

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE PROLOGUE: 1:1-8

The prologue to the Revelation is thorough. It gives the origin and destination of the work. Though short, the opening paragraphs are significant in that they provide the perspective from which one is to read the book.

The apocalypse (= revelation) is “of” Jesus Christ, and this is probably to be taken as being “by” Jesus Christ rather than “about” Jesus Christ.¹ The things that John will be shown are to occur in the near future. In one sense, this points toward the struggle between the church and the Roman Empire, but in a broader sense it points to the end of the age inasmuch as for Christians the end of the age is always impending (cf. Mk. 13: 32-37; Re. 22:7,10,12,20).

John’s word to the church is visionary (something he “saw”), and it was intended to be read publicly to the congregations.²

The Readers (1:4-8)

The seven churches in the province of Asia were to be the recipients of the document. The number seven has special significance and probably indicates fullness in the sense that there is a basic unity in spite of some diversity. Seven is not necessarily a sacred or godly number (the Beast will have seven heads!), but it does seem to indicate completeness. If so, then what is addressed to the seven churches is also to be heard by the church universal, which is directly suggested by the repeating phrase “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

The phrase “who is and who was and who is to come” refers to God the Father, and it speaks of his eternal character (cf. 1:8b).

The seven spirits might refer to the seven archangels of the intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 90:21; Tobit 12:15), but more probably, the reference is a symbolic way of speaking about the Holy Spirit in his fullness (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). As such, a better translation might be “Sevenfold Spirit” (so NLT), especially as the reference lies between that of God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, the Son (cf. Zec. 4:10b). Christ is shown to be sovereign over all political powers, a fact that a persecuted church needed to bear in mind!

THE EXALTED TITLES OF JESUS CHRIST

*In 1:5, John offers the first of several exalted titles for Christ Jesus. The three given here emphasize his death, resurrection, and sovereignty. As the **Faithful Witness**, he is the One who bore witness to the truth, even unto death, and it is to the point that the Greek term “witness” is also the same as the Greek term “martyr.” As such, Jesus is the first “martyr,” the model for those who give their lives in martyrdom. As the **Firstborn from the dead** (cf. Ro. 8:29; Col 1:18), Jesus is the beginning of a new creation, and John’s title here is similar to what Paul calls the “first-fruits” of the resurrection (cf. 1 Co. 15:20, 23). As the **Ruler of the kings of the earth**, Jesus is the One granted universal sovereignty at the Father’s right hand (cf. Ac. 2:33-34; 5:31; 7:55-56; Ep. 1:20; Col. 3:1; He. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pe. 3:22).*

¹ The Greek phrase is probably to be taken as a subjective genitive rather than an objective genitive due to the context.

² The verb *anaginosko* (= to read aloud) here indicates a public, audible reading of the document.

Jesus' sacrificial death bought freedom for his people, and he made them to be a kingdom composed of priests. This is the first of several references in the Revelation to the Jewish/Christian question, "Who are the true Israelites?" John has taken a phrase that originally applied to Old Testament Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:6) and has transferred it over to the church. In a similar way, he will take the seven-branched candelabrum, the symbol of the remnant of Israel in the post-exilic period (cf. Zec. 4:2), and will transfer that symbolism to the representative seven churches of Asia. Further, he will later allude to those who claim to be of Israel but are not truly so (2:9; 3:9). All these references seem to be John's way of saying that the true Israel is not necessarily to be defined in conventional Jewish terms, a point emphasized in the writings of Paul as well (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 4:11; Ga. 3:29; 6:16; Phil. 3:3). It is probable that he means to say that the true Israel is made up of those who have come to faith in Christ Jesus, whether ethnically Jewish or not.

The Theme (1:7-8)

This verse, describing the return of Christ as a universal event, is a foretaste of the book's climax (19:11-16; cf. Ac. 1:11). It echoes the prediction of Zechariah about a mourning for "the one they have pierced," though while Zechariah's oracle concerns the house of David and Jerusalem, John extends the sorrow to all the peoples of the earth, who are guilty for "piercing" God's Messiah.

The prologue concludes with a cryptic description of God's all-encompassing power over history. The use of "*alpha* and *omega*," the first and final letters of the Greek alphabet, is comparable to saying, "I am the A and the Z." The use of alphabetic letters to express theoretical concepts was well-known in the ancient world.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *How important is it for Christians to understand God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What is at stake?*
- *With regard to what would be described later, why is the exaltation of Jesus Christ so significant as part of the opening of the book?*

JOHN'S COMMISSION: 1:9-20

John's prophetic call came while he was on Patmos, a rocky and volcanic island to which he had been exiled because of his Christian faith.³ His exile made him a fellow-sufferer with the other believers of Asia in the tribulation of the kingdom of God (cf. Jn. 16:33; Mt. 24:13). On the "Lord's Day," an early Christian way of referring to the first day of the week because it was the day of Jesus' resurrection, John was caught up in an ecstatic trance. He was duly commissioned to prophesy.

The Seven Churches

The order of the naming of the seven churches probably reflects the route which the courier would take to make his delivery. He would land at Ephesus, follow the road north through Smyrna to

³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 111.18.1; 111.20.8-9, says that John was banished by Domitian in AD 95 and released by Nerva 18 months later.



Pergamum, then take the imperial post road to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, thus returning to Ephesus. Since there was no state postal service for private individuals or groups, early Christians were obliged to provide their own letter-carriers.

The seven churches were by no means the only ones in Asia, so they must have been selected as representatives of a larger Christian community. They were likely postal districts from which copies could be sent to the other various area congregations. Perhaps they also represented the



The interior detail of the Arch of Titus in Rome displays the menorah, which the Romans took as spoils of war when they destroyed the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.

Christian churches beyond merely Roman Asia, as implied by the symbolism of the seven stars and the seven-branched candelabrum, a symbolism transferred from Israel to the churches. The significance of the number seven suggests that these churches represent the church universal, and each local congregation has an angel which represents it in heaven.⁴

One Like the Son of Man

When John turned to see his commissioner, he confronted the glorified figure of Jesus Christ. The title “Son of Man,” which appears in Dan. 7:13 and many times in the Book of Ezekiel, had become a messianic expression among Jewry (1 Enoch 37-71), and it described a heavenly figure who would establish the kingdom of God. Jesus was “like” a son of man (or, in Hebrew, a “son of Adam”), a human but infinitely more! It is more than coincidental that John’s poetic vision of the glorified Jesus is very similar to Daniel’s description of the Ancient of Days (7:9-10). This similarity points not only toward the preexistence of Christ but also to the fact that he shares the attributes of God the Father. The full effect of this stylized vision is one of overwhelming power. This is no longer the gentle, submissive Jesus of Pilate’s judgment hall. It is the living, sovereign Lord who was victorious over death and stands as the final judge of all worldly powers. In Greek thought Hades was the intermediate state of the dead and equivalent to the Old Testament *Sheol*. The metaphor of Keys in Jewish thought were symbols of authority (Mt. 16:19; Re. 3:7). Here the idea is that Christ is

⁴ If the word *angelos* is taken to be “messenger,” then it might alternately refer to the letter-couriers who would distribute the letters. Others regard them as pastors or bishops of the churches. The precise interpretation of the angels is uncertain.

sovereign over the realm of death.

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES: 2:1-3:22

All seven letters follow a common literary pattern. They begin with an address to the “angel” of each church followed by one of the titles of the risen Christ taken from the original vision in chapter 1. To each congregation, Christ says, “I know you...” and this is followed by a word of praise, except in the message to Laodicea, where no praise is given. Then follows a criticism, except in the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Each letter concludes with a warning, an exhortation to hear the message of the Spirit, and a promise of reward to the overcomer.

When Christ warns the various churches, “I will remove your lampstand,” or “you are about to suffer,” or “I will soon come to you and fight,” or “I will strike her children dead,” or “I will come like a thief,” or “I will keep you from the hour of trial,” or “I am about to spit you out of my mouth,” his warnings seem to point toward historical events of judgment within time. Like the prophets in the Old Testament, the judgment of God comes within history, not only at the end of history. In some cases, he promises protection, in others he predicts affliction, and in still others he vows punishment.

Much speculation has been offered as to the precise meaning of the rewards promised to the overcomers. Some rewards, like the tree of life (2:7), the crown of life (2:10), and the book of life (3:5), are metaphors pointing toward the believer’s eternal union with God. Other rewards, like the authority over the nations (2:26), the right to sit with Christ on his throne (3:21), and the privilege of being spared the second death (2:11), point toward elements explained elsewhere in the book (e.g., 20:4).

The rewards of the white stone with a new name and the hidden manna (2:17) as well as the pillar imagery (3:12) are more difficult to interpret. Stones had a variety of uses in the ancient world. Small white stones sometimes functioned as tickets of entry into public festivals and royal assemblies. In a court context, they represented acquittal by a jury. Hidden manna may be an allusion to the true bread from heaven, that is, to Jesus Christ in contrast to the manna in the desert (cf. Jn. 6:31ff.). The pillar imagery with an inscribed name possibly points toward entrance into heaven. Consistently in the Revelation, God is described as dwelling in the heavenly temple (7:15; 11:19; 14:15; 15:5; 16:1). However, in the final picture, there will be no temple (21:22). This absence probably indicates that when the believers are finally united with God, they will no longer need a sacred place of mediation, but they themselves, in their eternal union with God, will function as a heavenly temple. Such temple imagery is not unlike that of St. Paul (cf. Ep. 2:20-22).

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *What is the significance of the seven-branched candelabrum now representing Christian communities instead of the Jewish community and temple?*
- *Is Jesus both the Ancient of Days as well as the one “like” the Son of man? If so, what does this say about him?*
- *What might it mean to have a candlestick “removed” (cf. 2:5)? Do you think this could be applied to modern congregations or denominations if they veer too far from the apostolic message?*