

No One Knows Who's in Charge and What's Happening?

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Revelation 1:1-20

Introduction

Before the book of *Revelation* was written, St. Paul wrote the following passages to the Corinthian church (NLT):

1 Corinthians 13:9-12 Now we know only a little, and even the gift of prophecy reveals little! 10 But when the end comes, these special gifts will all disappear. 11 It's like this: When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. 12 Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now.

2 Corinthians 3:15-18 Yes, even today when they read Moses' writings, their hearts are covered with that veil, and they do not understand. 16 But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, then the veil is taken away. 17 Now, the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, he gives freedom. 18 And all of us have had that veil removed so that we can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory even more.

The very first word in the Greek text of *Revelation* (hereafter referred to as *Rev*) is *apokalupsis* which literally means "an uncovering", and from that sense we arrive at the idea of "revelation". One form of the root word, without the prefix, meant a "head covering", such as a veil or garment of mourning. Paul uses this notion in 2 Corinthians, cited above, to explain that when the Lord through the Spirit comes into a person's life, he lifts the veil which hinders a true understanding of the Scriptures. Not only does this "unveiling" bring greater understanding, it also changes the person, causing them to become more like God, for it exposes the reader to the "glory of God". When *Rev* begins, the reader is implicitly promised a "lifting of the veil" that will reveal the glory of God. This uncovering is not given for mere information's sake, but so the person might undergo a life-transforming experience in the presence of God's very glory. This would certainly be the expectation of Christian readers living at the end of the first century, and it should be also for us.

Yet, modern readers of *Rev* find the book filled with confusing images, mysterious numbers, beings and events. Far from "uncovering", the inclination is to think that something is being "covered up" through the use of this strange, unfamiliar literary form. For those readers, the effort ends there. Others, undaunted by the symbolism, try to de-code the language in light of current events. Believing that the book of *Rev* was intended for an "end-time" audience, they seek airplanes, bombs, spaceships, mass communication, computers, and other technologies hidden in the words used by the book to talk about the future. This approach has been fueled over the past generation by a host of writers who insist on calling ours the "terminal generation". As our calendars approached the year 2000, this "fever" accelerated with claims that "the" millennium was at hand. The literature of the *Left Behind* novels and the life's work of Hal Lindsey (of *Late Great Planet Earth* fame) illustrate this approach to some extent. This is often referred to as the *Futurist Dispensational* approach.

Skeptics of the book, following the *Higher Critical* approach, have dismissed its message as hopelessly lost in the crises of the first century church which really believed that Jesus would return in its time, but failed to do so. Put simply, this view argues that the writer of *Rev* was wrong on most of the predictions he made. A similar attitude is expressed toward Jesus' own predictions, recorded in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21), that he would return "before this generation passed". Once more, they argue, he was mistaken. Books like the Gospel of John, they claim, were written to revise the perspective of the early church toward the

future, and grew out of what is sometimes called the problem of a "deferred arrival (or *Parousia*) of Christ". Such a deferred Parousia was a deep disappointment and could only be assuaged by a shifting emphasis on spreading the good news, planting churches, streamlining doctrine, and focusing on the importance of the sacraments and the life of the Spirit.

Still others have found in *Rev* accurate accounts of events that took place primarily in the first century. Far from failing to fulfill its own words, these events were well-known to the first readers of the book and from the *Rev* they took great encouragement that God had not forsaken his people but was acting in history to fulfill everything he had promised. By the end of the first century, argues the *Preterist* view, most of *Rev* had been fulfilled, as had the predictions of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Accordingly, Jesus had actually returned as judge, bringing unbelieving Israel to account, allowing the Romans to destroy the city of Jerusalem and vindicating the warnings he had given toward the end of his public ministry. His coming in judgment was accompanied by his remaining present in the life of the church, through the Spirit, and this "presence" (Parousia) is with us today, leading the people of God on to victory throughout the ebb and flow of history. His coming in the future brings to completion what he has already begun in the present time.

In a similar way, others see the book as presenting a kind of "template for history", painting a picture with daring images in bold colors of God's constant involvement in the life of his people and in the events which swirl around them. The book of *Rev* is, so to speak, a story-line, a grand epoch, or, as some scholars call it, a "meta-narrative" which gives meaning to history. What we experience in the life of our community, nation or world, is not without purpose or meaning. War, famine, disease, and other chronic evils are not horrible mistakes in a chaotic universe, but find a context in the great drama even now being played out in history. Such a story, argues this approach, has an *above* and a *below*, an *inside* and an *outside*. As is the case with most stories, the artisan of the plot and the characters is not only interested in telling us "what happened", she also wants us to know "what is really going on". To the first century Christians, and to us, much is happening in the world. The real question is, "but what's really going on here in our time?" This *Idealist* reading of *Rev* assumes that's what the "revelation" in *Rev* means. It's a pulling back of the veil so we can see something deeper at work in the midst of our human perplexities.

And so, the history of interpreting *Rev* is long and respectable. Each generation, to a certain extent, has grappled with its meaning. What is important for us to know is that *Rev* does have a "history of interpretation" that stretches back 2000 years. A careful researcher will discover the many attempts at a "final interpretation". I am reminded of Richard Kyle's excellent book, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, published in 1998. His chapter titles gives us insight into what he discovered: 1. The End Is upon Us, 2. Apocalypse Postponed: Early Christianity, 3. The Slumbering Apocalypse: Medieval Christianity, 4. The On-Again, Off-Again Apocalypse: The Reformation and Beyond, 5. America and the Great Millennial Hope, 6. Rapture Fever: The Early Years, 7. Rapture Fever: The Doom Boom Has Arrived, 8. Eager for the End: Messiahs and Prophets, 9. The End without God: The Secular Apocalypse, 10. 2000 and a Few Afterthoughts. What Kyle helps us do is put in perspective the various claims that "the end is near" by setting them in the context of their history. He makes clear that he is no skeptic, but a firm believer in the coming of Jesus. Yet, he warns us to avoid the pitfalls of premature predictive prophecy.

In more strident ways, Robert Fuller, in his *Naming the Antichrist, The History of an American Obsession*, published in 1995, explores the darker side of using *Rev* to advance a particular view of evil. Most especially he sheds light on the danger of "demonizing" persons, movements or events through the use of powerful apocalyptic language drawn from the book of *Rev*, and how Americans have in fact done this across their history. By giving us a history of the idea, he helps us avoid misconstruing the ideas found in *Rev* for self-serving reasons.

All of which simply suggests that as fresh and eager readers of the book of *Rev* we should have open minds and hearts to the message it delivers to us. If it truly is a book which "reveals", we need to let go of the tendency to

force meanings on the text or read out of the text meanings not there at all. It is, after all, God's Word to us. Perhaps the opening few verses contain the sort of spirit we need to have as we approach this new reading of the book:

1 This is a revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him concerning the events that will happen soon. An angel was sent to God's servant John so that John could share the revelation with God's other servants. 2 John faithfully reported the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ--everything he saw. 3 **God blesses the one who reads this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to it and obey what it says. For the time is near when these things will happen.** (1:1-3, NLT, emphasis mine)

What ought to intrigue us is that the blessing offered is for: 1) those who read aloud to others, 2) those who hear the reading, and 3) those who obey what is read. This is a book to be read aloud in the context of the gathered community. When the scrolls were delivered to the first readers, they had to be read aloud: the number of copies was limited in the absence of duplicating machines and printing presses! It was also true that the culture of the first century was largely a "reading out loud" culture. There was little "silent reading". The act of reading was considered a highly respected skill. But it was also a helpful tool to evoke fresh meaning through oral interpretation and inflection. Reading aloud drew the community into the text in living and new ways. And so, if we are to honor the intention of the original author of our text, we should also "read aloud" as part of our experience of the book, something we intend to do as a group.

Secondly, "hearing" is a complex affair. It assumes a person also understands. Although the book of *Rev* contains much that is enigmatic, the person reading the book hopes that the listener will make sense out of the message. If this is a "revelation", an *apokalupsis*, it must reveal something. For, thirdly, whatever it reveals, it must be followed and obeyed. From the outset, the book makes at least one thing clear: those who hear the words are expected to be personally changed as a result. This was St. Paul's expectation in 2 Corinthians 3 and certainly is the hope of the book of *Rev*.

What all of this seems to suggest is that the act of "revealing", promised by the first verse of the book, has as its goal true obedience. What seems to be absent is any concern that the curiosity of the readers will be satisfied. Blessed is the reader, blessed is the hearer and blessed is the follower. This three-fold blessing echoes the covenant relationship which the people of God have with their Lord. These words belong to the universe of covenant language. When Moses assembled the people one last time before his death, he read to them their covenant responsibilities (Deuteronomy 26-30) and called on them to hear and obey. To those who obey, he promised blessing and to those who failed to obey, he warned of judgment. And so, as the book of *Rev* opens, the new people of God receive the same instructions. Whatever else we make out of the book, first and foremost, it is a covenant book, calling God's people to read, hear and obey his word for their time. Across the centuries, the same summons applies. We also hear the words and are asked to discover the fresh new ways to make them effective in our own lives.

A Word About the Outline

The Outline Challenge

Let's look at the way the book is put together. One cause of debate is how to create an outline which fairly represents the sequence of ideas in *Rev*. What makes this difficult at the chapter and verse level is the tendency for the writer to present ideas and then repeat them several times. Images are introduced, then laid aside, only to reappear later in the text.

Some scholars speak about the "cyclical" method of organizing the material. Clearly, the writer does not follow a sequential straight line path in *Rev*. No sooner does he tell us things are finally completed, than he resumes telling the story from a new starting point. Consider the following climactic texts: 1) 6:12-17, where the sun, moon and stars are in crisis and earth's inhabitants call for nature to cover them, "For the great day of their (God and the Lamb) wrath has come, and who will be able to stand?"; followed by 2) 8:1-6, where the seventh seal is broken, only to announce the blowing of seven trumpets for a new set of events to happen; yet there is 3) 10:7-

11, where a mighty heavenly messenger declares, "God will wait no longer", and then adds, "But when the seventh angel blows his trumpet, God's mysterious plan will be fulfilled.." At this point, an unrolled scroll is handed to the writer and he is told "you must prophesy again..."; but now, 4) 11:15-19, where the seventh angel blows his trumpet announcing "You (Lord God Almighty) have assumed your great power and have begun to reign"; until we come to 5) 15:1, where yet another series of seven events (the bowls of wrath) are about to play out on the earth, climaxing in 16:17 with the words "It is finished!"; but then, 6) 19:11-21), where a rider appears in the heavens leading an army for yet one more great battle; only to be followed by 7) 20:1-15, where "a thousand years" of righteous rule is followed by yet another rebellion which is put down by God and his Christ; then finally (we hope), 8) 21:1-22:6, where a new heaven and earth appears, along with the descent to earth of a "New Jerusalem" where God is the temple and the Lamb is its light.

This "cyclical pattern" of composition, which also looks much like a woven cloth, keeps the reader paying close attention to the flow of the action. It also follows the practice of many excellent writers who employ the flashback and flash-forward techniques to tell their story. This is, after all, a grand story which narrates the activity of God in history, all the time circling around many crucial themes, tracing and re-tracing them so the reader does not miss their importance. No less daunting, is the constant shifting landscape: First on the island of Patmos, then caught up into heaven, soon back on earth witnessing horrifying events. On mountains, at the seaside, in the wilderness, and down into the Abyss, the writer's vision scourers the earth, burrows into the depths and soars up to the heavens, unfolding a dramatic plot, filled with people, strange beasts, supernatural phenomena, and provocative messages. Angels, demons, human beings, God and the Lamb all encounter one another in this drama. Whatever else we say about *Rev*, it is a book of "Cosmic Proportions". The whole world is swept up into the action. A reader, first exposed to this book, may well feel that he is suddenly part of something much larger than himself. Indeed, by the time he reaches the end of the story, he is, in fact, invited by God and His people to "Come" and share in the blessings offered by the book (22:17).

The Three Scrolls¹

The writer, who calls himself simply, "John", writes his visions down and communicates them to yet another cast of characters, the "Seven Churches of Asia Minor". His initial words, vision and the seven letters taken together make up the *Letter Scroll* of 1:1-3:22. Summoned into heaven, he witnesses yet another vision recorded in 4:1-11:18, his *Worship Scroll*, which begins with praise (chapters 4 and 5) and ends with praise (11:17-18). With the opening of "The Temple of God", the *War Scroll* (11:19-22:21) begins, and carries the reader to the climatic vision of a triumphant Lord who makes all things new. These scrolls comprise the fundamental message of the book, starting with instruction for the churches, sweeping upward to the glorious worship of God in heaven, and then back down to the fulfillment of God's purposes for the whole world.

Revelation's Sources

As we look more closely at the details of each scroll, we will discover the tapestry woven there, pulling threads from other portions of the Scripture, events from John's own time, and, above all, shedding light from God's perspective because of the work of the Lamb, slain, risen, present and coming in power to reign. This three-fold division imitates the canon of the Hebrew Bible, with its divisions into *Torah* (Law), *Nebiim* (Prophets) and *Kethubim* (Writings), the three scrolls known to Jewish worshippers of the first century. And *Rev* also ends with a similar "canonical warning", not to add to or take away from the book (22:18-19), drawn from Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32. *Rev* is the word of God, every bit as truthful, reliable and authoritative as any other part of the Bible. The fact that the book is assembled as three scrolls only underscores this fact.

The readers of the book are members of a new synagogue, recipients of a new covenant, and looking forward to the arrival of a new world. Through John's faithful written witness, they are invited to share in the blessings of a new vision of God, of Jesus, of heaven and of earth's history. Theirs is a transformed vision, shaped by the powerful images painted on John's canvas. The written form of this revelation invites many readings, over and

¹ See David L. Barr, *Tales of the End*, Polebridge Press, 1998.

over again, pulling the scrolls from their "ark", unrolling them, and absorbing their words from beginning to end. No two readings will ever be alike. No sooner does the reader grasp the meaning of one symbol, than another image flashes before her face bringing with it a fresh insight.

Familiar themes help the reader with this task, themes drawn from the Old Testament. John's story makes nearly one thousand references to the Hebrew Bible, influenced by books like *Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, and *Zechariah*. Roughly more than half the references come from the *Psalms*, *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Daniel*. Most agree, *Daniel* wields the greatest influence, though there are actually more allusions to *Isaiah*. In these frequent Old Testament references, God appears as King and Judge, and these "Theophanies" ("God appearances") often launch the prophetic career of the person who sees them. These Old Testament texts include Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, and Daniel 7:9-13. When *Rev* makes reference to these texts, it doesn't just quote them. There are no explicit "quotation formulas" (such as, "it is written") found anywhere in the book. Instead, the writing is saturated by such a familiarity with the Hebrew text, that it flows freely through fresh images and allusions, none of which needs quotation marks. Nowhere else in the world of apocalyptic literature do we find such a comfort level with the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, as they find their way into the pages of *Rev*. In the progress of our study, we will become quite familiar with these Old Testament allusions and come to appreciate the place they occupy in John's telling of the "greatest story ever told".

What is Apocalyptic Literature?

The language of *Rev* is not plain prose nor narrative history, although it includes both kinds of literature. When talking about the future — God's future — ordinary language is simply not rich enough to "tell the story." That is why the ancient writers, both Jewish and pagan, resorted to the use of mysterious symbols to communicate the truth of their message. Charles Talbert offers this concise definition of "apocalypse":

Apocalypse is a genre in which a revelation is given by God, to a human seer, through an otherworldly mediator, disclosing future events and/or transcendent reality, which is intended to affect the understanding and behavior of the audience.²

Several examples of such writings, besides *Rev*, existed among the church fathers, including: *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Book of Elchasai*, and Hippolytus' *On Christ and Antichrist*. Within the wider world of Jewish literature, we find: 1 Enoch 1-36; Daniel 7-12; 1 Enoch 85-90; Animal Apocalypse; Jubilees 23; 1 Enoch 93:1-10; 91:11-17; Apocalypse of Weeks; Testament of Levi 2-5; 1 Enoch 37-71; Testament of Moses; 2 Enoch; 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch; Apocalypse of Zephaniah; Apocalypse of Abraham; Testament of Abraham.

Among the Christian writings we have: Mark 13 (and parallels in *Matthew* and *Luke*); 2 Thessalonians 2; Shepherd of Hermas visions 1-4; Didache 16; Ascension of Isaiah 6-11; Apocalypse of Peter; 5 Ezra 2:42-48; Book of Elchasai; 6 Ezra 15-16. Also, the quasi-pagan texts known as the *Sibylline Oracles* contain Christian interpolations (7; 8:194-216, 217-500).

No thorough study of *Rev* can omit familiarity with these extra-biblical apocalyptic works.

Social upheaval often prompted the appearance of such literary works, especially among people who felt marginalized by the larger culture. In addition, these writings urged their audiences to modify behavior and acquire wisdom:

For the age is divided into twelve parts, and nine of its parts have already passed...Now therefore, set your house in order, and reprove your people, comfort the lowly among them, and instruct those that are wise (2 Esdras 14:11, 13).

Go then and tell the Lord's elect...that this beast is a type of the great persecution which is to come. If then you are prepared beforehand and repent with all your hearts...you will be able to escape it, if your mind be made pure and blameless, and you serve the Lord blamelessly for the rest of the days of your life (Shepherd of Hermas 4.2.5).

² *The Apocalypse*, p. 4.

Throughout apocalyptic literature from the biblical period we find symbolism, numerology, carefully crafted structure, and cyclical repetition. In his *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, John J. Collins writes:³

The language of the apocalypses is not descriptive, referential newspaper language, but the *expressive* language of poetry, which uses symbols and imagery to articulate a sense or feeling about the world. Their abiding value does not lie in the pseudoinformation they provide about cosmology or future history, but in their affirmation of a transcendent world.

The symbols of *Rev* are, in some cases, either explained by the writer or to the writer. In other cases, the whole background of biblical literature is the reservoir for drawing out an interpretation. Similarly, numbers are treated in symbolic ways. For example, the famous "666" is explicitly called "the number of a man," and can mean either a specific man (e.g. Emperor Nero) or humanity in its imperfection. The number "7" generally means completeness or fullness, as in a seven-day week. Occasionally numbers are multiplied by other numbers in order to reveal *expansion* or *dimension*. Ironically, some numbers are literal, as in the kings described in chapter 17 which are more than likely Roman emperors taken in succession.

From numbers, the writer of *Rev* derives his outline or surface structure. His preference for *seven* organizes the book into a series of cycles or sequences, as seen in these passages: 4:1-8:1; 8:2-11:18; 11:19-13:18; 14:1-20; 15:1-16:21; 17:1-19:5; 19:6-22:5. Emerging from this arrangement are *visions* involving seven each of seals, trumpets, bowls, and angels. This structure uses the principle of recapitulation in which *Rev* goes over the same material but with carefully crafted variations. The *sevens* do not move forward in a straight chronological line but instead circles around themes which the writer wants to emphasize. Here is not *logic* but *narrative*.

As a consequence of the Hebrew's thinking in totalities, it is easy to see that in presenting his subject-matter, the Hebrew does not develop it so much in logical order, step by step from general to particular, but rather from the outset he has the complete topic concretely in mind, and not being able to present it all at once, he keeps coming back to it, letting it be seen from various aspects, no emphasizing this angle, now that, until in the end the full picture, which we saw totally, but not clearly from the very start, has been imbibed with full grasp and satisfaction.⁴

Redating Revelation

The question of *when* the book of *Revelation* was written has resurfaced in recent years. Two dates are commonly proposed:

An "early date", around 64-68 A.D., during the reign of the Roman emperor, Nero.

A "late date", around 95-96 A.D., during the reign of emperor Domitian.

The "external evidence" (evidence outside the book itself) is inconclusive. In support for the late date, appeal is often made to a statement of Iraneus who lived in the late 2nd century C.E. His statement is rather ambiguous, however, and can be understood in several ways.⁵ In support of the early date, the Syriac version of the New Testament (dating back to the 2nd century A.D.) says the book was written during the reign of Nero. The *Muratorian Fragment* (170-190 A.D.) and the *Monarchian Prologues* (250-350 A.D.) claim that Paul wrote to

³ Op. Cit., New York: Crossroad, 1984, p. 214.

⁴ J. Schildenberger, cited by: Bernard J. LeFrois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Apocalypse 12*, Rome: Orbis Catholicus, 1954), p. 190; Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture I-II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 115, 123.

⁵ In 1976, J.A. T. Robinson startled the scholarly world by the publication of his *Redating the New Testament*. In it, he mounted an argument that no good reason prevented the completion of the whole New Testament *before 70 C.E.* Some New Testament scholars now adopt a similar view, suggesting that the older theories of composition and dating were based on assumptions which are without foundation in historical fact. Placing *Revelation* in this period before the fall of Jerusalem, affects massively our understanding of what John tells us and to what he was referring. The events surrounding the Jewish revolt (66-73 C.E.) play substantially into the visions the writer records. Also, see Carsten Peter Thiede and Matthew D'Anconda, *Eyewitness to Jesus*, 1996. Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, 1989.

seven churches following the pattern of John's example in Revelation, placing the book of Revelation even before some of the Pauline epistles (cf. *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12; p. 406).

The "internal evidence" (evidence from within the book itself) supports a date prior to 70 C.E., before the destruction of Jerusalem and during the reign of the Roman Emperor Vespasian. This evidence includes the following:

1. In 11:1-14 the temple, which was demolished in August of 70 C.E., was still standing.
2. In 17:9-11, we find mention of *eight* "kings". If these "kings" are emperors of Rome, then starting with Augustus the first *five* were: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero (who died June 9, 68 C.E.). Nero's death left the empire in an uproar. This may be the "deadly wound" in 13:3,12,14. Three men (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) tried vainly to consolidate power over the empire, but it was Vespasian who restored order in 70 A.D. Thus, the "deadly wound" was healed, and Vespasian would be the *sixth* "king" (or the "one is" in 17:10). This would make Titus the *seventh* emperor and Domitian the eighth.
3. In 17:8,11 John was told that the beast "is not". It "was", and "is about to come", but at the time the Revelation was given, the beast "is not"! If we understand that the "beast" represents imperial Rome as personified in its emperors Nero and Domitian, then *Revelation* could *not* have been written *during* the reigns of either Nero or Domitian, but *before*.
4. The condition of persecution that had been experienced already by those in the book are similar to that mentioned by Peter. He wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor also, just a few years before (cf. 1Pe 1:1). They were undergoing persecution similar to that described in Revelation 2-3 (cf. 1Peter 1:6; 4:12; 5:9); i.e., persecution by the Jews with the help of Roman authorities, something that had been going on since the days of Paul's first missionary journey.

The internal evidence indicates that the *Revelation* was given during the reign of Vespasian, the *sixth* emperor, while the "beast is not". This would place the date of the book around the spring of 70 A.D. (as suggested by Philip Schaff, in his *History Of The Church*, Vol. I). A date between the death of Nero in 68 A.D. and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was also favored by F. J. A. Hort, J. B. Lightfoot, and B. F. Westcott.⁶

Philip Schaff, who at one time held the "late date", restated his position for an "early date" as follows:

The early date is best suited for the nature and object of the Apocalypse, and facilitates its historical understanding. Christ pointed in his eschatological discourses to the destruction of Jerusalem and the preceding tribulation as the great crisis in the history of the theocracy and the type of the judgment of the world. And there never was a more alarming state of society.

The horrors of the French Revolution were confined to one country, but the tribulation of the six years preceding the destruction of Jerusalem extended over the whole Roman empire and embraced wars and rebellions, frequent and unusual conflagrations, earthquakes and famines and plagues, and all sorts of public calamities and miseries untold. It seemed, indeed, that the world, shaken to its very center, was coming to a close, and every Christian must have felt that the prophecies of Christ were being fulfilled before his eyes.

It was at this unique juncture in the history of mankind that St. John, with the consuming fire in Rome and the infernal spectacle of the Neronian persecution behind him, the terrors of the Jewish war and the Roman interregnum around him, and the catastrophe of Jerusalem and the Jewish theocracy before him, received those wonderful visions of the

⁶ As noted in Robinson, *Redating*, p. 224.

impending conflicts and final triumphs of the Christian church. His was truly a book of the times and for the times, and administered to the persecuted brethren the one but all-sufficient consolation: Maranatha! Maranatha!⁷

Prior to redating the New Testament, the usual proposals placed the writing of the *Revelation* during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96 C.E.). References to John's exile to Patmos, found in the church fathers, state that Domitian was the Emperor at that time. The weight of this external evidence generally outweighs considerations of internal evidence. However, as it turns out, Domitian was actually Emperor *twice*: his first rule took the form of a regency after the bloody civil war in Rome when four emperors ruled Rome in a single year (68-69 C.E.), following the death of Nero. Vespasian was declared Emperor in 69 C.E., but it took him six months to beat back obstacles to his assuming the role. During that time, Domitian, the younger son of Vespasian, acted as Emperor under the tutelage of Mucianus, procurator of Syria. It is possible (though not proven) that Domitian sent John into exile during that period.

According to the traditions, John rose to a position of influence within world-wide Christianity and shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E., he moved to Ephesus. He became the pastor of the church in Ephesus and had a special relationship to other churches in the area, as we know from the letters to the Seven Churches in Asia, in the book of Revelation. John's brother, James, was the first of the apostles to die, while John, on the other hand, was the last to die peacefully in Ephesus, at an advanced age, around the year 100 C.E.. There is a church tradition, which says, that while John was living in Ephesus, John had with him Mary, the mother of Jesus, for a few years. While in Ephesus, by order of the Roman emperor Domitian, John was exiled to an island called Patmos.⁸ In what is known as the Cave of the Apocalypse (located on this island), *Revelation* was given to the apostle John by Jesus. When he was released from exile,⁹ he returned to Ephesus and lived till the time of the Roman emperor Trajan. It is said that John, "Founded and built churches throughout all Asia, and worn out by old age, died in the sixty-eight year after our Lord's passion and was buried near the same city (Ephesus)." When John was evidently an old man in Ephesus, he had to be carried to the church in the arms of his disciples. At these meetings, he was accustomed to say no more than, "Little children, love one another!" After a time, the disciples wearied at always hearing the same words, asked, "Master, why do you always say this?" "It is the Lord's command," was his reply. "And if this alone be done, it is enough!" There is, also, a tradition which says that John was in Rome for a time.

Purpose and Audience

Faced with the coming fall of Jerusalem (70 C.E.), persecution, and political chaos, the early Christ followers needed to hear the words of a Christian prophet for their times. "John" was the man for the job. Himself swept up in the Roman sting directed at potential trouble-makers, John knew something about exile. As a prophet, he got a special commissioning from Jesus himself (chapter 1, as we shall see below), and directed his primary messages to the churches of Asia Minor (chapters 2-3). Shaped by his vision of the heavenly kingdom (chapters 4-5), he was prepared to address a powerful prophecy to his contemporaries and speak about tribulation, salvation, and judgment — common prophetic themes of the Old Testament.

When the early Christians refused to participate in the cult worshipping the Emperor as Lord and Savior (*kurios* and *sōtēr*), they drew fire from the Roman government. Since many Christians also had Jewish backgrounds, the events of 66-73 C.E. affected them directly. After all, an enemy of Rome is an enemy of Rome, whether Christian or Jew! Were the Christians ready for the challenges ahead of them? Based on a careful reading of Revelation 2-3, the answer is "No!" The book, including its pre-pended letters to the seven churches, is aimed at warning and encouraging the church. It also announces judgment on both Jerusalem (unfaithful Israel) and Rome (Antichrist).

⁷ *History of The Christian Church*, Vol. I, pp. 836-837.

⁸ Tertullian (160-220 C.E.), *On the Prescription Against Heresies*, 36:3; Hippolytus (170-230 C.E.), *On Christ and Antichrist*, 36.

⁹ Clement of Alexandria (150-215 C.E.), *Who is the Rich Man Who Shall be Saved?* 42:1-15.

Although it might not seem that way, God is in control of human events. Suffering Christians will find salvation at last. Judgment will fall on the evil-doers. And, in the end (the *eschaton*), God's eternal "kingdom will come and His will be done on earth as in heaven." The promise of Revelation 21-22 about "new heavens and new earth" echo the same hopeful themes found in the Old Testament book of Isaiah (65:17; 66:22).

What lies between the beginning (1-5) and the end (21-22) is the immense period sometimes referred to as the *millennium* (6-20). About it, John's visions offer highly symbolic and encoded information. Readers who knew their Old Testament and were familiar with the other apocalypses (referenced above), would hear "in their own language the wonderful works of God." For us, the task is harder. But armed with sufficient background, we hope to make some headway along this wonderfully mysterious journey.

A Word About Resources

At the end of this week's notes, I have include a selective bibliography of reference materials devoted to the book of *Revelation*. Throughout the next several weeks those materials will find their way into our comments and in support of certain interpretations of the text. You are encouraged to refer back to that listing of books as they appear in the footnotes.

The Letter Scroll: The Prologue

The Title (1:1-3)

1 This is a revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him concerning the events that will happen soon. An angel was sent to God's servant John so that John could share the revelation with God's other servants. 2 John faithfully reported the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ-- everything he saw. 3 God blesses the one who reads this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to it and obey what it says. *For the time is near when these things will happen.*

The Greeting (1:4-8)

4 This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit before his throne; 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness to these things, the first to rise from the dead, and the commander of all the rulers of the world. All praise to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. 6 He has made us his Kingdom and his priests who serve before God his Father. *Give to him everlasting glory! He rules forever and ever! Amen!*

7 Look! He comes with the clouds of heaven.

And everyone will see him--
even those who pierced him.

And all the nations of the earth will weep because of him.

Yes! Amen!

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega-- the beginning and the end," says the Lord God. "I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come, *the Almighty One.*"

The First Vision (1:9-20)

Hearing

9 I am John, your brother. In Jesus we are partners in suffering and in the Kingdom and in patient endurance. I was exiled to the island of Patmos *for preaching the word of God and speaking about Jesus.* 10 It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard a loud voice behind me, a voice that sounded like a trumpet blast. 11 It said, "Write down what you see, and send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

Seeing

12 When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. 13 And standing in the middle of the lampstands was the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. 14 His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were bright like flames of fire. 15 His feet were as bright as bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. 16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. *And his face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance.*

Understanding

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. 18 *I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.* 19 Write down what you have seen-- both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later. 20 This

is the meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The Title and Source of Revelation (1:1-3)

We have already noted that the Greek word for "revelation" means "to lift the veil" and allow previously hidden things to be seen. The opening two verses of the book are a title and do not form a complete sentence. The expression "revelation from Jesus Christ" could also be translated as "revelation of Jesus Christ". Some scholars suggest that both meanings may be implied. Jesus is the source of the revelation and he is also its primary subject matter. It's "from him", and so we can fully trust it. It's "about him", and so we must prepare ourselves to see him in a new and fresh way. Whatever else we think we see in *Rev*, we must first and foremost look for Jesus there. The title also reminds us that God is the ultimate source of revelation, which tells us that God wants us to know him and his son. How will God, whose thoughts are higher than ours, make known such important things about Jesus? The original language behind the words, "share the revelation", actually means to make something known through the use of symbols: symbols that John and "God's other servants" would understand. Symbols make God's truth sharable. And that is the purpose of any act of revelation.

But God's method of making this revelation known also involves "his angel". The most basic meaning of the word angel is "messenger". Sometimes it's hard to tell if the Greek word *aggelos* means "angel" or "messenger". The context usual helps us decide. By mentioning *aggelos* in the context of God revealing something, John makes clear he means a special heavenly messenger or angel. He also leads the reader back to the writings of the Old Testament where angels often appeared in this special role, particularly when a prophet was being commissioned for a special work. Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Zechariah all had encounters with these heavenly emissaries. When John includes the angel in the revelation "chain of command", he ties his work with the prophets of the Bible and also alerts his readers to the importance of remember the words of those prophets when trying to make sense out of the book he writing. The involvement of an angel also shows the urgency of the message. In the Old Testament, when God wanted to communicate news about impending events, he used an angel to do it. And, remember how an angel appeared to Mary and Joseph in connection with Jesus' conception. When Jesus rose from the dead, angels communicated the wonderful message, "He is not here. He is risen!"

John identifies himself in the title with simple words: "his servant John". There's been much debate about who this John really is. Most of the church fathers in the first 300 years of Christian history accepted John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, disciple of Jesus, as the person identified here. Others have suggested a different figure who played a prominent role in Asia Minor, known as "John the Elder". According to tradition John the apostle also wrote the Gospel of John and three letters, and so students of *Rev* have carefully compared the language, themes and vocabulary of those other books with similar forms in *Rev*. Opinions vary about how closely all the books compare. Yet, there are many similarities. How important are the differences? Does the question of authorship need to be settled in order to study the book? History has shown it does not. My own view gives considerable weight to the judgment of those who lived closest to the time of writing. I also think that the common themes between the other books of John the apostle shed much light on the thinking of *Rev*.

How does John treat this revelation? In 1:2, John is called a "faithful reporter" (Greek: *martyr*, "witness", from which we get our English word "martyr"), a person who bears reliable testimony even to the point of suffering and possible death. For John to receive such a remarkable message from God placed him in an extraordinary situation. He was responsible for it. He was committed to faithfully reporting what "he saw". It was his stewardship to bear witness and accurately preserve this record of what God showed to him about Jesus. After all, John is not getting this revelation only for himself, but for the benefit of God's other servants. This sets *Rev* apart from many other so-called *apocalypses* which claimed to contain private communications from angels or from God, even using the names of ancient biblical figures such as Enoch or Moses. John does not do that. Revelation, is after all, suppose to be open communication from God to his servants, and John shows us he is

faithful, even to the point of suffering, in making that revelation known to others who urgently needed its message.

Earlier in our study, we stressed the special blessing that comes from 1) public reading, 2) hearing, and 3) obeying of the *Rev* message. Since *Rev* is the word of God, we stand in relation to it in the same way we stand in relation to the whole of the Bible. There is no indication in 1:3 that the book is a "closed book". In fact, a helpful passage about this is found in 22:10:

Then he instructed me, "Do not seal up the prophetic words you have written, for the time is near.

The same language appears in 1:3: "for the time is near when these things will happen."

Why would John be told by the angel "do not seal up" the book? Once again, reading the Old Testament can be helpful here. Our best insight into this comes from Daniel. Daniel, like John, was a prophet who lived some 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Because Israel's enemy, Babylon, had attacked and conquered her land, God's people were sent into exile. Among the prominent Hebrews who were taken to the royal palace in Babylon, were Daniel and three of his friends. In Babylon, they kept Torah faithfully and were a witness for God among their pagan captors. Though suffering in exile, they were faithful witnesses to the word of God, just as John is described in *Rev*. Daniel also received visions from God. He interpreted the dreams of others. The written record of his revelations is contained in the Old Testament book which bears his name. What sorts of things did he see? Chapters 2, and 7-12 are probably among the most important sections for our study. In them, God shows Daniel how history will unfold and how God's people will be affected by it. Specifically, Daniel is told that Babylon is but the first of several world powers that will affect the life of God's people. In turn, he uses visions and symbols, much like the ones we see in *Rev*, to communicate the prophecy to Daniel. Before his visions end, Daniel is told that off in the future, Messiah would come and die for the sins of his people, but that one day he would come in judgment and make things right with God and his world. God uses several series of numbers to serve as measuring sticks for when all these things will happen. At the end of the book, it becomes clear to the reader that "the end has not yet come" in Daniel's day, and, in fact, the fulfillment of the book awaits the distant future. Daniel 12:4 summarizes best the situation in Daniel's time: "But you, Daniel, keep this prophecy a secret; seal up the book until the time of the end." This instruction prompts Daniel to ask "how long?" God's response is quite clear: a long time, at the end of days. Daniel would die and only see the fulfillment when he "rises again" (12:13).

Daniel's revelation was sealed until "the time of the end". The reason was clear: the fulfillment of the revelation would only come much later. But notice the contrast with *Rev*: John is told "not" to seal the book because fulfillment is close at hand. This is the burden of 1:3--"Read, hear, and obey, because *ò gar kairos eggus*: "for the time is near". "For" gives the reason--the time of fulfillment is near and just as John has been faithful in receiving the revelation from Jesus Christ, so the servants of God must be faithful in obeying its message to them.

The followers of Jesus, the Messiah, of whom John was one, had come to believe that with the coming of Jesus, his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the promised kingdom of God foretold in Daniel had in fact been inaugurated. Jesus was already reigning from heaven at the right hand of the Father. One very specific prophecy in Daniel 9, pointing to the death of the Messiah, had been clearly fulfilled and this meant a series of events was being set into motion that would lead to further fulfillments of Daniel's prophecy. Jesus himself, as recorded in the gospels, predicted that the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed by the armies of the pagans. In his prophecy, Jesus specifically cited Daniel (see Matthew 24:15). He also affirmed that "this generation will not pass away until all has been fulfilled" (Matthew 24:34). This language parallels beautifully John's own words "the time is near". This, I believe, explains the importance of God's giving this revelation to John precisely when he did. Unlike Daniel, John was not centuries away from fulfillment, but standing on the very edge of fulfillment. He was asked "not to seal", "because the time is near". How would a reader of this book have heard these words? It's hard to imagine they could have heard them in but one way: "We need this revelation because it will help us understand what's about to happen and it will give us instructions about what

we are to do." If they knew the words of Jesus, recorded in the Gospels, they would remember that after he warned of the coming destruction of Jerusalem, he commanded them: "Those who are in Judea, flee into the hills. A person outside, must not go inside to pack. A person in the field must not return even to get a coat..." (Matthew 24:16-18). Similarly, the readers of John's revelation now await their instructions which they are to obey as he asked them to do. "For the time is near."



The Greeting and Its Source (1:4-8)

This portion of *Rev* is plainly written in the form of a letter one would find during John's time. Letters were common forms of communication and, thanks to Roman roads, the postal system efficiently brought information to the scattered cities of the Roman Empire. *Rev* adopts this literary format and John greets God's people on behalf of the entire Trinity as we shall now see.

For the first time we are told who the first recipients of this book are, the servants of God who will receive the revelation from Jesus Christ, delivered through John's written record. They are real Christian communities located in what is modern day western Turkey, an area referred to as "Asia" in John's time. We would call it "Asia Minor", "Asia the little one". The Greek word for these communities is *ekklēsia*, which we commonly translate as "church" in our English Bibles. The word simply means a "gathered community", literally, "called out ones". A Jewish synagogue might also be called by this word. An assembly met for conducting business in a city also might be referred to in this way. John is writing to seven Jesus communities in Asia Minor. If you look at the map, you will see how they form an arc, starting with Ephesus as the most prominent of the seven. Shortly, we will be told that John himself is in exile on the island of Patmos, a few miles off the coast of Asia Minor. He is exiled from these seven churches over whom, we believe, he had pastoral responsibility. Now he is being given a God ordained way to communicate with them, writing and sending to them an urgent message, intended to help them through the events they were about to pass.

These are the "seven churches", and in this passage we encounter the first significant number in the *Rev*. It will figure prominently throughout the book and so we need to make some comments about it. Like much of *Rev* the number seven has roots in the Old Testament where it meant "fullness", and, when applied to time, meant the interval necessary for accomplishing something thoroughly and completely. The "week" of Genesis 1 and 2 was a period for effectively fulfilling the work of creating the world. In Daniel, seven indicates periods of time when something is fulfilled. Occasionally the number is multiplied by itself and another number to show "extended fulfillment" or "later fulfillment". This special use of numbers may seem odd to people living in the 21st century, but it belongs to the "poetry" of the Bible and to its love of symbols and suggestive images. Even moderns and post-moderns still talk about somebody being a "ten", when they mean someone extraordinary!

Later in chapter one, John will list the names of the seven churches so that we will have no doubt about the historical and geographical existence of actual communities in Asia Minor who followed. But John certainly could have been instructed to send this collection of writings to more churches than just the ones listed in 1:11. Which leads us to consider an additional meaning for the number seven. By mentioning "seven", the book is also referring to "all churches", "the complete set of churches" wherever they are in the world. Chapters 2-3 will contain the actual letters written to these churches, but these letters will also invite "other churches" to

listen to the message and take it to heart: "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7; 2:11;2:17, and elsewhere). Because he calls them the seven churches means they also represent all the churches--communities of Jesus willing to "hear what the Spirit is saying to them". This is an important point: *Rev* is written for the churches: to read, to hear and to obey.

The originators of *Rev* are, as the opening verses indicated, the persons of the Trinity. They are described here in the following ways:

"The One Who Is, The One Who Was, and The One Who Is Coming"

God the Father: based upon his Hebrew name first introduced in the Old Testament as "Yahweh", a word derived from the Hebrew verb "to be". Some scholars believe its translation should be, "The one who is, is the one who was and the one who will be". If that is true, this text is the perfect expansion of God's relationship to all of time. He is the "everlasting Father", who met Moses at the burning bush and proclaimed his Name as the "I AM" (Exodus 3:14; also, see Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12; Deuteronomy 32:39). This three-fold name also indicates how we are to understand *Rev*: it is a book which applies to the past, present and future. As the "revelation", it expresses God's lordship over time. It would not be trite to say, it is ever and always a "timely book" because it comes from the timeless one.

"Seven-fold Spirit Before His Throne"

God the Spirit: Translators have wisely handled this expression from the Greek by stressing the unity of the Spirit. The Jewish mind would often use plurals to emphasize the "majesty" of God. The more important things we can say about God, the more we honor his glory. In this case, John no doubt has in mind Isaiah 11:2 where the Messiah speaks prophetically about the coming of the Spirit on his life. He speaks about the "Spirit of..." and then adds seven different qualities of the Spirit (for example, "of the Lord", "of wisdom", "of might", etc.). Picking up similar language, Zechariah 4:2-7 describes the Spirit as "seven eyes" that see everything that is happening throughout the world, thereby underscoring God's universal awareness of his people's condition and what he needs to do to help them. *Rev* portrays the Spirit as present everywhere, God's personal presence in the world. The feast of Pentecost, which followed Jesus crucifixion and resurrection, involved the beginning of a new relationship between the Holy Spirit and the people of God. John's greeting reaffirms that role.

"And from Jesus Christ..."

Two groups of ministries are ascribed to Jesus: 1) Those which apply to his universal work; 2) those that apply to his followers. By dividing his roles in this way, John also prepares the reader for the activities found throughout the book of *Rev*. The book speaks to the world and the also to the people of God.

Rev acknowledges three distinct ministries of Jesus which have *cosmic significance*:

1. Faithful Witness: The word for witness is also the word for "martyr". Jesus committed himself to completing the work God gave him to do: dying on the cross for the sins of *the world*. This role will appear throughout the book under several symbols, including that of the "Lamb of God", the perfect sacrifice.
2. Firstborn from the Dead: His resurrection was the defining moment in his life. And it becomes the ultimate source of hope for *the world*, troubled as it is by death. Such hope stands at the center of the *Rev*.
3. Ruler of the Kings of the Earth: Notice that John does not place this ministry in the future, but in the present. Already, Jesus reigns from heaven over his kingdom. This statement is also politically charged. By claiming that Jesus holds this royal position, the *Rev* is also saying Caesar does not; the Herods do not. This is a subversive claim which calls into question the reigning human powers in *the world*.

The next verses describe additional ministries that apply specifically to *the people of God* (notice these are "ascriptions" of worship--"To the one..."):

1. The One Loving *Us*

2. The One Setting *Us* Free from *Our* Sins through His Blood
3. The One Making *Us* a Kingdom, Priests to His God and Father: This text is drawn from words spoken by God to Moses just before the Law was given (Exodus 19:6). In that passage, it took the form of a prediction, but here, it is an accomplished fact. Because Jesus is Priest and King (through his death and resurrection), he makes his people to be a kingdom and priests. These two roles were divided in ancient Israel and assigned to the tribes of Judah and Levi. Yet, even in Exodus 19, before such a division was ever made, God's long-term plan was for the *whole nation* to be kingly and priestly. Peter, in his first letter, chapter 2, picks up this theme and states it beautifully this way:

9 But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God's holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 10 "Once you were not a people; now you are the people of God. Once you received none of God's mercy; now you have received his mercy.

We should expect to see in *Rev* ways in which the people of God function as a kingdom and priests. Peter hints at it when he urges his readers to "show others the goodness of God" by living a life which reflects light and not darkness. John's *Rev* will make a similar point: we are a universal priesthood of believers. God has placed us in the world to exercise priestly functions and to live as holy people of God. The Old Testament clothing for the priests included a turban which was inscribed with the words "holiness to the Lord" (Exodus 28:36; 39:30). Here, in *Rev*, all God's people are consecrated as priests and exercise that office in the world.

The Greeting climaxes with three additional sections: 1) Worship; 2) The Coming of the Lord; 3) A Personal affirmation from God himself.

Worship involves an ascription of *glory* and *power* to God: *glory* emphasizes *who God is*; *power*, tells us *what he does*. *God is* who no one else can be: give him *glory*!. *God does* what no one else can do: give him *power*! This, too, is part of the "revelation" in *Rev*: showing the reader the person and works of God in history. If *Rev* is a great drama, then God (Father, Son and Spirit) are the lead characters. When we worship God, all aspects of our liturgy should put the attention on these two elements: glory and power; person and work of God.

The next section is written in the form of a poem in Greek, consisting of four lines. It is a "vision poem" because it begins with the familiar *idou*, "look", "see", or "behold". The reader is called upon to look at something: to have a vision and experience the revelation first-hand. When John the Baptizer began to direct his own disciples to follow Jesus, he spoke the same word: "Behold (*idou*) the Lamb of God!" (John 1:29). Using this expression is much like pointing: "Look over there, see that!" John does the same thing. He asks the reader to "have a vision", to see something. Or, in this case, to see "someone".

1. "He is coming with the clouds". The text uses the present tense. Already John has reminded the reader that the fulfillment of the things found in the *Rev* lies close at hand. This present tense "coming" language underscores that emphasis. Whatever further meaning we may eventually discover in the idea of the "coming of Jesus", at least one of its meanings is revealed here. "Jesus is coming, even now", John tells us. His arrival is in one real sense *progressive* and not only *punctiliar*. It is true he *will* come again in a decisive act of grand revelation at the end of history. But for John and his readers, he *is already in the process of coming*. But how?
2. The text gives us some clues. John's use of "cloud" language is highly suggestive. The source for this imagery is, once again, the Old Testament, in particular Daniel 7, where the "Son of Man" (the Messiah) comes to take his throne after he has defeated the enemies of God's kingdom. In this setting, Messiah puts down the power of the nations who have subjugated Israel (Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome). Both Daniel and John draw from the powerful "cloud symbolism" found in passages like Isaiah 13:1-13; 19:1; Psalms 18:7-15; 104:3; Joel 2:1-2; Micah 1:3-4: God rides on a storm cloud, coming in judgment. The *Rev* passage before us is no exception. "Look, he comes in judgment!" declares John to his readers. Judgment day is just around the corner. But what judgment?

3. John answers that question in the final lines: those who crucified Jesus and rejected him as God's Messiah now face him in judgment: "the ones who pierced him" (see Zechariah 12:10-11) respond to his coming with weeping and wailing. This language parallels Jesus' own words found in Luke 23:28-31:

6 As they led Jesus away, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country just then, was forced to follow Jesus and carry his cross. 27 Great crowds trailed along behind, including many grief-stricken women. 28 But Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't **weep** for me, but **weep** for yourselves and for your children. 29 For the days are coming when they will say, 'Fortunate indeed are the women who are childless, the wombs that have not borne a child and the breasts that have never nursed.' 30 People will beg the mountains to fall on them and the hills to bury them. 31 For if these things are done when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry? "

And to what does Jesus refer? He speaks about an event he has already predicted: that the city of Jerusalem and its Temple will come under siege and be destroyed. In three key passages (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), Jesus sets forth his own "little apocalypse", describing in ways similar to *Rev*, how human history will unfold in the immediate future. Anyone familiar with Jesus' teaching would instantly recognize the language John uses here. For the first time readers of *Rev*, get a clearer picture of what to expect in the following pages of *Rev*. The book intends to reveal to God's churches how the immediate future, involving Israel, will unfold and what sort of future the churches can hope to have in light of these world-shaking and life-shaping events.

4. Yes, John tells us, Jesus IS coming. Look! He is coming even now: in judgment on Israel. To underscore that point, he writes *pasai 'ai phulai tēs gēs*: literally "all the tribes of the land" will mourn. This is precisely what Jesus predicted in the Luke passage. This weeping and wailing will even cause people to seek the cover of the falling mountains, a powerful picture which we will see again in chapter 6 of *Rev*. John is saying, "When the tribes of the land are mourning, it is because judgment is coming. That judgment is from Jesus, the pierced one. Do not think what is coming is some mere accident of history. Let everyone 'see him', this Jesus, as the rider of storm-storms when this judgment comes." From the manner of John's language, he forewarns that the events leading to judgment day on Israel are close at hand. To the casual student of history, *how* close is not hard to determine. Jesus was crucified around 30 C.E. His own prophecies spoke of fulfillment within "this generation", a period of forty years at the outside. Jerusalem fell in 70 C.E. This places the writing of *Rev* sometime just prior to that date with signs already showing themselves such that John could say "Look, he is coming with the clouds."

The Final section of the Greeting is in the form of a first-person self-description:

1. "I am Alpha and Omega"
2. "The One Who Is, The One Who Was, The One Coming"
3. "The All Powerful One"

God is the speaker. He proclaims his sovereignty over all history. This language echoes Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12 where Yahweh says "I am the first and I am the last". Put simply, God is telling us, "I was there to put this whole cosmic drama into motion, and I will be there when it reaches completion. What is about to happen to the mourning and weeping in Israel is not Rome's idea. The Empire may think it is advancing its own plan to keep the *Pax Romana* by destroying Jerusalem, the hotbed of insurrection in Judea. Caesar Nero may think he is doing the Roman citizenry a favor by suppressing the Christians on whom he pins guilt for the burning of Rome, a policy which falls into the same time-frame as Nero's decision to send General Vespasian against Jerusalem. But Nero has it wrong. The Empire has it wrong. I am Lord and Caesar is not! I was there when Abraham was called to become the father of the Hebrews. And I was there when those same Hebrews handed Jesus over for crucifixion by the Romans. And, make no mistake about it, I will be there when judgment falls on the city that said 'No' when my Son offered to be their Savior and Lord." This God calls himself *pantokratōr*: the All Powerful One. "Look! He is coming with the clouds!"

A few general comments about the structure of this Greeting and our extended commentary on it. *Rev* favors the use of "threes" in presenting its material here. This is due to the Trinitarian emphasis: God is Father, Son

and Spirit. The whole being of God saturates the ideas we have just read. History, says John, is three-dimensional because it is God-determined. Time is three-dimensional because it is God-directed. What is the net effect of this structure? It is to show how history is itself a "revelation" of the person and work of God. If we read *Rev* correctly, we ought to see plainly and clearly how God's purposes lie behind the otherwise chaotic events of human life. Remember our remarks in the previous *Notes*: the text is not only interested in "what happened", but also in "what is really going on". The short answer of *Rev* is to say: "God is going on!" And from the viewpoint of John in the first century, sometime between 30 and 70 C.E., something very important is about to happen which will require a "revelation from God, about Jesus Christ" to understand it. The Greeting has already made a start.

The First Vision: 1:9-20

"I am John". This unassuming identification by the writer is enhanced by his own revelation that he shares with his readers a life of suffering and patient endurance. In his case, the suffering includes loss of home and companionship: he is a man in exile on the island of Patmos, miles off the coast of Asia Minor. But distance and distress do not dampen his love for the churches. Among them he had preached the word of God and the gospel of Jesus. Now, under Imperial orders, as part of Nero's policy of containment, John has been separated from his fellow Christians and lives in isolation from the events he is about to see unfolding before him. Any ordinary person would feel helpless and in despair. Yet, John tells us that the ever-present Spirit was with him on Patmos where he celebrated the Lord's Day in worship. Perhaps some of the verses we have studied so far formed part of his worship meditations: "All praise to him who loves us..." "To him be glory and power..." We can only imagine the content of his liturgy that day. Was he expecting a revelation? Probably not with the dimensions of the book he will be asked to write! Yet he was faithful in the place he found himself. He knew the Alpha and Omega, the one who died and rose again. The seven-fold Spirit was his companion that Lord's Day. Much like Ezekiel the prophet, when he was in exile with the captives in Babylon, John was "in the Spirit" when he received the extraordinary revelation he is about to record (see Ezekiel 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5).

And then he heard a voice behind him. This was no ordinary voice, but sounded like a "trumpet blast". Before he turned around, he heard the instruction to "Write down what you see." His mind could easily have raced to the Old Testament story of God giving his word to Moses on Sinai some 1500 years before. On that occasion there was lightning, thunder, a dense cloud, smoke, fire and the loud blast of a trumpet which sounded several times (Exodus 19:16, 19-20). John would also have recalled how after Moses, the prophets of the Old Testament were often commanded to "Write", and when God asked them to do so it nearly always took the form of a prophecy of judgment against a faithless Israel (see Isaiah 30:8; Jeremiah 37:2; 39:44; see also, Exodus 34:27; Isaiah 8:1; Jeremiah 36:1; Habakkuk 2:2 for the importance of the *written* word of God). No doubt, John's first impression of this unusual experience, was a sense of urgency, beginning with the trumpet blast and continuing with the instruction to "write".

The order of the churches listed in the instruction to John has no particular meaning, although clever Bible students have tried to find one. William Ramsay, who studied extensively the geography and cultural of the first century Near East and Roman Empire, argued that the particular selection of cities pointed to their location as centers of communication and as postal drop-points. Sending the letters through the cities would facilitate the quickest and widest distribution of their message, not only to these cities, but to any other ones (such as Colosse). In our next study, we will take up the individual messages. When we do, the relevance of these seven churches will become increasingly clear.

Hearing the voice was one thing. Seeing the speaker was quite another. We will encounter this pairing of "hearing" followed by "seeing" elsewhere in *Rev*. When John "hears", his understanding is only partial. But when he "sees", things become clear and incompleteness vanishes. That is the case here. As he turns, he sees

two images: 1) seven golden lampstands, and 2) the Son of Man standing among the lampstands. Further, John gives a graphic description of this "Son of Man".

What are we to make of the first image? John knew that in the Jewish Temple was a two-room sanctuary, serviced by the priests. The outer-most room of that sanctuary, called the "Holy Place", was home to a multi-branched lamp-stand whose flame was kept lit to provide light for the service of the sanctuary (see Exodus 25:30-31; Numbers 8:1-4). To the Jews, this lampstand symbolized the power and presence of God in his Temple. Zechariah saw a vision of a single lampstand, fed by divinely supplied oil (Zechariah 4) and was then told by God, "Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts" (Zechariah 4:12). Of historical interest, the lampstand's light was extinguished some two hundred years before Christ, when the Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Temple and offered a pig on its altar. Later the Jewish people celebrated their victory over the Syrians, thanks to Judaeus Maccabeus. During the re-consecration of the Temple which followed, the lampstand was once more lit and burned miraculously for several days without an additional supply of oil. The feast of Hanukkah ("feast of lights") commemorates this event.

With all of this as background, John was probably struck by the number of lampstands. Here before him was not a single lampstand, but *seven*! And they were separated far enough apart to permit a person to walk among them. If these lampstands are "temple lampstands", then John has made a startling discovery: he is seeing the form and shape of a new Temple whose outer sanctuary is none other than the whole of the Christian churches, represented by the ones enumerated for him by the voice. Moreover, he is also standing in the presence of the High Priest who services the needs of these lampstands, by being sure their oil is supplied (they have the Spirit) and their flames are burning brightly. This is the first great revelation. He is seeing the New Temple and "The Son of Man" at work within it. But what could this mean for the Temple still standing in Jerusalem? At this stage of the study, the reader is left to wonder.

The appearance of the "Son of Man" figure is consistent with those found in the Old Testament, notably in the book of Daniel, chapter 7. The figure John sees combines images of Priest, Judge and King all into one. But he is no ordinary Priest and King. His appearance glows with cosmic light: sun, fire, and ocean waves are woven together into a tapestry of majesty beyond human comprehension. Holding the very stars of the heavens in his hand, speaking with the sword-like word of God, this super-human figure evokes fear from John. Overcome by the "brilliance", the writer "fell at his feet as dead". The same language was used of Daniel and Ezekiel when they encountered the angels who brought their messages from God. Standing before John is the messenger of God *par excellence*. With his white hair, here stands the "Ancient of Days" described by the prophets before him.

Though appearing as a supernatural being, the Son of Man unexpectedly displays a deeply human gesture toward John. He places his hand on the frightened man and speaks words John had no doubt heard before: "Fear not!" It happened out on the Sea of Galilee, in the storm, Jesus came to his disciples on the water. "Fear Not!" he said then. And his comforting words to his faithful servants have not changed. The truth of this Jesus now reinforces: "I am the First and the Last. I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave" (1:17-18). The reader understands better now John's use of this language earlier in the Prologue. This was John's first vision of the resurrected and ascended Jesus. This Jesus is rooted in John's past. John saw Jesus die. John witnessed the risen Jesus. He saw the ascension on Mount Olivet. Now, miles away from Jerusalem, exiled on the fortified island of Patmos, seventy-five miles west of Ephesus, John receives the first great revelation that Jesus, the Son of Man, is firmly in charge, and that he is even now caring for the needs of the churches. He also sees that the Temple is not far away, but is as close as any one of the lampstands, any one of the seven churches.

Jesus now tells John he is to write down the vision which consists of two main movements of history: what is happening now and what will happen later. Should John need help with the symbols he now sees, Jesus will be quick to reveal their meaning. The lampstands are the churches. The seven stars in the hands of Jesus are the

messengers to those churches. This is powerful symbolic language. To the first century mind, stars held the destiny and fortunes of human beings. Elaborate astrology attempted to show how this was so. John is getting a very different message from Jesus.¹⁰ Jesus holds the stars in his hands and they are not impersonal powers ruling the cosmos. Rather, they symbolize God's specially chosen messengers who have care over the churches. Who are these messengers (*aggeloi*)? As we noted in the Prologue, the word used here can be translated either "angel" or "messenger" depending on the context. Are these "stars" *angels* or human *messengers*, charged with the delivery of John's *Rev* to the churches? Examining the sixty times the word appears in *Rev*, we would be forced to conclude they are "angels", not human messengers. Both in Jewish and early Christian literature (outside the Bible), there is precedent for angels being appointed as representatives for the people of God. In the book of Daniel, Michael is actually called "Israel's prince" (see Daniel 12). Not only are they appointed, they are accountable for what happens in the churches. One clear passage in the New Testament is Hebrews 1 where angels are described in this fashion:

1:14 But angels are only servants. They are spirits sent from God to care for those who will receive salvation.

This understanding about angels is deeply embedded in Judaism of the first century and is affirmed by Jesus' words to John in *Rev*. Each letter we read in chapters 2 and 3 will begin, "To angel of the church at...". Through angels, God has given to the churches special agents of his purposes. Though John writes his *Rev* on Patmos, it is the angelic caretakers who in the end bear responsibility for carrying out the delivery process. How perilous is the journey from Patmos to the churches in Asia Minor? How dangerous for any human messenger who bears the scrolls with God's word to Israel, the church and the nations? Knowing that God holds the "stars in his hand" (that is, the messengers are his own divine appointments), ought to give John peace of mind and heart.

The Interpretive "Key": Revelation: 1:19¹¹

Students of *Rev* usually point to 1:19 as the key to understanding how John's book acquires its structure. The most common translations of this passage say in effect:

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this (ESV).

Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later (NIV).

Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards (NAB).

Write down what you have seen-- both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen (NLT).

We have sampled from four translations to provide some slight variations, but also to show the general idea they all have in common. To this we add the Greek text:

Grapson oun ha eides kai ha eisin kai ha mellei genesthai meta tauta.

There appears, at first glance, to be three accounts John should write down:

1. What [things] you have seen (*ha eides*)
2. What [things] are (*ha eisin*)
3. What [things] are about to become after these [things] (*ha mellei genesthai meta tauta*)

Does this mean the book of *Rev* is actually divided into three sections? If so, are we to see that three-part structure as:

#1 — 1:1-20: The things seen

#2 — 2:1-3:22: The things which are

#3 — 4:1-22:21: The things which are about to be after #1 and #2?

View One:

Those who hold this viewpoint, assume that a chronological sequence is meant. Based on this large assumption, some argue that everything after chapter 3 belongs to the future *after our own time*, and usually after their particular interpretation of the Second Coming as the *Rapture* of the church. Following this event, this view maintains, a tribulation follows which is described in detail, starting with 6:1 and continuing to the end of chapter 19. Then, chapter 20 refers to the millennium (still future, one thousand year reign of Christ on earth),

¹⁰ Bruce J. Malina, *On The Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys*, Hendriksen, 1995.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of 1:19 and the various views, refer to G. Beale (see bibliography at the end), pp. 152-170.

while chapters 21-22 refer to the final arrival of God's new creation. Clearly a *futurist* perspective, this position is also referred to as the pre-tribulation, pre-millennial view of the Second Coming, for reasons that should be reasonably clear from this description.

View Two:

A different approach is adopted by those who favor a *double reference* understanding of both the present and the future. According to this, the command "write what you see" means the same thing as it does in 1:11. Based on this analysis, there are not really three distinct time frames but only two: "the present" and "the future." Both of these periods are included in what John "sees," making the phrase "what [things] you have seen" into an introduction or topical statement to the present and the future. This is how the NLT version handles the underlying Greek text(see above).¹²

In effect, the book offers a distinction between "already" (chapters 1-3) and "not yet" (4-22). The question remains, however, is whether that two-part analysis is a *chronological* one? Such a division would imply that it is. But it does not need to be. For we could just as easily take this two-fold analysis as applying to the whole book not to two parts within it. When we read *Rev* we are seeing *both* the present and the future depicted in symbols *throughout*.

View Three:

According to this position, we must begin our study with 1:1,

"To show...what things must take place quickly."

and then compare this with the Old Testament book of Daniel, 2:28,

"he showed...what things must take place in the latter days..."

There is a sharp contrast between something that happens "quickly" (*taxei*) and something which happens "in the latter days" (*ep' eschatōn tōn hēmerōn*). According to Daniel, the fulfillment of what he sees awaits a distant future, while for John, the events he sees are on the verge of taking place. What was prophecy awaiting fulfillment in Daniel becomes prophecy in the process of fulfillment during John's own day. This is confirmed by Revelation 1:4 which states that "the time is near" (*kairos eggus*): not merely imminent but actually present. Compare this with Mark 1:15, and we get a similar sense: "the kingdom of God has drawn near" (*hēggiken*).

The emphasis in 1:19 (the text we are examining) falls on,

"what is about to take place after these things,"

and this compares favorably with Daniel 2:29 and 45,

"what must take place after these things."

Throughout Daniel 2, the emphasis is on things happening "in the latter days" (2:28, 29, 45). That language, from John's perspective, points to his own time when the promises of the coming Messiah and the kingdom of God were already being fulfilled in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. For John, the language of "after these things" (*meta tauta*) is pointing to both inaugurated events and to their ongoing completion.

Similar language appears in Revelation 4:1 when a voice calls John to enter the "open door" in heaven where he will be shown "what must happen after these things immediately" (*ha dei genesthai meta tauta eutheōs*). Obviously, the events of chapter 4 and beyond, therefore, are not *delayed* but in fact immediately commenced with the visions which follow! Rather than pushing the fulfillment of all the visions found in chapters 4-22 out into the distant future, the voice is telling John that he and his own generation is about to see them at least *begun* in his own time!

¹² Greek scholars refer to such a construction as *epexegetical* because it supplies additional explanation or explanatory material. We might say that the two additional phrases (*what is* and *what is about to be*) are epexegetical to *what you have seen*, expanding on it and offering greater detail. That is, John sees "what is" and "what is about to be" as the content of his vision in *Revelation*.

We agree, then, that 1:19 holds an important key to the understanding of the whole book. The reader should be prepared for events which he "sees," which are presently being fulfilled, and which yet need to be fulfilled in the future. Throughout the two thousand years between John's time and ours, that three-fold application holds true. As we read and study *Rev* we will discover throughout in the *whole book* evidences of things already fulfilled, things being fulfilled, and things not yet fulfilled. In effect, we live between the tension (as we studied last week) between the *already* and *the not yet*.

Concluding Thoughts

How different the world must have looked to John after his first vision! Accustomed to thinking about the Temple in Jerusalem with its solitary lampstand, he now sees the world around him as a sanctuary and its little Jesus communities as lampstands. "You are the light of the world!" Jesus had told him and the other disciples some years before. That notion must have made better sense because of the vision. "We are God's temple", John no doubt began to think. "If the Jerusalem Temple is destroyed one day, that will not fundamentally alter the shape of God's true Temple. That temple is here and it is in Asia Minor. Jesus, our High Priest and King, has this Temple in his care. He holds its heavenly caretakers in his hands. And that must mean he holds us as well. Indeed, he is the Alpha and Omega: he was there with us at the beginning, and he remains with us now."

Glory to God. Amen.

A Select Bibliography: *Revelation*

The following list of works represents a cross-section of scholarship and different points of view. I have largely limited the selections to works which deal with historical, cultural, social and theological issues. Absent are works which focus on the sensational aspects of applying *Revelation* to current events — an enterprise which becomes dated the moment it leaves the writer's pen. These are books I have read and studied across several decades of studying the book of *Revelation*.

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Digger Deeper: *No One Knows — Who's in Charge and What's Happening?*

(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *No One Knows — Who's in Charge and What's Happening?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our emphasis this week is Revelation 1:1-20, the first study in the *Revelation* given to John on the isle of Patmos. Using a Bible atlas, locate Patmos and the seven churches mentioned in 1:4, 11, 20. What sort of relationship did John have to these churches, do you think?
2. Who gave John his revelation, and what reasons are given for doing so?
3. Those who receive the *Revelation* have an immediate responsibility toward it. Describe that obligation based on 1:3. Along with the responsibility, what does Jesus promise to the readers? What seems to be the basis of the promise?
4. Carefully read the entire chapter (1) and make note of all references to *time* relative to John the writer. Based on the results of your study, where do the events of *Revelation* fall on John's time horizon? On ours?
5. How is God described in 1:4a? How is the Spirit described in 1:4b? How is Jesus Christ described in 1:5a? What relationship does the Triune God have to the full sweep of time?
6. According to 1:5b-6, what has Jesus Christ achieved for God's people? What role do they have because of his achievement?
7. Read 1:7-8 and then comment on this statement: "In one sense, the "Coming of Jesus Christ" is both a present and future event."
8. Compare the phrase "coming with the clouds" (1:7a) with its use in Daniel 7:13-14. Is this just a pretty metaphor of Jesus floating to earth on a cloud or does it have a deeper meaning? Explain.
9. What does John tell us about himself and his situation in 1:9?
10. Under what circumstances did John receive the *Revelation*? (1:9-13).
11. How did Jesus Christ appear to John in his first vision? (1:14-16). List each feature in the vision and offer your explanation of the symbolism. What method will you use to unpack the meaning of each symbol? Notice the use of "son of man" language in 1:13 and compare it once more with Daniel 7:13-14.
12. What effect did the vision have on John (1:17a), and how did Jesus respond to what John did?
13. Jesus makes several statements about himself in 1:17b-18. List them and then suggest why each of these are especially relevant within a revelation about "what must soon take place."
14. Twice, John is told to "write" the words of the Revelation vision. Why is writing down such things important? Compare this with 22:18-19 and expand your answer. What sorts of things were "written down" in the Hebrew world?
15. What three-fold application does the whole book of *Revelation* have, according to 1:19?
16. In what ways does Jesus help John understand certain symbols in the first vision (see 1:20)? Are other symbols left unexplained? Why?
17. Based on your reading and study of Revelation 1, who is the main theme and focus of the book? What is his relationship to time and history? What does that tell us about the likely purpose for writing the book of *Revelation*?