the Word of God. It is a Word that has spoken powerfully to Christians through the ages and it is a Word that still proclaims a vital message for us today. I hope this book helps you to hear this Word from God, and to sense the power and wonder of the God revealed in the Lamb who was slain.

Many thanks are due for making this book possible. A deep thank you must be said to Dr. Craig Koester of Luther Seminary, my advisor for my Doctor of Ministry work. I very much appreciate all the hours and insights Dr. Koester so freely shared. His insights and critiques and guidance have been invaluable. Thank you also to Dr. Matthew Skinner of Luther Seminary for his comments and critiques of this manuscript.

Thank you to the good people of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Tyler, Texas, and Grace Lutheran Church in Fairmont, Minnesota. They have allowed me to study Revelation with them and teach Revelation for them. In their questions and comments, I have gained insight into the book and a sense of how Revelation is a vital Word for the whole people of God.

Thank you to Dad and Mom, LaVerne and Lucille Braaten, for your support and help in making my Doctor of Ministry studies possible. You instilled in me a love for learning and teaching, and that love guided this project. Thank you to my children, Amber, Christopher, and Cassandra. Your encouragement and support through these years of study has been so important to me. Your excitement keeps refreshing me.

And most of all, thank you to my wife Karen. In your love I've been empowered and uplifted for ministry, for writing, for life. Thanks for sharing my life, for keeping our home and family going, and for supporting me in all these projects that I keep finding.

May God guide us all by his Word into newness of life.

Introduction

A pastor served as chaplain in a nursing home. One of the residents of the home was a man who was mentally challenged. This man was a person of deep Christian faith. He was constantly going to worship, and loved to talk about the faith.

One afternoon the pastor and the man were talking about the Bible. The pastor asked the man what his favorite book of the Bible was. The man replied, "Revelation." The pastor was intrigued. He asked the man if he understood the book. The man said, "Sure." The pastor asked the man what the message of Revelation is. The man smiled and said, "Jesus wins in the end."¹

Jesus wins. That's a good introduction to the book of Revelation. Also, it must be quickly added, we are invited to share in Jesus' victory.

Revelation is a powerful book. Its images and choruses and proclamations contain profound witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. More than any other book of the Bible, Revelation lifts up the victory and the hope of Jesus. Underlying the entire book is the conviction that Jesus has conquered, and the invitation is issued that we conquer with him. Revelation is a profound and fitting final book of the Bible.

Revelation is also a confusing book. There is no book in the Bible that has so exasperated Christians, nor any book that has been so misinterpreted. Many a devout Christian has read into Revelation, only to close the book in frustration. Many people have come up with wild and differing understandings of the book, which serve to further the confusion. Too often the message of Revelation seems beyond our grasp and we simply avoid it.

This study is written with the conviction that Revelation contains a message that can not only be understood, but which can powerfully direct our faith. As we examine and appreciate the rich symbolism of

¹ This story is told by Rev. Paul T. Hadland of Augustana Lutheran Church in Fergus Falls, MN.

Revelation, we find an incredible message. Even more, as we study Revelation, we encounter the Word of God. Through the pages of Revelation, the Holy Spirit speaks, and we are guided and shaped in lives of faith.

Five Background Questions

Before we begin our reading of Revelation, we need some background information. Let's look at five questions that will aid us in our journey.

1. *Who* wrote Revelation?
2. *Where* was it written, and where are the churches to which it was sent?
3. *When* was Revelation written?
4. *How* is the book to be understood?
5. *Why* should we read Revelation?

Who wrote Revelation?

The author of Revelation identifies himself as John. In 1:9 he writes, "I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance." John is obviously someone well known to the original recipients of Revelation, and requires no further introduction to them. Unfortunately, we know very little about him.

There is an old tradition in the church that says that the author of Revelation is also the author of the Gospel of John, and is John the son of Zebedee, one of the original disciples. This tradition dates back to the second century.² However, there are numerous reasons for questioning the accuracy of this tradition.

The first reason for questioning this tradition is that it is doubtful that the author of Revelation is John the son of Zebedee, one of the original disciples. If that were the case, the author of Revelation would have been a very old man by the time he wrote Revelation. He would have been in his eighties or nineties. Moreover, in the book itself, the author simply introduces himself as "brother" (1:9). He makes no claim to be an apostle, nor to have shared in Jesus' earthly ministry. (In fact, in 21:14, the author mentions the twelve apostles of Jesus, but makes no attempt to link himself to the apostles.) Given this, it appears that the author is not John the disciple.

² Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 25–26.

There is a second issue here, and that is that it is also quite doubtful that the book of Revelation and the Gospel of John have the same author. The two works differ enough in style, vocabulary, and theology that it seems unlikely that they were written by the same person.

We do best not to identify the author of Revelation with John the disciple, or with the author of the Fourth Gospel. But that leaves us with the question, who then is this John who wrote Revelation? We know little about him, only what we find in the book. John was obviously a person who knew the seven churches in Revelation well. We know that he had been banished by the Romans to the island of Patmos for preaching the Word of God (1:9). He was a person of deep faith, who considered his work a work of prophecy. Beyond this we know little about him.

Perhaps it is significant that we know little about John. John's intention in writing Revelation was not to point us to himself, but to point us to Jesus. He has succeeded in doing just that.

Where was Revelation written, and where are the churches to which it was sent?

John tells us that he wrote Revelation on the island of Patmos (1:9). Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea, about forty miles off the coast of modern day Turkey. As was noted, John had been banished to Patmos by the Romans because of his preaching and teaching.

Revelation is addressed "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4). Asia refers to the Roman province of Asia, which was the western part of Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. Revelation is specifically addressed to seven congregations that are spread across the western half of Asia Minor.

This, however, raises a question. Why is Revelation addressed to only seven churches? We know from the New Testament and from church history that there were more than seven congregations in the Roman province of Asia. Why is Revelation addressed to only seven?

There are two possibilities here. One is that John simply chose to write to seven specific churches. Perhaps these were the congregations he knew best; perhaps he had other reasons for writing to these seven. A second possibility is to be found in the symbolism of Revelation. Seven was a number that implied completeness. (John will repeatedly use the number seven as a symbol of completeness throughout Revelation. There will be seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, etc.) Given this, perhaps the seven churches that are mentioned are to represent the entire or the

complete church. John's message, while directed specifically to seven congregations, would also be an open letter intended for the church as a whole.

We can't be sure which of these possibilities is correct. We are sure, however, of two things. First, John takes the specific context of the seven congregations very seriously. Revelation is addressed to seven specific congregations and, as we will see in chapters two and three of Revelation, John knows these seven congregations well. He is intimately aware of their lives, and of their strengths and weaknesses. The book is directed to a very specific context. Second, as part of the church of Christ, we can read John's words with attention to what they say to and about our own congregations.

When was Revelation written?

Revelation was most likely written at the end of the first century. The book itself does not give a date of composition. There are however two reasons for dating the book toward the end of the first century. First, and most importantly, there was an early Christian leader named Irenaeus who lived in the later second century, who wrote a major work around 180 A.D. entitled *Against Heresies*. In this work Irenaeus said that Revelation was written at the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled from 81 to 96 A.D. That would date the book of Revelation around 95 or 96 A.D.

A second reason for dating Revelation to the end of the first century is that Revelation often uses the name "Babylon" for Rome. (For example, see chapter 17 of Revelation, especially verses 5 and 9. The city is referred to as "Babylon," but is also identified as the city on seven hills, a definite reference to Rome.) This way of referring to Rome as Babylon developed in Judaism after 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. John's use of this terminology would point to a date in the later first century.

Given all this, a late first century date is quite probable. Of course we can't be certain. But following Irenaeus, 95 or 96 A.D. seems likely.

How is Revelation to be understood?

Revelation is a challenging book. It contains strange pictures and imageries. Its thoughts and patterns seem foreign to us. We wonder how we are to approach the book. As we seek to understand Revelation, it is

helpful to keep four categories in mind. Revelation is a letter, a prophecy, an apocalypse, and a spiral of visions.³ Each of these categories is helpful in understanding the book.

A Letter

Revelation is a letter, written by a man named John to a number of churches in the Roman province of Asia. It contains standard formats of Christian letters from the first century—greetings, blessings, listing of sender and recipients. Moreover, Revelation has many similarities in form to the letters of Paul. Just like the letters of Paul, Revelation is a letter that John expected to be read aloud in the worship of the receiving congregations.

It is important to keep this in mind, for this reminds us that Revelation was not originally addressed to us. John did not address his message to twenty-first-century Christians. Revelation was originally intended for first-century Christians in Asia Minor. Given that, we do well in our studies of Revelation to ask first what Revelation said to its original audience. After that we can ask what it says to us. Of course Revelation still speaks powerfully and vitally to our modern day. But we do well to begin our studies by remembering that Revelation was originally directed to someone else.

A Prophecy

John identifies the book of Revelation as being a prophecy (1:3). Since John considered his work to be words of prophecy, we do well to ask what that means. Please note, we need to be very careful here, because John has a different understanding of prophecy than we do. We think of prophecy in terms of foretelling the future. We see prophecy as “history written in advance,” or as being about predictions of future events, but John has a different understanding.

For John there are two elements in prophecy. First, prophecy is an inspired message, received directly from God.⁴ John received his message in a divinely given vision (1:2, 1:10), and he is careful to note that the message of Revelation is God’s message.

³ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 38–40, 42.

⁴ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, ed. James Mays and Paul Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 25.

Second, prophecy for John involves true testimony to Jesus. (Note, in 19:10b, John writes, “Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”) The function of prophecy is to direct people to the one Lord Jesus Christ, and to call people to live in faithful obedience to this Lord. Prophecy is about directing people in the life of faith.

We need to be very careful here, for John’s view of prophecy is different from ours. For John true prophecy is not so much about laying out a road map to the future, as it is about calling people to live for Jesus in both the present and the future. The focus of prophecy is in faithful teaching and exhortation.

Two examples from Revelation are helpful here. In 2:20 and following, John writes about a false prophet whom he calls “Jezebel.” The reason that John labels this woman a false prophet is not because she has made inaccurate predictions about the future. In fact, there is no reference to any predictions. Rather “Jezebel” is teaching people to “practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20).⁵ In her teaching she is not bearing true testimony to Jesus, and therefore she is a false prophet.

A second example is found in Revelation 11:3. In this passage there are two witnesses who are said to prophesy, but their message is not about the future. It is about repentance, as indicated by their being dressed in sackcloth. Their prophetic message is one that calls people to Jesus. That again is what prophecy is for John. It is a divinely given message that calls people to an active and true faith.

Now, the prophetic message certainly has implications for the future. John foresees the destruction of the Roman Empire, and he looks forward to the new heaven and the new earth. But prophecy also involves the present, as John calls the people of the seven churches to faithful living. Prophecy for John involves directing all of life to Jesus.

It is important that we understand John’s view of prophecy, for this has implications for how we read Revelation. If we follow John’s guidance, we will find in Revelation not so much a road map to the future, but a call for obedience and faithfulness. We do well to carefully let John guide us here.

An Apocalypse

Revelation is a type of literature that is called “apocalyptic literature.” This type of literature developed in the ancient world and is often quite difficult for modern readers. “Apocalypse” is a Greek word that means

⁵ Koester, 45–46.

“revelation” or “unveiling.” (The word “apocalypse” is actually the first word in the original Greek text of the book of Revelation.) Eventually the word “apocalypse” came to be used to refer to this whole type of literature that developed from roughly 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. Revelation is one of the great examples of apocalyptic literature. Other examples can be found in both Jewish and Christian circles, and include works such as: Second Esdras, Sibylline Oracles, Second Baruch, and the second half of the Old Testament book of Daniel.

Apocalyptic literature was a picturesque, symbolic type of writing. It involved rich imagery and cosmic battles. Apocalyptic literature often included angels, supernatural beings, plagues and trials, and battles between God and Satan. Often it focused on the end of the world. Apocalyptic literature was expressive, pronounced, and made use of rich and often bizarre images (seven-headed dragons, cosmic events, etc.). It was concerned with justice, that God and God’s people be vindicated in a sinful world. It often contained words of warning for nonbelievers, and words of encouragement for believers. One of the functions of apocalyptic literature was to provide hope for people in difficult situations.

The following is an example of a non-Biblical piece of apocalyptic literature. It is found in a work entitled Second Esdras, specifically chapter 5, verses 1-7.

Now concerning the signs: behold, the days are coming, when those who dwell on earth shall be seized with great terror, and the way of truth shall be hidden, and the land shall be barren of faith. ²And unrighteousness shall be increased beyond what you yourself see, and beyond what you heard of formerly. ³And the land which you now see ruling shall be waste and untrodden, and men shall see it desolate. ⁴But if the Most High grants that you live, you shall see it thrown into confusion after the third period; and the sun shall suddenly shine forth at night, and the moon during the day. ⁵Blood shall drip from wood, and the stone shall utter its voice; the peoples shall be troubled, and the stars shall fall. ⁶And one shall reign whom those who dwell on earth do not expect, and the birds shall fly away together; ⁷and the sea of Sodom shall cast up fish; and one whom the many do not know shall make his voice heard by night, and all shall hear his voice.⁶

Note the vivid imagery and threats of judgment. Sin and evil will be dealt with. Implicit in the judgment is a promise of deliverance for

⁶ Bruce Metzger, ed., *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977), 31.

the righteous. This type of imagery and this message are common in apocalyptic literature; in fact, we will find similar imagery and messages in the book of Revelation.

As modern readers we are not familiar with apocalyptic literature. We tend to see Revelation as a unique piece of literature. We wonder how John came up with such strange and bizarre images. It is helpful to recognize that Revelation is not the only piece of literature like this. It is rather an example (and a very good example!) of a type of literature that existed in Jewish and Christian circles of the time. John's images, rather than being simply bizarre, fit in well with this type of literature. John is using a specific style of writing to share his vision and to proclaim the Word of God.

We also need to remember that John's first readers would have been familiar with this type of writing, and would have known how to grasp the images and message of Revelation. In fact, John expected that his first audience would hear and understand his work as it was read in worship (1:3).

The challenge we modern readers have is that this style of writing is strange to us. It strikes us as confusing and even incomprehensible. However, modern readers can come to understand the messages and the images of Revelation. We will need to work at it, but as we do, we will find that Revelation proclaims a vital and powerful Word!

A Spiral of Visions

Another helpful insight in understanding Revelation is to recognize that Revelation is a cyclic book, a book that contains cycles of visions, repetitions, and deepening developments of reoccurring themes. Revelation is written as a spiral, with ideas and themes developed, then re-developed and intensified as the book moves onward.

Too often we try to read Revelation in a straight-moving, chronological manner. We assume that the book moves from point A to point B to point C. But the problem is, the book isn't written that way, and reading it in such a manner only creates confusion or misunderstanding.

Part of John's artistry is that he repeats and redevelops ideas in a cyclic manner. John will develop point A and point B. But then rather than moving on to point C, he will return to point A and redevelop and deepen that idea. Revelation is an artistic work, in which John uses a spiral of visions to proclaim the glory and power of God.

Three examples are helpful in seeing this. First, at the end of chapter 6, when the sixth seal is opened, the universe comes to an end. The sun

becomes black, the stars fall to the earth, and the sky vanishes (6:12-14). The cosmos is finished. That would seem to indicate the end of the book. And yet it does not. The opening of the next seal, rather than announcing the end, instead opens up a whole new series of events, the seven trumpets.

Second, when the seventh trumpet is blown in chapter 11, we again seem to come to the end. Verse 11:19 tells us that God's temple in heaven is opened, and the ark of the covenant is seen within the temple. In Jewish thought, this is an announcement of the end of history, and the coming of the fullness of God's kingdom. But again the book does not end here. Rather, a new series of visions begins.

Third, Babylon (or Rome) is said to be destroyed in a variety of ways. It is destroyed by an earthquake (16:19), by its former allies (17:16), and by pestilence, mourning, famine, and fire (18:8). To read this in a straightforward, chronological manner raises all sorts of problems. (For example, how many times is Rome to be destroyed?) We do better to read this as a repetitious, intensifying message of John's conviction that Rome will be judged, and that Christians must avoid compromise with Roman ways.

Revelation is not written in a chronological manner. Rather, like a powerful hymn, the messages are repeated in ongoing verses and refrains. John repeats, redevelops, and expands his themes in an ever-intensifying spiral of visions. The result is a powerful proclaiming of the Word and wonder of God.

Why should we read Revelation?

Given all the challenges in reading Revelation, the final question to ask is why should we read it? Three answers stand out.

First, we read Revelation because it is part of the Bible. The church has determined that Revelation is part of its authoritative writings, the Holy Scripture. As such, Revelation speaks the Word of God in a normative and definitive way. We as Christians need to know this Word. To avoid Revelation (or other parts of the Bible for that matter) is to short-change the life of faith.

Second, Revelation has greatly informed the hymns and worship life of the church. An intriguing fact about Revelation is that while many Christians avoid reading the book, they nonetheless sing the book. Many of the great hymns of the church and other portions of worship come from the book of Revelation.

Here is a partial listing of some hymns that draw from the book of Revelation:

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

“Crown Him with Many Crowns”

“For All the Saints”

“Battle Hymn of the Republic”

“Shall We Gather at the River”

“Jerusalem, My Happy Home”

“Hallelujah Chorus” of Handel’s *Messiah*

Moreover, the choruses and announcements of Revelation have been and continue to be used in the worship life of the church. For example, the hymn of praise “Worthy is Christ” in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is a composition based on the hymns of Revelation.⁷ Note the words, and as we read into Revelation, listen for these themes:

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain,
Whose blood set us free to be people of God.
Power and riches and wisdom and strength,
and honor and blessing and glory are His.
This is the feast of victory for our God. Alleluia.
Sing with all the people of God and join in the hymn of all creation:
Blessing and honor and glory and might be to God and the Lamb
forever. Amen.

This is the feast of victory for our God,
for the Lamb who was slain has begun His reign. Alleluia. Alleluia.⁸

Often Christians don’t study the book of Revelation, but they sing the book in their hymns. The words of Revelation continue to enrich and inform the church’s worship life. We do well to read and study this rich resource.

Third, Revelation speaks a Word of God that is vital for Christians today. Many of the issues in Revelation are issues that Christians continue to wrestle with in our day: issues of complacency in faith, of accommodation to culture, of persecution for the faith, of hope in a challenging world. In Revelation we encounter a message that shapes and informs the life of faith in the twenty-first century.

⁷ Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 213.

⁸ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 81.

We have noted that Revelation was not originally addressed to twenty-first century Christians. That is true, and we need to keep that in mind as we study the book. But the wonder of Revelation is that it nonetheless continues to speak to new generations of Christians, including ours. Revelation has spoken to Christians for nearly two thousand years. Our generation too needs to hear this Word from our God.

Section I

A Vision of Christ

Chapter 1

This first section is an introduction to the book of Revelation. It identifies Revelation as a letter from John to seven congregations in ancient Asia Minor. Note how this opening section is dominated by a vision of Jesus. John begins by focusing us on Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1

1:1-3

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

John begins the book by pointing to Jesus. This book will be “the revelation of Jesus Christ” given by God. John is clear from line one. This book is a message from God, and Jesus is the means by which God shares this message. We as modern readers need to read the book with this in mind. This is a message from God and is to be treated and understood as such.

It is worth noting that our modern Bibles usually entitle the book “The Revelation to John.” This title is a later addition, and a bit of a misnomer, for it focuses on the author. John has no intention of focusing on himself. He rather directs us to God, the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

John goes on to explain more about the origins of this revelation. This message came by a chain. It is rooted in God, and then proceeded from God to Jesus to an angel to John. (This type of chain is common in apocalyptic literature. It served to ensure the transcendence of God.) Make no mistake, John insists. John is writing the manuscript, but the author is the Almighty.

The introduction then proceeds with a blessing, both to the one who reads the book and to those who hear and keep the words of the book. In the ancient world, most reading was out loud. John expects this book to be read out loud during worship. Those who read and hear the book are blessed.¹

John refers to his words as “prophecy.” It is important to note again that for John, prophecy was not a road map to the future. Prophecy was

¹ This blessing is the first of seven blessings in the book. As was previously pointed out, John often uses the number seven. In the ancient world, seven was a number that symbolized completeness, fullness. The seven blessings point to the fullness of blessing that is given in Jesus Christ.

teaching and exhortation, given by God, that directed people to Jesus. That is why John tells people to “keep” what is written. We keep prophecy by obeying it in lives faithful to Jesus.

John goes on to add, “the time is near.” This will be a reoccurring announcement in the book. John will tell us numerous times that “Jesus is coming soon” and that “the time is near.” As we move through the book, we will need to discuss what John means by this. For now we will simply note that this language adds a real urgency to the message. This prophecy must be read and heard and lived immediately!

1:4-8

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

This new section reveals that the book is actually a letter. It is a letter from John to seven churches in Asia. (Asia refers to the Roman province of Asia, which is roughly the western half of modern day Turkey.) John, much like St. Paul in preceding years, writes a letter to congregations. In verse 4 and after, John follows some of the format of Paul. (For example, compare 1:4 with 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.) This is a particular letter addressed to seven specific congregations.

John begins with “grace to you and peace.” This was a standard Christian greeting, and one that is often still used in worship today. John writes that grace and peace come from God, who is described as him “who is and who was and who is to come.” This designation echoes the Old Testament name of God as found in Exodus 3:14 (“I am who I am”). God is the everlasting one, the one who has always been and who always will be. But John wants to tell us even more than that, and writes that God “is to come.” The future of God will be defined by his coming on behalf of this world.

John has more to tell us about God. God's throne is surrounded by seven spirits. This is a reference to Jewish thought, where seven spiritual beings stand before the throne of God. Perhaps it is also the case that this "seven" functions symbolically and is an indication of completeness and fullness. If that is the case, then what we have here is a reference to the one, complete, Holy Spirit of God.

Grace and peace are also said to come from Jesus Christ. Jesus is intimately linked with God, both here and throughout the book of Revelation. Revelation in fact has one of the most exalted views of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus is further described as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." All of these images will become important in the book. "The ruler of the kings of the earth" is a politically loaded statement. To Roman minds, the ruler of the kings was the Roman emperor. John challenges that and says that highest authority belongs to Jesus.

Verses 4 and 5 raise a question for modern readers. Do we have in these lines a Trinitarian statement? In other words, does this language of God and the seven spirits and Jesus Christ point us to the one God who is Father, Spirit, and Son? That is a difficult question to answer, as we can't be sure what was in the mind of John. On the one hand, we need to be careful about reading later ideas into the text. The doctrine of the Trinity wasn't fully developed until a few hundred years after John wrote Revelation. But on the other hand, John seems to be moving in that direction. John points us to a fuller proclamation of the mystery of God.

John continues by telling us more about Jesus. Jesus is the one who "loves us and freed us and made us to be a kingdom of priests serving God." Note the incredible things that Jesus has done for his people. Moreover, Jesus is the one "to whom be glory and dominion forever." Once again we have an incredibly powerful view of Jesus.

John then shifts focus and tells us that Jesus will come again. But this coming is more threat than comfort, as "all the tribes of the earth will wail." This is a word of warning for those who ignore Jesus. "The tribes" are those who have not taken Jesus seriously, and John tells us that they will be judged (i.e. "will wail") at Jesus' coming. John has set up a stark contrast here. In the previous paragraph John has written about the love and freedom and kingdom that Jesus' followers share. Now in this section, John adds that those who have not taken Jesus seriously will wail at his coming. John's not-so-subtle question of us is, where will we be? Will we be part of the community that shares in the glory of Jesus, or part of the tribes that wail at his coming?

Note also how John has constructed this last paragraph. Verse 7 is a paraphrase of Old Testament verses Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10 and 12. It is not an exact quotation, but a paraphrase of these verses. A point to watch in Revelation is that John will continually allude to the Old Testament. He will never quote the Old Testament directly. But he will allude to it, and paraphrase it, hundreds of times. The Old Testament is one of the key sources from which John draws his imagery.

This section concludes with another key phrase for God. God is the “Alpha and the Omega,” which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the “a” and the “z,” the first and the last. As John has already stated, God is the one “who is and who was and who is to come.”

1:9-11

⁹I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

John once again introduces himself, this time as a “brother” who shares with the people the life of faith. John makes no claim to being one of the original twelve apostles. He is obviously someone well known to the recipients, as he feels no need for further introduction. He emphasizes that he shares with the Christians “the persecution, the kingdom, and the patient endurance.” As we will see, these items are central to John’s understanding of the Christian life.

John writes that he was on the island called Patmos, which is an island about forty miles off the coast of modern day Turkey. Most likely he was banished there by the Romans for his preaching and teaching activities. John further explains that he was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day” when he saw and heard a message. We’re not sure exactly what John means by this. Was he in prayer, in worship, in a vision, or in some other spiritual experience? Whatever the exact experience, we need to take John at his word here. John received a revelation as a gift from God, and he shares it in this book.

Two points are worth noting here. First, spiritual experiences were well accepted in New Testament times. For example, Peter has a vision in Acts 10:10 and Paul records that he was caught up into the third heaven

in 2 Corinthians 12:2-3. John seems to have had some sort of similar experience. Second, John does not focus on his own experience, but on the message that God gave him. For John what is vital is not what happened to him, but the message that God shared.

John continues by recording that he heard a voice. We learn later that this is the voice of Jesus. John is instructed to write what he sees in a book, and send it to the seven churches, which are listed here for the first time.

1:12-20

¹²Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you have seen, what is and what is to take place after this. ²⁰As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

John turns to see who has spoken to him. As he turns he sees seven golden lampstands, and someone standing in the midst of the lampstands. We learn in verse 20 that the seven lampstands symbolize the seven churches, and we learn from the rich imagery that the person is Jesus. Jesus stands in the midst of his churches. We are reminded that Jesus is not an absentee Lord. He is present in the very midst of his people.

Jesus is then described in rich imagery, rooted in the Old Testament. "One like a Son of Man" draws on Daniel 7:13. The robe and sash are clothes of the High Priest in Exodus 28:4. The white hair is a mark of the Ancient of Days (God) in Daniel 7:9. Eyes like a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze, and the voice of many waters draw from Daniel 10:5-6.

The two-edged sword represents the Word of God as in Isaiah 49:2. Further, Jesus shines “like the sun shining with full force.” What we have here is an image of the wonder and majesty of the Savior. We ought to stand back and simply be in awe!

Note the language that John uses. He uses the words “like” and “as.” The challenge that John has is, how does one describe Jesus in his full glory? There is simply no adequate language for doing that. So John uses the language of symbolism and simile to paint a picture of the glory of Jesus. We can analyze this picture and take it apart and understand what the various symbols point out. But we also need to step back and simply see and experience the images. What we have here is a powerful picture of the living Christ.

In verse 17 John falls at Jesus’ feet, as though dead. This is an appropriate response when one finds oneself face to face with the living Lord! But Jesus tells John not to be afraid. Jesus says that he is the “first and the last” (note the echo of Alpha and Omega from verse 8) and the one who died and rose again. In addition he is the one who has “the keys of Death and of Hades,” the one who sets people free from death. Jesus then instructs John to write the vision.

The book of Revelation begins with a vision of Jesus, the glorified Jesus, the Jesus who is present now. Jesus in Revelation (and in the entire New Testament for that matter!) is the one in whom God accomplishes his purposes of redemption and salvation. One of the focuses of this book is to help people (including us!) encounter Jesus Christ.

Chapter 1 ends by pointing out that the seven lampstands are the seven churches, and the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. John will speak of angels quite a bit, and in the next chapter he will address his remarks to the angels of the seven churches. Apocalyptic literature as a whole often uses the imagery of angels. Perhaps Revelation serves to remind modern Christians that there is more in this universe than our scientific minds see!

John’s Use of Symbols

This is a good place to look at how John uses symbols, and to point out that John uses symbols to speak of and to point to deeper realities. We need to be careful in Revelation not to take the symbols literally. We rather need to ask, what is John saying when he uses symbols? Two examples are helpful. First, when John says that Jesus has white hair, he is really not concerned about Jesus’ hair color. He rather is telling us that

Jesus is the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9), and thereby shares in the wonder of God. Second, when John writes that “from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword,” we ought not to think of a dagger that hangs from Jesus’ teeth. (If that image is literally true, it becomes impossible and grotesque.) It is rather symbolism drawn from Isaiah 49 that proclaims that Jesus is the one who truly speaks the Word of God. When John uses symbols, we need to ask what the symbols say.

John uses symbols to speak of and point to deeper realities. This needs to be recognized now, and remembered as we proceed with the book. Too often when people go further on in Revelation and come to things like Armageddon and 666 and the thousand-year reign, they forget that these too are symbols, and not to be taken literally. We do well to continually ask how John uses his symbols, and let that show us how to understand the message.