

The Gospel in Miniature — In the Book of Revelation

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The book of Revelation is a mysterious yet wonderful document. It is mysterious because its message is largely couched in the language of symbolism; it is wonderful because of the hope it presents.

Revelation contains word pictures of horses, beasts, horns, bowls which pour forth wrath, bloody battle scenes, etc. The very first verse asserts that it is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” which was “signified” to John while the apostle was in exile on Patmos.

But the symbolism has a definite purpose. It is designed to covertly convey a message of hope to Christian people in an era of dreadful persecution. The imagery is based upon language employed in the Old Testament. Westcott and Hort’s *Greek New Testament* lists over 500 references or allusions from the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. The Christians, being familiar with these Scriptures, would grasp the significance of the symbols, while their enemies would have no clue as to the thrust of the document’s message. One can only imagine how their persecution might have been intensified had they been apprehended circulating a treatise that predicted the overthrow of Rome — in **literal** language! Roman authorities repressed any group whose prophets denounced Rome (Keener, p. 762).

The theme of the Apocalypse is “victory.” A keyword is the Greek *nikao*, meaning overcome, conquer, victory. The word is employed twenty times in the New Testament, and seventeen of these are in Revelation. Note this dramatic affirmation: “And they [the citizens of God’s kingdom] overcame him [Satan] because of the blood of the Lamb” (12:11).

One writer notes: “On the canvas of his age [John] pictured a final crisis of cosmic proportions, the outcome of which should be the advent of Christ in glory. The book is a trumpet call to faith in view of the sure triumph of the Kingdom of Christ and God” (Beasley-Murray, p. 119).

The Salutation

The document is primarily directed to seven congregations of the Lord’s people in Asia. Though the apostle John is the instrument through whom the message is directed the ultimate source is the divine Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The sacred three are depicted in the following way: “from him who is and who was and who is to come [the eternal Father]; and from the seven Spirits that are before the throne [the Holy Spirit — the agent of the completed revelation, seven being a numeral suggesting completeness]; and from Jesus Christ” (1:4-5).

This is a strong indication that the entire complement of divine Persons are intensely interested in the fate of the suffering saints and are orchestrating a glorious conquest of the opposition.

The Descriptive of Christ

After introducing Christ as a special object of focus, the inspired writer presents a threefold descriptive of the Lord. He is “the faithful witness.” He is the “firstborn of the dead.” And he is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). In concert, these phrases speak volumes about the nature and mission of the victorious Lamb, and the dramatic conquest he will achieve.

The Faithful Witness

There are three possible ideas associated with the descriptive, “the faithful witness.”

Faithful: His Manner of Life

It could be intended to affirm that as a witness on behalf of God (cf. John 1:18), Jesus was absolutely faithful in the **manner of his life**. It was an essential component in the sacred plan of redemption that Christ, as the sacrificial lamb of God, be without spot or blemish (1 Peter 1:19), thus allowing the Father to be just, and yet a justifier of sinful humanity (Romans 3:21-26). The divine record carefully documents the flawless character of Jesus. He was obedient to his heavenly Father always (John 8:29); though he was tempted in all points, yet he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15) — not even once (1 Peter 2:22). The Lord, therefore, was faithful in all things (cf. Hebrews 2:17; 3:2).

Faithful: His Teaching

The term “faithful” clearly includes the nature of Jesus’ **teaching**. His instruction was wholly compatible with previous revelation, and with the unfolding will of God. Christ once informed his apostles, “if it were not so I would have told you” (John 14:2), which is another way of saying, “You can depend upon what I say.” Jesus claimed that he spoke only that which he had heard, seen, and been taught by the Father (John 8:26,28,38,40). He is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). One should keep this fact in mind in recalling how skeptical critics attempt to undermine certain miraculous narratives recorded in the Old Testament; forcefully, Christ authenticated these very records, e.g., the Adam and Eve account (Matthew 19:4), the universal Flood of Noah’s day (Matthew 24:37ff), Lot’s wife (Luke 17:32), the brazen serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14-15), and the cleansing of Naaman’s leprosy (Luke 4:27). Had these and similar cases not occurred, Jesus would have set the record straight.

Faithful: His Death

The word “witness” translates the Greek term *martyrs*, which may derive from a root meaning “to hear in mind, to be concerned,” hence connote the idea of one who remembers and can tell about something (Bromiley, p. 564). Some scholars believe that the word takes on a special nuance in the book of Revelation, signifying one who bears witness even to the point of death (cf. 1 Timothy 6:13). Likely there is the suggestion here that Christ’s earthly sojourn culminated in his faithful death. It is thus quite possible that the phrase “the faithful witness” summarizes the entire span of Jesus’ ministry — his life, his teaching, and his sacrificial death.

The Firstborn of the Dead

The Lord is depicted by the apostle as “the firstborn of the dead.” Originally, the designation “firstborn” had a literal, chronological significance, i.e., it had to do with the “first” individual “born” into a family, whether human or animal (Exodus 11:5; 12:29). But because of certain privileges associated with the “firstborn” (cf. Genesis 37:21-30; 42:37; Deuteronomy 21:17), the term eventually took on a **spiritual** significance. For example, in the Old Testament, Joseph had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Manasseh was the older of the two hence, the “firstborn” in a literal sense (Genesis 48:14); and yet, Ephraim was designated as “firstborn” because he was to be accounted as “greater” than his brother (Genesis 48:19) See Jeremiah 31:9, where Ephraim is equivalent to the nation of Israel.

The word “firstborn” is used of Christ in several different senses. “Firstborn” is employed as a Messianic title in an OT prophecy: “I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth” (Psalm 89:27). In Colossians 1:15, Paul employs the expression “firstborn of all creation” to show Jesus’ superiority over the entire universe in his role as Creator (cf. vs. 16). [Note: When the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” attempt to use this passage to establish their theory that Christ was not an eternal Being; rather, that he was the “first” one created by Jehovah, they are terribly in error. For a detailed study of this see my booklet, *Jehovah’s Witnesses & The Doctrine of the Deity of Christ*.]

In another epistle, Paul depicts Jesus as “the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29), which emphasizes his relationship to the church (of which he is head — Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). In Hebrews 1:6, the inspired writer, by his application of “firstborn” to Christ, stresses the Lord’s superiority over the angelic world. “Not only is the Son greater than the angels, but He is worshipped by angels” (Bengel, p. 344).

In two places, though, the Lord is denominated as “firstborn” in terms of his resurrection from the dead. The first is in Colossians 1:18, and the second is the passage under consideration. The appellation does not imply, in contradiction to plain evidence elsewhere, that Christ was the first person ever to be raised from the dead. That clearly is not the case (cf. John 11:43). Rather, it suggests that of all the instances of resurrections that had occurred previously, Christ exercised a priority, in that he was the first to be raised in absolute immortality. As Paul writes, in his letter to the Romans, “Christ being raised from the dead dies no more; death no more has dominion over him” (6:9). Subsequently in Revelation 1, in his interview with John, the glorified Savior declared: “I am. . . the Living one; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore” (vv. 17-18).

In passing, we might mention that there is a similar word used by Paul regarding Jesus’ resurrection. Twice in First Corinthians, the apostle refers to the Lord as the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep, i.e., died (15:20,23). This suggests that Christ’s resurrection is a pledge of the “full harvest” to follow, i.e., the resurrection of the saints on the final day of earth’s history. Of course the wicked will be raised as well (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15), but that is not in view in the Corinthian context.

The Ruler of the Kings of the Earth

It is a staggering thought that Jesus Christ is to be honored as “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Surely the concept would be difficult to believe — if one were evaluating the situation from a strictly humanistic point of view. Yet it is absolutely true if one accepts at face value the testimony of the Scriptures. And we can entertain every confidence in their reliability, based upon volumes of evidence which establish their credibility. What a heart-lifting message this must have been to those first-century saints of Asia Minor who were being so brutalized for the name of Jesus Christ. Never mind; he **is** in control!











It is very difficult for arrogant men to accept the fact that God is the Sovereign of his universe, and that he is in charge of earth’s affairs. Things appear to have gone “amuck” because Jehovah has granted humankind (made in his very image) free will. That blessed privilege has been abused egregiously, and the Lord is permitting us to reap the consequences of our rebellion, as an element of our spiritual education. The trouble is, most folks refuse to matriculate through his school! Be that as it may, divine authority, as exercised through Christ, clearly will be manifest eventually (Philippians 2:10-11).

Following his resurrection, and preliminary to his ascension back to the Father’s right hand, Jesus declared: “All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). As Bloomfield observed, though Jesus received that authority, it was not to be exercised until he appeared at the right hand of God (p. 152). This is apparent from a reading of Ephesians 1:20-21 — Christ was raised, he sat down at the Father’s right hand, he then began a reign above “all rule, and authority,” which continues until the end of time (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:24-25). The reign of Christ does not await some “earthly millennium.” It is **now!**

Conclusion

When one considers these three phrases in concert — “faithful witness,” “firstborn from the dead,” and “ruler of the kings of the earth,” it dawns on him that this really reflects the entire scope of the gospel message. They speak of the earthly mission of the Messiah, his death and resurrection, current reign, and anticipated victory. Again, what a thrilling ray of hope this must have generated in the hearts of those early, suffering saints. Indeed, this “gospel in miniature” ignites a confidence in the soul of every child of God — of **any** century.

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John 1:18; 1 Peter 1:19; Romans 3:21-26; John 8:29; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 2:17, 3:2; John 14:2; John 8:26, 28, 38, 40; John 14:6; Matthew 19:4; Matthew 24:37; Luke 17:32; John 3:14-15; Luke 4:27; 1 Timothy 6:13; Exodus 11:5, 12:29; Genesis 37:21-30, 42:37; Deuteronomy 21:17; Genesis 48:14; Genesis 48:19; Jeremiah 31:9; Psalm 89:27; Colossians 1:15; Romans 8:29; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 1:6; John 11:43; Revelation 1; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Philippians 2:10-11; Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:20-21; 1 Corinthians 15:24-25

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