

Commentary on the Revelation

I. Prologue, 1:1-20

The point of the prologue is this: The Lord is the great judge who sits majestically upon His throne with the right to care and protect His people, as well as to judge His adversaries. The book is *about Jesus!!* The point reminds me of the words of an old hymn.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

A. The Introduction, vv. 1-3

1. The revelation, vv. 1-2

The essence and focal point on the book are captured in the initial five words, “The revelation of (or about) Jesus Christ.” It is about the Lord Jesus and our ultimate victory through Him who alone is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

2. The blessing, v. 3

B. The Salutation, vv. 4-8

While the book can be described as apocalyptic or prophetic in literary form, it is also a letter. These verses are a salutation; the book begins and ends, typical of letters, with a blessing (1:4, 22:21). *Remember, there are seven statements of blessing in the book.*

1. The author, v. 4a.

The Holy Scriptures leave us with little information concerning the apostle John in his later years. He appears to have remained in Judea at least until the Jerusalem Council (49 A.D.) being designated as a “Pillar of the Church (Gal. 2:9).” At some point, he left the city and resided in Ephesus laboring in the gospel in the western part of the province of Asia. He was exiled to Patmos, a Roman penal colony, and died in the late 90s.

It is important to know, for the sake of reading the book accurately, that John is cast in the role of a prophet and, because he frequently consults the OT prophetic literature, he stands in the tradition of those prophets though with some degrees of greater clarity since he wrote after the first coming of the Lord.

3. The recipients, v. 4b

The recipients of the letter are seven churches in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey (v. 11). “Seven” likely also has a symbolic meaning of fullness or completeness. *We know of other churches in the area, such as Colossae, so John likely had a unique relationship to the seven. Scholars have also pointed out that the churches surrounded Ephesus and, being connected on a postal route, could have been part of John’s itinerary.*



4. The greetings, v. 4c-8

The structure of the chapter, with its salutation and greeting, indicates that the book has the characteristics of a typical letter, though unusually lengthy.

a. From God, v. 4c

The traditional greeting is from the one who “is, was, and is to come,” a title indicating the covenantal faithfulness of the author, the designation for the “I AM” (YHWH) in Exod. 3:14; He is without the limitations of time (“... who is and who was and who is to come”). While used of the Father in vv. 4 and 8, it is used of Jesus in vv. 17, 18. The interchangeableness of titles is a clear assertion of their equality; Jesus is God.

b. From the Seven Spirits, v. 4d

The meaning of “seven spirits” is uncertain; perhaps the most feasible answer is that the reference is to angels who were the messengers to the seven churches mentioned at the end of the chapter (1:20). I take it so since they are described as “*before* the throne.”

Others have argued that the referent is the Holy Spirit. That would seem strange since the Holy Spirit is designated in texts after and subservient to Jesus by function.

c. From Jesus Christ, vv. 5-8

1) His identity stated, vv. 5a

Jesus is identified in three ways: “the faithful witness,” meaning one who is loyal and true; “firstborn from the dead,” meaning preeminence and centrality, and “ruler,” meaning supreme authority in the earth. These are important themes developed throughout the book. Further “firstborn” suggestions that something new has come upon the scene; though not to its fullest extent until eternity, the kingdom, the new creation, the church, has come through Christ’s triumph over death.

2) His mercies revealed, vv. 5b-6a

Again, John presents us with a threefold description of Jesus: “He loves us (the verbal tense indicates continuous action),” “He released us (the verbal tense looks to a past event, Calvary [“by His blood” looks to the cost of our redemption]),” and “He made us priests” (we have been released with a view to a purpose, divine service, the duty of representing Him).

Note: “A kingdom of priests” emphasizes the corporate identity of all believers; we are collectively one in the realm of God’s rule. *Our cultural expression of Christianity emphasizes individuality, a distortion of the priesthood of believers (“It’s about ME’ and the Lord,” goes a popular saying).*

- 3) His praise accorded, v. 6b
This seems to be the theme of the book; He alone is the object of praise and will be so forever.
- 4) His coming declared, v. 7
This verse may have been declared by an angel (v. 1).

“Coming in the clouds” is a metaphor for triumph, the universal recognition of His victory over mankind.” “Amen” is an affirmation of faith (it is so!).

While believers rejoice, unbelievers will embrace their doom for their rejection of the Savior. The quotation is from Zech. 12:10, 12, which is spoken to the Jews by the prophet, but John universalizes to all humanity. Says Mounce, “The thrust of the verse is that upon the imminent return of Christ unbelievers will mourn the judgment that follows from their rejection (73).”

- 5) His identity rehearsed, v. 8
The self-identification of Christ is stunningly magnificent. Only here and in 21:5-8 does God directly speak in the book.
 - “I AM” is the great covenant-keeping name for God; He is the faithful one.
 - “Alpha and Omega” indicates that Jesus is the beginning and the ending of all things, the timeless one. He is the all: the beginning, the end, and everything between.
 - “Lord God” is the combination of two great names for God, Jehovah (Gen. 2:4, the “I am” or Jehovah) and Elohim (Gen. 1, the creator).
 - “The Almighty,” the one alone who is supreme.

C. The Vision, vv. 9-20

The Christological vision of John here is directly connected to addresses to the seven churches that immediately follow. The description of the triumphant Christ and John’s experience of suffering provide the content of the book, a call to perseverance through suffering which will eventuate in victory through the triumph procured by Jesus at the cross in His first coming and in the future destruction of His enemies in His second.

1. The occasion of the vision, vv. 9-11

John identifies himself as a fellow-sufferer being imprisoned, likely for his Christian profession, in the Roman penal colony on the island of Patmos (a small island, being six by ten miles of size, in the Aegean Sea some thirty-seven miles from southwest of Miletus).

The trilogy “tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance” is crucial in understanding the book. His circumstance places him in the tribulation (see 2:9, 10), though it is one of the shadows and not the final one (though he may not have known that when he wrote); the “kingdom” tells us why he is suffering, for his testimony to Christ; and the exhortation of a fellow sufferer is the needed for endurance, the moral theme of the book.

John, in a trance-like state on “the Lord’s day” (v. 10, the specific day is uncertain since the adjectival usage of “Lord’s” is never used of Sunday), is instructed to record the vision he was about to receive (“in the spirit” is a phrase that is frequently descriptive of Jewish apocalyptic literature). The loud noise, in this instance the sounding of a trumpet, would indicate impending revelation as at Sinai (Exod. 19:6).

2. The description of the vision, vv. 12-16
The seven golden lampstands (v. 12) represent the seven churches of chapters 2-3. A lampstand is to hold a light- source so that it shines in the darkness. Christ’s complaint of the churches is that they had let their light flicker through religious and moral compromise.

Among the lampstands walks the “Son of Man (v. 13a),” a term found in Dan. 7:13 for the Messiah and used by Jesus of Himself. Here is a vision of Jesus (vv. 13b-16) in the role of a judge, one who would judge His church (2-3), His opponents (4-20), and reign in the church forever with His people (21-22).

His robe is that of the high priest.

His head and hair are white, the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9), deity.

His flaming eyes suggests penetrating knowledge.

His voice suggests heavenly authority.

His hand, holding seven stars, implies His care for the seven churches.

His mouth holding a sword indicates war, power, and judgment.

His feet, like bronze tried by fire, suggests His purity; His demand of those among whom He walks.

His face shining speaks of triumph.

3. The result of the vision, vv. 17-20
 - a. John comforted, vv. 17-18
The revelation of God to John caused a reaction not uncommon with other appearances of God. Christ comforts His servant in two ways: by a caring touch and by a personal disclosure of His character. Both are personal and comforting.
 - “Touched” by the right hand suggests personal care.
 - “Do not be afraid” reveals caring awareness.
 - “First and last” is the same as alpha and Omega; it is a reference to the timeless one, the great I AM (Jesus spoke these words in v. 8; John says that Jesus spoken them here (v. 17).

“Dead...alive” suggests His triumph.

“Keys” indicate spiritual authority over death. By virtue of our Lord’s death and resurrection, His victory, He has authority over death and hell.

b. John commanded, vv. 19-20

Verse 19 is often seen as indicating the structure of the vision as a whole. I have changed my mind several times as I have reflected on this verse as an outline of the book. It may be best to read the verse this way: “The things you have seen (1); things that are (2-3); and things that will be (4-21).” The first phrase is explained by the following two phrases (“are” and “shall be”). Since chapter 22 is an epilogue, it would make sense that chapter 1 is a prologue to the book.

What is clear in v. 20 is that “seven spirits,” “seven stars,” “seven golden lampstands,” and “seven angels” are symbols related to the seven churches. The “seven stars” are symbolic of the seven angelic messengers to the churches. The churches are to be lights, lampstands, that shine forth Christ (this seems to be the problem; their mission of shining was flickering). That Christ appears among the churches, in spite of harsh criticism at times (2-3), indicates that He has not abandoned them (criticism, warnings can be acts of love and compassion, as in this case).

Applications:

1. Our God does great things when it is least expected. Who would have thought that God would have chosen to complete the volume of His revelation to us in this manner? Who would have guessed that such a wonderful thing would come out of imprisonment in a Roman penal colony? Circumstances are no limitation to God; He sometimes does His greatest work when least expected. Is that not true in your experience? In what ways and instances has God acted in unexpected ways in your life? Can you trust Him for the unexpected?
2. Stunned by the appearance of Christ, John experienced a collapse. In John’s fear and shock, the Lord did two amazingly comforting things. First, He touched him, an expression of His compassion. Second, He told John that he was aware of his need by saying, “Do not be afraid.” How many times have you found Jesus to be more than compassionate toward you in your weakness? Name some instance when He has had just the right words to say to you.
3. That God would reveal His plans to us not only is a source of great comfort personally; it clearly demonstrates that He considers us His friends (one does not disclose secrets to enemies). God has not left us in the dark as to the future. He will judge His people for their derelictions, but reign with them as co-heirs forever. His warnings to us are evidences of His love for us. He will judge His enemies for the same reason that He will judge us; He is holy. However, God’s warnings and judgments toward us are expressions of His love and compassion; His warnings to unbelievers are judgment anticipated. Revealing His will to us tells us that He considers us His friends.
4. This book begins with a promise of blessing for those who hear it with a believing heart; it is unique in this regard though every word from God is intrinsically a source of great comfort. While it is a book filled with threats and judgments, the purpose of the book is

quite positive. Is the Bible a book of comfort to you? How could it not be since it describes for us the beauty of our Lord?

5. The standard by which right and wrong is determined is the very character of God. In our culture, human freedom and tolerance are virtues while holiness is spurned and divine justness in punishing error has been lost. While God is a God of grace and mercy, it is not at the expense of divine justice. Thus, our God is also a God of judgment, a God who bears the sword. Wrong will not go unpunished and right unrewarded. Jesus is the great judge of mankind as He is the great Savior. Do you rejoice that He became the judged one for you, being the savior, that you shall never face the just judgment of God?
6. The self-revelation of Jesus to the great apostle should be a great source of comfort to us. He describes Himself as the timeless one (He does not grow weary or forgetful); He is the great "I AM" (the covenant keeping, faithful one); He is the great creator who enters into relationship with His children, the almighty God. Can you imagine that one so exalted would desire to condescend to us that we could know Him? Meditation on the character and names of God is a great way, not only to worship God but to be comforted in God. We have come to know a God of great power. Can you praise Him enough?
7. There is no greater source of delight than to know that Jesus loves us (present tense, right now). This is clearly stated (1:5) in our passage (typically the love of Jesus is stated in the past tense because the writers connect His great love with His great act of love for us at Calvary). The evidence of His love toward us is action; action is the truest evidence of one's profession. He showed His love by releasing us from our sins. Is your love for Jesus reflected in your actions? Our text says that He made us priests. A priest is one who engages in the service of God. How are you engaged in divine service?