

The Christ Addresses the Seven Churches

Revelation 1:1–20

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Introduction

Perhaps the most important chapter of the Revelation for the reader to understand is the first chapter. It gives us many things that are helpful – and some I deem necessary – to approach the remainder of the book intelligently. It tells us that John wrote it in “sign language” or symbols. It identifies its human author, where he was when he wrote it, and why he was in that location. It informs readers to whom it was primarily addressed and what their circumstances were. The writer identifies it is an “apocalypse” (from which word the book is named) and that it is prophetic in at least some measure. It even provides the meaning of the earliest signs or symbols of the book. It introduces us to the numerical emphasis of the book by the use of the number *seven*. The entire chapter naturally divides into seven sections.

Title and Source of the Revelation

Verses 1–3

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, *even* the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified *it* by his angel unto his servant John; who bare witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, *even* of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.

The first word of the first verse gives the book its name. *Revelation* is the English transliteration of *apokalupsis* (i.e., “apocalypse”) meaning “an uncovering; a laying bare, making naked.”¹ John manifestly used the term metaphorically to speak of the undisclosed secrets, both of present and future events, that the Lord uncovered or laid bare to him. These were truths, like those of the Gospel in its entirety, which men cannot perceive through their innate wisdom or physical senses (1 Cor. 2:7–10). As Herman Hoeksema well stated: “The word *revelation*, then denotes that act of God whereby He discloses to us that other world....”²

This book is the “revelation of Jesus Christ.”³ Scholars disagree somewhat on whether this phrase is an objective genitive (i.e., a revelation **concerning** Jesus) or a subjective genitive (i.e., a revelation **given by** Jesus). While this book is indeed “...a revelation of Jesus Christ in His present glory, rule, and executor of judgment,”⁴ the indication of this opening statement concerning Christ is to show the **source** of the revelation. The context immediately says plainly,

“...God gave him [Christ, DM]” the Revelation that He (i.e., Christ) might “show it unto His servant” (v. 1).

What does the statement mean that the things to be revealed “...must shortly come to pass”? Commentators have offered two extremes of thought relative to this phrase. First, there are those who believe that John (along with Paul and Peter) was convinced that Jesus would return very soon, precipitating the final Judgment. To those who hold this view, John’s statement here is but one more indication of his expectation of the imminent coming of Christ. However, that the apostles would dare so teach—or would have had the knowledge thus to teach—cannot be harmonized with Jesus’ declaration that no man, neither the angels nor even He knew the hour of His coming (Mat. 24:36). Nor can such a mistaken view of the soon-coming of Christ relative to The Revelation be harmonized with Jesus’ promise that the apostles would be guided into all the Truth and shown the things to come by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). Jim McGuigan has well stated:

The claim is made that the early church believed that the second coming was near in time; but this is just not true. They may have lived aware of the possibility of His coming soon, but that they believed he was coming soon is not at all established by the New Testament.⁵

A second extreme position is that **everything** in The Revelation was to be (and indeed was) fulfilled in a very short period after the Revelation was given. Some notable men have taken this view, including the highly respected Foy E. Wallace, Jr.⁶ This view would certainly (even if unintentionally) give consolation to advocates of the view that the Second Coming of Christ and all final events were consummated in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (including Max King’s “realized eschatology” and other preterists in general). However, to hold that all of the Revelation is already in the past is to ignore the prophetic elements of the book that point to the appearance of Christ when He will raise from the dead and judge all men, bringing us to the end of time itself. These things have obviously not occurred. As Frank Pack wrote, “To put it entirely in the past seems to fly in the face of the materials in the book itself.”⁷

I believe Dusterdieck was correct in saying that “...the prophet himself distinguishes the beginning of the future things, as the beginning of the ultimate completion, from that distant completion itself.”⁸ In other words, John is saying that the **beginning** of the things revealed to him will “shortly come to pass” and are “at hand” (v. 3). The comment of Burton Coffman on *shortly come to pass* says it well: “The meaning of it is the same as when Jesus said, ‘The kingdom

of God is at hand,’ meaning that the **beginning of it** was near at hand.”⁹ Please notice that John’s declaration that these matters would “shortly come to pass” utterly contradicts those speculative futurists who view practically all of the Revelation as a description of **final events yet future to us**.

Christ “sent and signified” this message to John by His angel (v. 2). The identity of this angel (cf. Rev. 22:6) is not revealed and speculation concerning him is pointless. However, it was not unusual for God to use angels as media of revelation. He employed the angel Gabriel in the revelation to Daniel (Dan. 8:16; 9:21), and He used an unnamed angel in the revelation to Zechariah (Zec. 1:9, 14). The Mosaic Law was likewise “spoken through angels” (Heb. 2:2).

The Revelation was “signified” – literally, “sign-i-fied” – communicated by means of signs, symbols, or figures of speech.¹⁰ *Signified* has long been recognized by sound expositors as a principal key to the book’s interpretation. While some references to literal entities in the book exist (e.g., 1:9, 11, et al.), the book is overwhelmingly couched in figurative and symbolic terms. Futurists (whose view of the book requires a literal understanding of most of it) should heed the words of Edward McDowell:

The opening sentences contain another warning that modern interpreters would do well to heed. It is that the message of the book is clothed in symbols.... Attention to this fact should save us from crass literalism in interpreting the message of the book.¹¹

It is generally assumed that the symbolism of the book was intended to serve as sort of a “code” language that the Lord’s people would be able to comprehend, but which their enemies could not.

Verse 1 tells us the chain of communication through which the Revelation was delivered: From God to Christ, from Christ to His angel, from His angel to John, and from John to the servants of God. John then tells us that he faithfully testified of all of the things he saw (v. 2).

The Revelation contains seven beatitudes (pronouncements of blessings), the first of which we find in Verse 3. Since an entire chapter of this volume will be devoted to these, I will comment on this one only in passing. *He that readeth* refers to a public reader of Scripture (note the singular pronoun). At best, each congregation would have only a single copy of any portion of God’s Word in written form by the end of the first century, thus requiring great emphasis on the public reading of Scripture in the early church. *They that hear* refers to those in the church

who listen to the reader. Reader and hearer alike are blessed as they keep the “words of the prophecy.” It will always be so: “But he that looketh into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and so continueth, being not a hearer that forgetteth but a doer that worketh, this man shall be blessed in his doing” (Jam. 1:25).

Salutation and Doxology

Verses 4–6

John 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 that are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins by his blood; and he made us *to be* a kingdom, *to be* priests unto his God and Father; to him *be* the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

While Verse 1 tells us the source of the Revelation, we do not have the actual greeting to its primary recipients until Verse 4—“the seven churches that are in Asia,” which are named in Verse 11. There were more than seven churches in the Roman province of Asia,¹² so why were only seven addressed? Some have suggested that perhaps only these seven needed special attention or perhaps that John had a peculiarly close relation to these seven. More likely, it seems to me, is the hypothesis that in the seven churches we have the first of the multitude of symbols or signs in the book. Counting the seven churches, there are no fewer than five sets of sevens mentioned in this first chapter.

Since seven is a number that has for centuries represented completeness or perfection, it is not unreasonable to apply this meaning to the number of churches addressed, thereby understanding it to be addressed to the church in its completeness and through all time. Indeed, this has been the understanding at least as far back as the Muratorian Canon of the late second century: “For John also, though he wrote in the Revelation to seven churches, nevertheless speaks to them all.”¹³

The usual combined salutation of “grace” and “peace” is bestowed by John, first, from God the Father (“him who is and who was and who is to come,” v. 4). This is at once a declaration of the immutable and eternal nature of God. Henry B. Swete observed: “Such a title of the Eternal Father stands fitly among the first words of a book which reveals the present in the light both of the past and the future.”¹⁴ The greeting is also from the “seven Spirits” before the throne of God. There is only one Holy Spirit, but here the symbolic number is used to

represent the perfection of His person, His attributes, and His work. Likely, the same symbolism is seen in Zechariah's reference to the seven "...eyes of Jehovah, which run to and fro through the whole earth" (Zec. 4:10).

After references to the Father and the Spirit, John mentions the remaining person of the Sacred Godhead, Jesus Christ, and bursts forth in a beautiful doxology concerning him (vv. 5–7). He is the "faithful witness." He came into the world to "bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37) as God's final spokesman (Heb. 1:1–2). He accomplished the work which God gave Him to do (John 17:4), hence, He is the "faithful witness" Who gave testimony of God and His Word. He is the "first-born of the dead." Others had been raised from the dead, but none like Christ. He is the first to be brought forth: (1) "through the glory of the Father" (no human agent involved in His resurrection [Rom. 6:4]) and (2) never to die again: "But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20).

John emphasized the ultimate authority of Christ as he proclaims Him the ruler of earthly kings. Right now we accept the fact by faith that our Lord has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mat. 28:18), but "...in its own time he shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings; and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15; cf. Rev. 19:16). It is significant that John, in the salutation, introduces this theme of the utter authority and final triumph of Christ (and his beleaguered people) – which is fully developed and repeated under numerous symbols in The Revelation. From the opening words, the Revelation gives hope to God's persecuted people!

Christ is the one who "loveth us" (present tense – His love continues ever). Moreover, because He loves us He "loosed ["washed," KJV] us from our sins" (aorist tense – an act accomplished in the past).¹⁵ The means by which Christ "loosed" (released) us from our sins is "by his blood." "His love, demonstrated in his sacrificial death, procured our redemption," as Homer Hailey aptly commented.¹⁶ To speak of being loosed or released from sin projects the figure of ransom or redemption from slavery. Both Paul and Peter used this same figure (1 Tim. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:18–19), even as the Lord himself did (Mat. 20:18). Paul says that the whole church was thus ransomed (Acts 20:28). This ransom and its resulting freedom from sin occurs when one obeys "from the heart" the Gospel plan of salvation (Rom 6:17–18; cf. vv. 3–4).

Further, this greeting is from Him Who has made us “a kingdom” and “priests” unto God (v. 6). This description of the church is a reference to a similar statement God made to Israel in Exodus 19:6: “Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests.” Peter used the same identity in calling Christians “a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). Coffman’s comment on Revelation 1:6 is well taken: “The first step in understanding this passage is to get rid of the two verbs in the future tense that have been added by the translators. There is a world of difference in the statements, *God made us a kingdom* and *God made us to be a kingdom*.¹⁷ John was not speaking of what Christ will do in some remote time in the future, but of **what He has done** for all who have been redeemed from sin by His blood.

As the Colossians had been translated into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13) and the Hebrew saints had received an unshakeable kingdom (Heb. 12:23, 28), so the redeemed were **at that time** a kingdom and a priesthood, and John was in that kingdom with them (Rev. 1:9). To insist that the kingdom of Christ is yet to come and to attempt particularly to justify that expectation from the book of Revelation requires an abysmal level of ignorance and/or a willful rejection of the doctrine found in its opening verses. As a kingdom we are subject to law, and we are to serve our King (John 12:48; Heb. 5:9, et al.). As priests we are to offer appropriate sacrifices unto our God (Rom. 12:1-2; Heb. 13:15, et al.).

Upon listing these remarkable and glorious attributes and accomplishments of our Lord, John could no longer contain himself. He bursts forth in a stanza of honor and praise: “to him be the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

The Coming of Christ **Verse 7**

Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they that pierced him; and all the tribes of the earth shall mourn over him. Even so, Amen.

Not only has the Christ wrought wonderful blessings presently upon His people by His past accomplishments, He yet has some future work to do. John introduces what he is about to say with the arresting term, *Behold*. The works of Christ yet to be done include His coming, the raising of all the dead (including evil and good), and executing The Final Judgment—all of which are either stated or implied in this verse. While some see in this statement a reference to the Lord’s more immediate judgments against Rome,¹⁸ I cannot agree. The language is too specifically descriptive of the **actual** return of the Lord at the end of time, rather than to a figurative return. The angels who stood by as Jesus disappeared into the cloud on his way to

Heaven promised that he "...shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven" (Acts 1:10-11), that is, coming "with the clouds." This coming of the Lord will be one "every eye shall see," even "they that pierced him." This requires that all men be raised from the dead, which will occur only at the actual coming of Christ (John 5:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:22-23; 1 The. 4:15-16). This coming of Christ will be accompanied by The Judgment, causing men from "all tribes of the earth" to mourn in utter hopelessness at the sentences about to be rendered.

This declaration is at once a promise bringing joyous expectation for the faithful redeemed, but that should bring the most awful dread and foreboding for all others. *They that pierced him* includes not only the actual Gentile executioners, but the Christ-denying Jews who demanded his crucifixion. By extension, it also includes all who have rejected the Lord by rejecting His Word, whether through outright repudiation or neglect. John recorded Jesus' words to this effect in His Gospel account: "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my sayings hath one that judgeth him: the word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day" (12:48). Those who "know not God" and "obey not the gospel" will see only too late how tragically wrong they have been as they anticipate their sentence of everlasting punishment (2 The. 1:8-9).

Those who contend that there will be distinct resurrections for the righteous and the unrighteous, separated by 1007 years (the fanciful "rapture" plus the "millennium"), are in open conflict with Revelation 1:7. When the Lord comes, "every eye shall see him," including His executioners. Therefore, good and evil alike shall be raised together in the same hour (John 5:28-29). Likewise, those who ridiculously contend that Christ has already come secretly (e.g., the "Jehovah's Witnesses") fly in the face of the proclamation that "every eye shall see him" when He returns. Further, this description of the Lord's return utterly exposes the preterist's folly, contending that the coming of the Lord was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The surety of the Lord's He then visible return is sealed with a strong, "Even so, Amen."

The Seal and the Signature of Christ

Verse 8

I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

The titles used in this verse admittedly tempt the reader at first glance to apply them to the Father, as several commentators indeed do. However, I believe a strong case exists for

taking them as the words of Christ, attesting that He is the source of the Revelation to John. Notice that these words appear in connection with John's description of Christ's past, present, and future work (vv. 5-7). He then refers to Jesus twice in Verse 9. The remainder of the chapter is centered on the arresting voice and appearance of Christ. It is a contextual digression to understand the words of Verse 8 to be spoken by the Father when one considers that, beginning with Verse 5, the subject of the chapter (and of the remainder of the book, for the most part), is clearly the Christ. Some object that the titles claimed by the speaker of Verse 8 belong to the Father, but are they any less appropriate for his Son? *The Alpha and the Omega* equals the clear claim of Christ, "I am the first and the last..." (1:17). He later identifies Himself as follows: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:13). It is surely not inappropriate to refer to Christ as "the Lord God." Did not this same John give us the record of Thomas' post-resurrection confession of Christ: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28)? While the phrase, *Who is and who was and who is to come*, manifestly refers to the Father in Verse 4, it is no less true of the Son: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and forever" (Heb. 13:8). There should be no problem in addressing our Lord as "the Almighty"; Isaiah prophetically called the Christ "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father" (Isa. 9:6).

Those ancients who lived much nearer the writing of the Revelation than we do almost universally attributed the words of Verse 8 to Christ. William Lee wrote: "Early Christian art and Early Christian Hymnology alike apply the symbolic language of such passages to Christ."¹⁹ Coffman referred to J.B. Smith's "...extensive quotations to show that all of the ancients attributed these words to Jesus Christ."²⁰ Even those expositors who believe God the Father is here speaking admit that Christ could be the speaker. After saying that he believes the evidence favors the Father as speaker, Hailey still comments: "However, the speaker might well be the Son, for he is the fullness of Godhood or deity (Col. 2:9)."²¹

While granting that the identity of the speaker in Verse 8 is not crucial to our salvation or worthy of severing fellowship, identifying Him as the Christ maintains the continuity of the thought and subject of the context begun in Verse 5. Thus concluded, Verse 8 stands as one of the boldest and plainest statements of the Deity of our Lord in all of Holy Writ. As the words of Christ, they stand as His personal signature and seal that the Revelation is indeed from Him.

John's Commission

Verses 9-11

I, John, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet saying, What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches: unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamum, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.

This section opens with John's explanation of his personal circumstances when he received the Revelation. He identifies himself as a "brother" to his addressees, a simple reference to his spiritual kinship to them in the family of God. He is not only their brother, but he is a partaker with them in the tribulation and persecution they are suffering for Christ's sake. John was no self-exalted, ermine-robed ecclesiastic sitting in an ivory tower, looking down on his suffering brethren from a safe distance! He tells us in Verse 9 that he was on the barren isle of Patmos "for the word of God," undoubtedly meaning **because** of his preaching of the Word of God.

John was not only a partaker in the tribulation with his brethren, but also in the "kingdom and patience which are in Jesus." Since Christ has "made us to be a kingdom" (v. 6) **we are in His kingdom**. Again, John and the brethren in the first century were not yearning for a kingdom yet to come; they understood fully that by being Christians, by being in the church, they were in the kingdom. How blatantly the future-kingdom theorists repudiate such unmistakable passages. John was also partaking in their "patience" as well as in their tribulation. *Patience* consistently has the meaning of "steadfastness" in the older versions and is so footnoted in the ASV. This tells us that John and many other brethren were bearing up under the great pressures pagan Rome was putting upon them. Indeed, to Pergamum the Lord wrote: "thou holdest fast my name and didst not deny my faith..." (Rev. 2:13). Undoubtedly, the faithfulness of the aged and beloved apostle gave others courage to hold on. John was "in the Spirit." Plummer said this means: "I came to be in a state of ecstasy capable of receiving revelations."²² Hailey explained that this "...does not mean that John was in a spirit of worship or meditation or under a spell of self-imposed ecstasy, but that he was under the power or control of the divine Spirit."²³ Pack agreed: "John is under the Holy Spirit's influence when he hears this trumpet-like voice."²⁴ Whether John's state implies ecstasy is perhaps moot, but his intention is surely to tell his readers that he was receptive to the inspired visions he was about

to receive. These visions transpired (at least began) “on the Lord’s day,” a term that is inexplicable apart from the first day of the week, our Sunday. Plummer stated: “But from Ignatius [second century, DM] onwards, we have a complete chain of evidence that *he kuriake* became the regular Christian name for the first day of the week.”²⁵ John heard a voice so great and arresting behind him that he compares it to the blast of a trumpet. This description implies the strength and clarity of the voice. However, it is not merely an indistinguishable musical tone, but a voice with a clear command to write in a book (actually a scroll) the things he is about to see. These revelations are then to be sent to the seven churches of Asia, which have already been mentioned and addressed as a group (v. 5), but here they are named. “These are real churches with real problems in John’s own day. It is grotesque interpretation to think of these churches as signifying periods of church history, as some futurists do.”²⁶

Christ in Power and Glory Verses 12–18

And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And having turned I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the candlesticks one like unto a son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about at the breasts with a golden girdle. And his head and his hair were white as white wool, *white* as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto burnished brass, as if it had been refined in a furnace; and his voice as the voice of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth proceeded a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, Fear not; I am the first and the last, and the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

This section composes the first vision of the Revelation. It presents an awe-inspiring picture of the One who delivered the Revelation and commissioned John to record it and send it to the seven churches. It was so wondrous to John that he fell “as one dead” at the feet of this One he saw and heard (v. 17).

When John turned to see the source of the great voice behind him, he mentions first, not a person, but seven golden candlesticks (more properly, lampstands). The seven-branched lampstand from one stem is a familiar part of the Old Testament tabernacle and temple (Exo. 25:31–37; 1 Kin. 7:49; et al.). However, John apparently saw seven individual stems and stands, for the person he saw was “in the midst” of them. The significance of the lampstands will be revealed to John (and to us) in Verse 20.

The person who spoke and who John saw among the candlesticks was “like unto a son of man.” The background of this terminology, like so much of the revelation, is from the Old

Testament. Daniel 7:13 says: “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man....” Daniel’s “son of man” is a prophetic description of the Son of God in his humanity. *Son of man* was the Lord’s favorite self-description (He used it of Himself approximately 50 times). Most likely He intended by it to consciously and clearly identify Himself as the subject of Daniel’s prophecy. This fact is especially apparent in Matthew 26:63–64 where He all but quotes Daniel 7:13. The significance of this inspired epithet of Christ throughout Scripture seems to be that of emphasizing that, although He indeed possesses Godhood and Deity, He is also a human being in every sense and is thus able to partake in our trials, temptations, and sufferings (Heb. 4:15). In spite of the vision of Christ’s glorified appearance (which John will soon describe), He is first identified as “son of man.” This reminder of the humanity of Christ to the oppressed saints of the seven churches must have helped them understand once more that He could suffer **with** them, even as He had suffered **for** them. It should likewise encourage us.

The “son of man” John saw was strikingly clothed. His garment reached to His feet and it was bound at the breasts with a belt of gold. Many commentators see in this attire the description of the priestly robe: “This is the word (*poderes*, DM) which the Greek Old Testament uses to describe the robe of the High Priest (Exo. 28:4; 29:5; Lev. 16:4).”²⁷ However, the vision as a whole is emphasizing the **power** of Christ rather than His priesthood. Hendriksen has likely caught the spirit of the symbolism:

Notice that the Son of Man is here pictured as clothed with power and majesty, with awe and terror.... The entire picture, taken as a whole, is symbolical of Christ, the Holy One, coming to purge his churches (2:16, 18, 23) and to punish those who are persecuting his elect (8:5 ff).²⁸

It seems to fit the context most harmoniously to see in the Lord’s robe and girdle symbols of His authority and rank. John quickly turns from describing the Lord’s attire to a description of His person. The dazzling white hair and fiery eyes are very similar to Daniel 7:9. The white hair may symbolize purity and victory, while *the eyes like flame* indicates the ability of Christ to see all things, penetrating and searching even the heart of every man. *The feet like unto burnished brass* perhaps indicates power of judgment and execution, as surmised by Milligan: “...Those feet which, like metal raised to a white heat in a furnace, consume in an instant whatever they tread upon in anger.”²⁹ Here His voice is not as the startling trumpet blast of

Verse 10, but as the mighty churning waves upon the shoals, conveying the idea of awesome power.

His right hand held seven stars, which John will explain in Verse 20. Out of his mouth proceeded a sharp, double-edged sword. This expression is the same one Hebrews 4:12 uses to describe certain attributes of the Word of God. Since it is proceeding from the Lord's mouth in this vision, it surely stands for His word. The avenging and judging work of the Lord through His Word must be the intended application of the symbol, even as it is in Revelation 19:15:

And out of his mouth proceedeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty.

The countenance of the Lord was comparable to the brilliance of the sun at its apex. This sight surely stirred John's memory of the transfigured Christ in the mountain (Mat. 17:1-2). Saul of Tarsus described the Lord's appearance in like terms (Acts 26:13). What John saw is a strong symbol of Christ as the glorified Son of God, and as that glorified Son, the One in Whom the Father has vested all authority (John 17:1-2). Plummer notes: "The exceptional glory of the Transfiguration has become constant now."³⁰

The vision of the authoritative, avenging, glorified Christ is overwhelming to John and he falls faint at His feet (cf. Eze. 1:28; 43:3; Dan. 8:18, 27; 10:7-9, 17; Acts 22:7; et al.). Christ's gentle right hand (but also strong, for so "right hand" connotes) comforts and perhaps lifts John up. The Lord's voice encourages him not to be afraid, but to trust in Him for three reasons:

1. Jesus said, "I am the first and the last." This has exactly the same meaning as the "Alpha" and the "Omega" of Verse 8. It is a declaration of the ever-living, self-existent, eternal nature of Christ. He did not have a beginning; He is the omnipotent Beginner and was alive when "the beginning" began (John 1:1-3, 14). Neither will He be defeated, destroyed, or brought to an end. This is a statement of assurance not only for the fearful John, but for his persecuted brethren. It should be likewise comforting for saints of all the ages.
2. Jesus said, "I am...the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore...." He mentions his present, past, and future life-states. This self-description unmistakably identifies the One addressing John as the crucified Christ, if nothing before had done so. It refers not to His life and existence as it pertains to his Godhood, but only to His humanhood. He indeed delivered Himself up to the death of the cross (Phi. 2:5-8), but the Father raised Him up (Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 15:20). Christ is alive to die no more, thus He is perfectly able to secure the final victory for His downtrodden saints.
3. Jesus said, "...I have the keys of death and of Hades." Keys are a symbol of power, both to enter and exit. Death is the consequence of sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23), and it is the great power

Satan yet wields over men. Hades (not “hell,” as in KJV) is the unseen realm of departed spirits. Thus death (which populates the grave by destroying our bodies) and hades (the depository of spirits when they depart the dead bodies) will both eventually be “unlocked” and “opened” by Christ. This “opening” will occur when the Lord “cometh with the clouds” (Rev. 1:7). Christ will reign on his heavenly throne over His earthly kingdom (the church) until death, the last enemy, is abolished (1 Cor. 15:24–25). Our Lord will destroy death itself when He returns and, by the glorious universal resurrection, empties both all the graves and hades! Ironically, it was through his own death that Christ was able to “bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

In this opening vision of Christ in His power and glory we see depicted the One Who, throughout the remainder of the visions, would have power sufficient to purge the dross from His churches, bear up His faithful ones, and eventually pour out His awful wrath against His (and their) enemies. Jesus employs formidable descriptive terms to identify himself as He addresses each of the seven churches (Rev. 2–3), that they might better respect Him Who is writing.

John’s Commission Repeated and Some Symbols Identified

Verses 19–20

Write therefore the things which thou sawest, and the things which are, and the things which shall come to pass hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks are seven churches.

As John was commanded in Verse 11 to write a record of these visions, so the commission is here repeated, doubtless for emphasis. This charge contains a three-part division of what John is to write: First, John was to write “...the things which thou sawest.” This order could hardly refer to anything besides the vision of Christ just seen. Second, John was to write “...the things which are.” This charge seems to refer to the present respective conditions of the seven churches as they were about to be revealed in the letters of chapter 2 and 3. Third, John was to write “...the things which shall come to pass hereafter.” This expression refers to the unfolding of the scenes of future events including the very consummation of all things, showing God’s people safely at home with Him at last.

In effect, we have what amounts to an inspired outline of the book:

- I. “The things which thou sawest” (Rev. 1).
- II. “The things which are” (Rev. 2–3).
- III. “The things which shall come to pass hereafter” (Rev. 4–22).

To illustrate the symbolic nature of The Revelation, Jesus gives a sampling of the application of some of these early symbols. The seven stars (v. 16) are the “angels” of the seven churches. The important thing to notice in this context is that the Lord is demonstrating the principle stated in Verse 1, namely, that signs and symbols (i.e., figurative language), characterize the book. He is telling readers not to take the trappings of the visions (numbers, beasts, time periods, et al.) literally, but to discover what they represent and what reality stands behind them. A second demonstration of the principle tells us that the seven candlesticks represent the seven churches addressed. A candlestick or lampstand is not a primary source of light, only a bearer and supporter of light, enabling men to see. So is each congregation to support the spiritual light of God’s Word for all men to see (Phi. 2:15–16; 1 Tim. 3:15). When Christ is depicted as in the “midst of the candlesticks” (v. 13) we are to thereby understand Him to be among the churches. What a great source of assurance this should be for those congregations and saints who are earnestly fighting “the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim. 6:12)! What a cause for dread and alarm for those who care only for pleasing themselves and their fellows rather than God! Christ is yet in the midst of the churches.

Conclusion

What more spectacular way could this marvelous book of visions begin than with the material in this first chapter? What more solemn commission could be given than for John to write the faithful record of these sublime scenes? What more exalted description of Christ and His work can be found in such a short space? This vision had powerful and startling effects on John (v. 17). How it must have struck either fear or consolation in the hearts of the saints in those seven churches as they first read these personal letters from Christ. With Albert Barnes’ assessment of this Chapter I heartily concur: “No more appropriate introduction to what is contained in the book could be imagined.”³¹

Endnotes

1. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Co., 1889), p. 62.
2. Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Pub. Assoc., 1974), p. 4.
3. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
4. Homer Hailey, *Revelation – An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 95.
5. Jim McGuigan, *The Book of Revelation* (W. Monroe, LA: W.C. Johnson, 1976), p. 32.
6. Foy E. Wallace, Jr., *The Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Pub., 1966), p. 63.

7. Frank Pack, *Revelation*, The Living Word Series (Austin, TX: R.B. Sweet Co., Inc., 1965), pt. 1, p. 15.
8. Friedrich Dusterdieck, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Revelation of John*, Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament Series (Peabody, MA: Pub., Inc., 1983), v. 11, p. 96.
9. James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Revelation* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Pub. Co., 1979), p. 16.
10. However, it is also worthy of note that John's use of this term outside of the Revelation refers primarily to miracles or wonders (John 2:18; 4:48; 20:30). Therefore, perhaps *signified* here means more than merely "symbolized," but also refers to the sweeping drama of the awe-inspiring miraculous content of many of the visions.
11. Edward A. McDowell, *The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 24.
12. Colossae (Col. 1:2), Troas (Acts 20:4-7), and Heirapolis (Col. 4:13) were all Asian cities with a church. Perhaps Miletus had one also (Acts 20:17). Barnes argues, but with little ground, that all but the seven had become extinct by the time John wrote Revelation. (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament – Revelation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983 reprint], v. 14; p. 40).
13. William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Bible Study Series (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), v. 1, p. 29.
14. Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1951), p. 5.
15. MS evidence seems to be, stronger for "loosed" (*lusanti*) of the ASV and later versions than for "washed" (*lousanti*) of the KJV, although the concept of being washed (cleansed, purified) in (by) the blood of Christ is surely not anti-Scriptural (Acts 22:16; Rev. 7:14; et al.).
16. Hailey, p. 100.
17. Coffman, p. 23.
18. Hailey, p. 100.
19. William Lee, *The Revelation of St. John*, The Bible Commentary, ed. F.C. Cook (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Book House, 1981), v. 10, p. 502.
20. Coffman, p. 25.
21. Hailey, pp. 103-104.
22. Plummer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, The Pulpit Commentary, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), v. 22, p. 5.
23. Hailey, p. 106.
24. Pack, p. 25.
25. Plummer, p. 5.
26. Pack, p. 25.
27. Barclay, p. 45.
28. Hendriksen, p. 71.
29. William Milligan, *The Book of Revelation*, The Expositor's Bible, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), v. 6, p. 383. 13
30. Plummer, p. 7.
31. Barnes, p. 58.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the 3rd Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 11-15, 1984. I directed the lectureship and edited and published (Valid Pub., Inc.) the book of the lectures, *Studies in The Revelation*.]

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