

Study 2: Revelation Chapter 1

Introduction

Revelation chapter 1 introduces the context for the rest of the book. It provides the background as to where, how, and why the visions occurred, and identifies their source. The first vision appears in this chapter – it is Jesus in the midst of the churches. We must not only read the *words*, but also see the *image* that John projects for us. In the first image, Jesus actually explains for us, what the vision means.

Body of the Study

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 1

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapters two and three in preparation for the next study.

Revelation was written to churches that were suffering persecution under a cruel government system. What relevance does the message have to us, when we (generally) live in a society under religious freedom?

John says that we are blessed if we hear and keep the things that are given in the prophecy. What are the practical ways that we do this?

Notes for study 2: Revelation Chapter 1

Whilst other books of the New Testament teach in “plain” language and instruction, Revelation teaches in images where John describes the visions he saw. The context for the visions is introduced in chapter 1, where he provides the background as to where, how, and why the visions occurred, and identifies their source. The first vision appears in this first chapter – the vision of Jesus in the midst of the churches. We must not only read the words, but we must also see the image that John projects for us. In the first image, Jesus actually explains for us, what the vision means.

The Prologue

The prologue is like an “address” for the letter – describing what the letter is about. “...*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place...*” (1:1 NIV). The message originated from God (the Father) and was given to Jesus Christ. Jesus then passed it on to John by the action of a messenger “...*He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John...*” (1:1 NIV). The word “angel” (*angelos*) just means messenger. Sometimes it is an earthly messenger, and sometimes it is a spiritual messenger. We can tell from the context what kind of messenger is meant. If we can’t tell from the context, then it is not important for us to know. In this case, the message was given to John *in a vision*, and so the messenger (angel) must have been a spiritual (heavenly) angel.

The message concerned things *which must soon take place*, and therefore had specific relevance to the readers in the first century. [This statement makes an interpretation of Revelation from the futurist perspective very problematical, since that position interprets Revelation as events that will mostly come to pass at the time of the Lord’s return. Even if we allow for the Lord’s return in this current generation (and we don’t know!!!), then the events are 2,000 years removed from the time that they were written in the first century]. John repeats *four times* (1:1; 1:3; 22:6; 22:10) that the events would happen *soon*.

John tells us what he did with the revelation and visions that he received “...*who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ...*” (1:2 NIV). We do not have only *part* of the vision, but we have *all of it*.

John passed the testimony on to us “...*Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near...*” (1:3 NIV). The message is given in a chain of five links:

God → Christ → God’s messenger → John → the messengers of the seven churches

Greetings and Blessing

The letter is formally addressed from John, to the seven churches “...*John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia...*” (1:4 NIV). He then follows with the traditional greeting that was common amongst the churches in the first century “...*Grace and Peace to you...*” (1:4). The blessings originate from God the Father “...*from him who is, and who was, and who is to come...*” (1:4 NIV). Whilst this might at first seem to refer to Jesus (the one who *was* here on earth (past tense), and who *is to come* again (future tense, when He returns), and who *currently is* sitting and ruling at the right hand of God (present tense)), the next verse makes it clear that it is someone else other than Jesus. “...*and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth...*” (1:5 NIV). So, it is God in His eternal nature that John has in view.

Jesus, the faithful witness (of the eternal Father) was the first person to be raised from the dead, never to die again. Whilst others were raised from the dead (for example Lazarus, and many others), they all died again. Jesus conquered death, and was the first to rise from the dead to die

no more. Jesus is also “...*the ruler over the kings of the earth...*” (1:5 NKJV), which shows His exalted position as *King of Kings, and Lord of Lords*. This latter statement is of particular relevance to the context of Revelation, where Caesar claims to be Lord and King.

The word of praise is addressed to Jesus “...*To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood...*” (1:5 NKJV). As in all of the scriptures, Christ’s love is central, and is shown in its fullness by His sacrifice for us (the perfect life sacrificed for the imperfect man, while we were His enemies). But, through Jesus’ perfect sacrifice, He “...*has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father...*” (1:6 NIV). John speaks of this in the past tense – He *has* made us to be... which shows that God’s kingdom had already been established. Peter describes it as a *royal* (ie a kingly) *priesthood* (1 Pet 2:9). The kingdom is made up of the believers who also make up the church.

Further, the Christians are also described as *priests*. All Christians are priests, and Christ is our only King and High Priest. Under the Old Covenant, the people approached God through the priests, and the priests approached Him through the High Priest. Under the New Covenant, Jesus has not gone into the Holy Place made with hands (the Holy of Holies in the Temple), but into heaven itself (Heb 9:24), and is the direct mediator between ourselves and God (Heb 8:1).

John concludes the word of praise with “...*to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen...*” (1:6 NIV). He reminds us that Jesus will return in the same way that He left the earth (Acts 1: 9-11) “...*Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him...*” (1:7 NKJV). When Jesus returns, no-one will “tell us about it”, because we will all see it first hand. It will be known to everyone, even “...*they also who pierced Him...*” (1:7 NKJV). Jesus’ prayer was *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*. When He returns, they will have no doubt about what they have done! The sorrow for what had been done to Jesus will not be restricted to those who physically killed Him, but will extend to everyone “...*And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him...*” (1:7 NKJV). Since all of the earth will know that Jesus is Lord, and everyone shall see Him, then every person will recognise their true state with God, and mourn and lament over their sins. Unfortunately for many, it will be too late.

John is presenting *authority* for the things that he is about to reveal. He has already introduced a chain of the message (1:4) and here repeats the origin again. There is much division as to whether he has God the Father, or the glorified Son in view in this verse, and good arguments can be made each way. However, to be consistent the “normal reader” of the letter would conclude that it was the same as the one presented in 1:4, the Father. “...*“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty”...*” (1:8 NKJV). Alpha and Omega are the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet, and the thought is reinforced by the next statement – *the beginning and the end*. The idea is that God is everything, all encompassing, and complete.

Alternate Views of the Text

The *Seven Churches of Asia* are considered by some to represent seven ages of the church covering an entire period from its beginning through to the return of Christ. Proponents of this position include William Marrion Branham (“An Exposition of the Seven Church Ages”).

It is apparent that there were other churches in the area **NOT** addressed by John (Colosse and Hierapolis; Col 1:2, 4:13), so there **IS** some degree of symbolism used in selecting the “seven”. However, these were **REAL** churches with **REAL** people facing **REAL** struggles.

Alternate Views of the Text

Wallace (p70-71) argues that *coming with clouds* does not refer to the second-coming, but to the figurative coming of Christ in the destruction of Jerusalem. He notes: “The added expression *with the clouds* are not to be literally taken for a material display of his bodily presence... in Matt. 24:30 Jesus describes the events in the destruction of Jerusalem as “the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” This is precisely what Jesus told Pilate that he should see, and it is the meaning of Rev. 1:7, pointing to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Spirit and the Lord's Day

John has a personal association with the brethren, and writes to them with the personal message "...I, John, both your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ..." (1:9 NKJV). It is obvious that the recipients of the letter knew who John was, and that he was fully acquainted with their suffering. He must have shared the same suffering since he describes himself as *your... companion in tribulation*. We know that he was in exile at the time he wrote the letter, and he describes the circumstances of the visions "... (I) was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ..." (1:9 NKJV).

Patmos lies about thirty-seven miles west-southwest of Miletus, in the Icarian Sea. Consisting mainly of volcanic hills and rocky ground, it is about ten miles long and six miles wide at the north end; it was used for Roman penal purposes. It was "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" that John was on Patmos (cf. 1:2; 6:9; 20:4). He was not there to preach that Word but because of religious-political opposition to his Christian faith. (NIVBC)

Sometime during his exile on Patmos, John received God's message in a vision "...I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet..." (1:10 NKJV). When John says he *was in the Spirit* the context demands that it was more than just pondering some spiritual applications. He is about to describe the revelation that he received, and is akin to other statements in scripture where similar events occurred. Harkrider¹ says:

This term "Spirit" is used again in 4:2; 17:3; and 21:10 to denote something like a state of trance in which one is enabled by the Holy Spirit to see a vision from God. Through supernatural power John saw these spiritual visions perhaps in the same manner that Paul described his experience (2 Cor. 12:1-7). Isaiah said that he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne" (Isa. 6:1). Ezekiel said "the Spirit took me up" (3:12, 14) and later brought him "in the visions of God to Jerusalem" (8:3) and then "into Chaldea, to them of the captivity" (11:24) and to the "inner court" of the Lord's house (43:5). Daniel saw what he described as a "dream and visions of his head" and "night visions" (7:1, 2, 7, 13). Peter was "in a trance" and saw heaven opened (Acts 10:10). Thus, **in the Spirit** means much more than an attitude of worship. John kept his consciousness but was lifted out of his normal waking state and empowered to see visions from the Lord (4:2, 21:10).

Further, John says that this occurred on the *Lord's Day*. The Greek word translated "Lord's" is *kuriakos* – which is something (in this case the day) pertaining to the Lord. The only other place that the word is used in the New Testament is 1 Cor 11:20, where it refers to the Lord's Supper. The supper was a specific memorial to Christ, and likewise the "Lord's Day" refers to something *specific*. It could be argued that everything belongs to God, and every day is His, but that is not the message that John is giving here. He clearly has in mind some specific day that the readers would understand. The question is, 'which day is the Lord's Day?' We have already noted the connection between the *Lord's Supper* and the *Lord's Day*, and it was the first day of the week when the disciples came together to partake of the supper (Acts 20:7). Further, the first day of the week was the day that the Lord rose from the dead (Lk 24:1), it was the day that the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles (Acts 2:1 – the day of Pentecost was 7 weeks and one day after the sabbath of Passover week, so it always occurred on the first day of the week). It was the day that the first gospel sermon was preached (Acts 2:14 ff), and it was the day the church began (Acts 2:47). It was the common day of assembly of the New Testament church, and the day that we are commanded to (literally) *thrust into the treasury* the money that we have laid by in store (1 Cor 16:1-3). Schaff² notes:

¹ Harkrider, p. 10

² Schaff, Philip "History of the Christian Church: Volume 1: Apostolic Christianity" Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, Michigan. p.478

The universal and uncontradicted Sunday observance in the second century can only be explained by the fact that it had its roots in apostolic practice. Such observance is the more to be appreciated as it had no support in civil legislation before the age of Constantine, and must have been connected with many inconveniences, considering the lowly social condition of the majority of Christians and their dependence upon their heathen masters and employers.

The voice that John heard was behind him – which means that he heard the voice, but did not see (initially) where it was coming from. It was loud and clear – like a trumpet sound.

The Vision of Christ amongst the Churches

The voice said “... *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” ...*” (1:11 NKJV) which identifies the message as coming from God, although the instructions which follow suggest that it had come from Christ. John was told to write down the visions, and to send them to the seven churches in Asia Minor “... *“What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.” ...*” (1:11 NKJV). The instructions are specific, and the churches to which the visions are to be sent is also specific.

After hearing the voice, John turned around and saw the vision “... *Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ...*” (1:12 NKJV). The lampstand (candlestick) is reminiscent of the Temple. The tabernacle was lit by a single stand of seven candles. In Solomon’s Temple, the number increased to 10, with five on each side. John’s vision has *seven* lampstands, which suggests a complete number. The seven are later revealed to represent the seven churches (1:20). The significance of the lampstand as a symbol of the church will be revealed later – when it fails to provide the light to the world, it will be removed from its place.

In the middle of the candlesticks, stands Christ “... *and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band...*” (1:13 NKJV). In view of the candlesticks representing the seven churches, the message is one of Christ in the middle of them. The clothing describes someone having a high office, but is not consistent with the High Priest of the Old Covenant, which is described in Exodus 28:39.

Christ is further described “... *His head and His hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters...*” (1:14-15 NKJV). There are parallels here to Daniel’s description of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9), although the differences are significant enough for the readers to clearly understand that it is not the same image. The pure white hair symbolises purity and holiness crowning Christ’s head. His eyes were sharp and penetrating, showing His scrutiny and judgement. His feet were as if they had just left the fire, and were able to tread to ashes the things of His enemies (c/f Mal 4:3), and His voice roars like an ocean crashing on the beach.

“... *In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance...*” (1:16 NIV). The seven stars are later identified as the seven messengers of the seven churches (1:20), and the right hand is the position of power and authority. The sharp two-edged sword is the word of God (Heb 4:12) which proceeds from His mouth.

Finally, the face of Christ is likened to "the sun shining in all its brilliance." This is a simile of Christ's divine glory, preeminence, and victory (Mt 13:43; 17:2; cf. Rev 10:1). (NIVBC).

John responded to the image “... *And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys to Hades and of Death...”*” (1:17-18 NKJV). The image has clearly been identified as Christ (1:13) and it is

clarified here by the statement *I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore*. But here, Jesus claims to be the *First and the Last*, which is the claim that God had made earlier (1:11). Hailey³ writes:

The expression “first and last” is found three times in Isaiah and three times in Revelation. In assuring Judah of His absolute Godhead whereby He was able to drive out His enemies and redeem His people, Jehovah said, “I am the first and the last” (Isa. 44:4; 44:6; 49:12). And now the glorified Christ uses the same expression of Himself three times thereby identifying Himself with the power and everlastingness of the eternal God (1:17; 2:8, 22:13).

The Charge to Write

After identifying Himself as God, and having the power and authority, Jesus charges John to write down the visions “...*Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this...*” (1:19 NKJV). He has already been instructed to write them down and send them to the seven churches (1:11), and here the instruction is repeated.

The Vision Explained

The mystery is revealed “...*The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches...*” (1:20 NKJV). Whilst many of the visions in revelation are not explained, we do have a perfect explanation for this one.

John refers to *angels* and there has been much discussion on the nature of the angels of the seven churches. Some have concluded that they are heavenly angels appointed to watch over each of the churches. Other views include that they are the chief elder, or the entire eldership of each church, or that they are a human messenger who was appointed to deliver the message to the church. [My view is the latter, as the context does not demand a heavenly angel, but does demand that *someone* take the letter and deliver it (or at least read it) to the congregation.

Whatever may be the correct identification of the angels, the emphasis rests on Christ's immediate presence and communication through the Spirit to the churches (cf. the link of "stars" in 3:1 with the seven spirits of God). In some sense, the reference to angels in the churches shows that the churches are more than a gathering of mere individuals or a social institution; they have a corporate and heavenly character (cf. 1Co 11:10; Eph 3:10; Heb 1:14). That the "seven lampstands are the seven churches" not only shows that the churches are the earthly counterpart of the stars but links the vision of Christ with his authority to rule and judge his churches. (NIVBC).

The Use of Numbers through Revelation

Some people have a strong belief in numerology, and make lots of fanciful theories about what they mean in the Bible. Others say that the numbers are just “co-incidental” and don’t have any specific meaning. Whilst this may be true for much of the Bible, we can’t ignore the symbolism of the numbers that John uses in Revelation.

The number seven appears throughout the letter, and brings with it the idea of perfection / completeness. But there are other numbers that also bring “coded” messages, and to ignore them is to throw the baby out with the bath water!

³ Hailey, p. 112

The following is taken from Hailey⁴ and other writers:

- 2 Suggests strength
- 3 Divine number – the number of Deity
- 4 Symbolises the world and creation
- 5 A short but definite period
- 6 Falls short of perfection & is incomplete
- 7 Perfection / Completeness
- 10 A complete number
- 12 Organised Religion
- 24 Twice 12 (12 apostles of NT + 12 tribes of OT)

Deciphering Apocalyptic Language

We often get quite specific in looking at scripture to define what it means, and go off into word studies to determine the shades of meaning. Whilst this approach is not wrong, and can provide a substantive comment on a passage where scripture interprets scripture, we always take a verse to be literal unless there is a reason why it should not be treated literally, and determine the meaning of the passage from the context and from what other verses teach on that subject.

However, this approach will bring us un-stuck when we look at the apocalyptic language of Revelation!

Harkrider⁵ provides a useful discussion on how to interpret apocalyptic literature:

- (1) *Picture*: Read the context; close your eyes and visualize the scenery described. If you do not see the picture, you will never understand the point.
- (2) *Principle*: After feeling the emotions depicted by the symbolic language, then analyze what point is intended.
- (3) *Practice*: Upon determining the principle lesson intended, then make the application first of all to those who originally received it and then determine its abiding lesson throughout all ages.

When reading Revelation one must guard against searching for a double meaning with every detail. We may not understand all the details, but we can understand the basic point. Read it like you would read a play. We do not analyze each detail on the stage. We do not ask why a certain chair is green rather than blue. Or why a picture is on the wall. We simply realize the chair and the picture are there to set the stage for the drama that is portrayed by the actors. Likewise, some of the details in Revelation are revealed to set the stage and must not be subjected to forced explanations.

Read Revelation and go with the flow. Let its pictures jump out at you. Feel the earthquake; hear the thunder; taste the bitterness of the tears. When you do that, then you are beginning to grasp apocalyptic writing. Once you have done that, then come back and start to analyze it. Remember Peter's vision in Acts 10? God could have just told him, "Gentiles are acceptable without circumcision." But he didn't do it that way. God chose a vision to illustrate the point...

This study series generally follows this approach, and some images from "Revelation Illustrated" are included to help us grasp the visions.

⁴ Hailey, pp 41-48

⁵ Harkrider, p. lix