

A
Simple Guide
TO
the Book of
Revelation

Jeff Scoggins
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Boonsboro, Maryland

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I also am grateful to Dr. Ranko Stefanovic. His commentary, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, has significantly added to my own education in the book of Revelation. I have cited his commentary specifically in a number of places, but the fact is that I referenced his book so often in my writing that it would be impossible to cite his influence properly. So again, I hope this general acknowledgement of his impact on this work will be sufficient.

Most importantly, I am grateful to God for the Bible and his guidance in studying it. I live in a constant state of wonder at the depths to explore in God's word, and specifically how the book of Revelation ties the entire book of Scripture together.

Foreword

When a teacher has labored throughout his or her life to guide and instruct students, there is no greater honor than when those students not only learn and grow, but make those teachings their own. Many of my former students have pursued the interests they were exposed to in my classes to the point of writing dissertations and books that extend the reach of these ideas and deepen our collective understanding of Bible prophecy in general and the book of Revelation in particular. For example, Ranko Stefanovic, with my encouragement, produced a massive commentary on Revelation called *Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Ekkehardt Mueller has produced a slightly smaller book in German called *Der Erste und der Letzte*. Steve Case has adapted my classes with youth and young adults in mind and Seth Pierce has done the same for teens. Graeme Bradford adapted my classes for evangelistic use (including a 24-hour television series on the Hope Channel) and co-published it as *Revelation: Hope, Meaning, Purpose*. And there are at least that many more that could be mentioned.

So after all that, what is there about the volume you hold in your hands that makes it worth writing and reading? For one thing, the format of this volume immediately jumped out at me. It is beautiful, clean, clear and easy to read. Not only that, it is enjoyable to read, something I can't say about all of my own work on Revelation. The book addresses adults, but does so in a way that speaks clearly to a general audience. You don't need to be a young person or a specialist in Revelation to appreciate this book. Jeff Scoggins understands me about as well as anyone I know, yet has been able to put these ideas into a form that is simple and easy to understand—rather remarkable for a subject like the book of Revelation.

Scoggins does not pretend to address the myriad of scholarly issues that have pushed major commentaries on Revelation over a thousand pages. He is selective in the issues he addresses and he does not attempt to explain every word or symbol. But for that very reason the reader is drawn into the bigger picture of Revelation in a way that is not possible in a traditional commentary. While the style of the book is that of commentary, this is a book to read, not just to use as a reference. And while Scoggins does not lose sight of the deeper issues in Revelation, his book about it is sound in its simplicity. Those who want to go deeper for themselves can consult

Scoggins' prequel to Revelation, *You Can Understand the Book of Revelation*, or my own outline of method for its study, *The Deep Things of God*.

I am very proud and appreciative of what my former student has accomplished in this book. It is my prayer that through this book you and many others will find the "water of life" that Revelation so beautifully promises (Rev 22:17).

Jon Paulien, PhD
Dean, School of Religion
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Preface

In warfare, coding messages as a way to communicate with one's allies while keeping the enemy in the dark, has been a critical strategy for centuries. One of the most famous codes was the German Enigma code used during World War II. The machine-randomized code was considered to be unbreakable, and indeed it may have remained unbroken except for sloppy user practices that finally allowed Alan Turing to build a machine that could crack the codes in real time.

Of course, merely cracking the code could not win the war. Communicating the enemy's plans to Allied forces for counter planning was just as crucial. Therefore, in the second part of the process, Allied messages were themselves encrypted, sent, and then decrypted on the other end, which was possible because the operators had been given the keys for unlocking the code.

Apocalyptic prophecy is like the second part of this communication process. Satan's plans are already known to God because God knows everything, including the future. God has chosen to communicate the enemy's plans to his people in code, perhaps for some of the same reasons that codes are always used in warfare. However, unlike the Enigma code, God has provided the keys to the code within the message itself, so that anyone who desires to understand his messages may do so. Why? Because we are the ones caught in the crossfire of God's great conflict with Satan. Indeed, we are the object over which God and Satan are fighting. Both God and Satan desire our loyalty. God desires our loyalty because he loves us and wants us to live, while Satan desires our loyalty in order to drag us into his own doom.

Over time, the message of apocalyptic prophecy becomes clearer and clearer to those who study the codes, and these code-breakers are tasked with warning the world of the enemy's plans and movements, in hopes that the people of the earth will give their loyalty to God. When we are able to recognize Satan's strategies in advance, we should also recognize the worthiness of God to receive our full allegiance because it is only through his power that we will be able to overcome the enemy, who is furious because he knows his time is short.

Jeff Scoggins

Introduction

How to Use This Book

This book might at first look something like a non-technical commentary, and in a way I suppose it is. However, commentaries are designed to be used as reference tools, not for reading cover to cover. While you can certainly use this book to look up specifics because of its verse-by-verse format, it can and should be read from beginning to end. And more than once. The reason is that the book of Revelation is so interconnected within itself (not to mention within the rest of the Bible) that it is impossible to fully understand any part of it except in relation to the rest of the book. The more you are familiar with the entire book of Revelation, the more you will recognize how Revelation helps to interpret itself.

Before you dive in, however, here are a few ideas you should understand from the beginning.

Apocalypse

The book of Revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ for the end of time. The word *apocalypse*, in the original Greek, means to take the covering off of something in order to reveal it, which well describes what the biblical book of Revelation does for us; it uncovers and reveals two things. First and foremost, Revelation “uncovers” Jesus in a way that is not possible in the gospels alone. The opening lines of the book state categorically that in the vision of Revelation it is Jesus Christ that is revealed. Just as the gospels reveal Jesus accomplishing his work of redemption *on earth*, so Revelation reveals Jesus accomplishing his work of redemption *in heaven*. Revelation may be considered the fifth gospel because in Revelation the work Jesus started on earth will be finally completed in heaven when he returns to put an end to evil.

The second idea that the book of Revelation uncovers and reveals is also stated in the opening lines of the book. It reveals, from the apostle John’s point of view, what would soon take place at the end of time. In Zechariah’s vision, a basket was uncovered to reveal a woman named Wickedness.¹ In the same way, Revelation uncovers and reveals a woman. She begins pure and holy but degrades herself until she becomes wickedness itself.

¹ Zech. 5:5–11

Beneath the symbols, Revelation is the story of God's people who drift into rebellion. Just as the Old Testament prophets chronicle God's work with his people who waffle between loyalty and rebellion, Revelation is the story of how Jesus deals with the same situations among his people throughout all of history and ultimately through the final days of earth's history. Recognizing that Revelation is the gospel of Jesus Christ for the end of time should change the way we read the book.

Symbolism

Most of the Bible is literal and ought to be read and understood that way. The clear and obvious reading is usually the way we should accept what we encounter. In the early Christian church, leaders like Origen and Augustine began allegorizing Scripture, applying symbolism to all manner of circumstances, which sometimes had the effect of actually discounting the clear and obvious reading. A reaction against such irresponsible allegorizing of Scripture was appropriate, but unfortunately the reaction lurched to the opposite extreme by claiming that nothing in Scripture is symbolic. The reality lies in between. Just as in modern language we are able to switch between literal understanding when we are reading a medical journal and symbolic when we are reading poetry, we must be able to do the same in Scripture. Some of Scripture, like the stories and accounts of events, are literal, while some parts feature symbolism a little or a lot, like poetry and some parables.

The prophets in Scripture sometimes used literal language and sometimes symbolic language. The question we must come to terms with in our minds as we read is whether a passage should be understood literally or symbolically. Since most of the Bible is literal, we ought to default to that understanding unless we can build a good case for switching into symbolic mode. But just as we recognize the clues in modern language indicating that we should switch to symbolic reading (like with poetry, parables, or stories that have more going on under the surface), the same applies to Scripture. The clues are fairly clear to the discerning reader.

Revelation is crammed full of these markers that help us to recognize that we are reading a book that is primarily symbolic. Not everything is symbolic, but most of it is. Therefore, we must read Revelation through the lens of symbolism, unless we can make a strong case for understanding something as literal.

Attempts to interpret Revelation exclusively in literal terms will encounter insurmountable obstacles for building a coherent plot to the story.

Allusion

In studying Revelation one must recognize how Revelation is intended to be read and understood. And, by the way, in spite of what some people claim, Revelation is intended to be understood—not only by us but by everyone since the time John put his pen to parchment. This fact too is stated in the opening lines of the book, as we shall see.

One of the key concepts that will help us to understand and correctly interpret Revelation is to recognize the prolific use of allusion in the book. Allusion is when someone uses a key word or phrase to direct our attention to a larger story or context. For instance, when someone says “nine-eleven” there is no need to tell the story of terrorists flying airplanes into New York City’s twin towers. Mentioning the numbers alone is sufficient to bring that whole scenario to mind. That is allusion. Revelation uses allusion constantly, with a word or two, sometimes more, referring our minds to stories, psalms, and prophecies in the Old Testament as well as to Jesus’ words in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and also, to lesser degree, to other New Testament passages.

Therefore, to interpret and understand Revelation one must be intimately acquainted with both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The better a person knows the entire Bible, the more clearly he will understand and interpret Revelation. Without this intimate knowledge of the entire Bible we have no hope of understanding Revelation in any meaningful way. Eugene Peterson stated it well when he wrote,

“When people are ignorant of the imagery of prophets and gospels, and untutored in the metaphorical language of war in the story of salvation, they are easy prey for entertaining predictions of an end-time holocaust at Mount Megiddo in Israel, conjured up from newspaper clippings on international politics.”²

The best way to study Revelation, then, is to read and study your whole Bible in great depth, gain an ever increasing bank of knowledge on the material written prior to Revelation, then study Revelation using that knowledge, comparing Scripture with Scripture. The more you do this the more you will discover that key words and phrases leap out of Revelation,

² Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 165.

demanding that you recognize the allusion and make the connection to another part of the Bible.³

Revelation's Historical Structure

Another concept important for interpreting Revelation is understanding the way the book is structured. Since as early as the third century in the time of Irenaeus, and then later with Hippolytus and Jerome, the primary way of interpreting Revelation has been the historicist method,⁴ which views Revelation as an overview of history from the cross of Christ to the Second Coming of Christ. Over the last hundred years or so, the historicist method of interpretation has fallen out of favor before other interpretation methods, which do not hold together nearly so well as historicism. Of late, the Christian church, beginning with Jesuit priests de Alcazar and Ribera in the sixteenth century,⁵ has actively built and promoted both the Preterist and the Futurist models of interpretation because of Christianity's own vested interest in not looking like one of the bad guys in Revelation. But the fact of the matter is that ever since Adam and Eve, God's people have always strayed into rebellion. As much as we hate to admit it, we are the bad guys, which is why God keeps calling us back.

Revelation, when interpreted through a historical lens, is consistent with the entire Bible. But when interpreted through other methods, Revelation is utterly inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. We must face it, Revelation is pointing directly at God's people, just like the biblical prophets did. And just as it was the intention of the Old Testament prophets to call God's people to repentance, so Revelation does the same for our time.

The shift away from the historical interpretation of Revelation has left Christianity with a burning question: "If salvation was completed at the cross, why did Jesus need to leave again to go intercede for us in heaven?"

³ For a more in-depth look at the concept of allusions in Revelation and how to identify them, and also for more on the chiasmic structure of Revelation, see Jeff Scoggins' book *You Can Understand the Book of Revelation: A Clear Guide to Interpreting Prophecy* (Boonsboro, MD: Skapto Publishing, 2013). For a more scholarly approach, see Jon Paulien's book, *The Deep Things of God* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2004).

⁴ Gerhard Pfandl, "How do Seventh-day Adventists Interpret Daniel and Revelation?" *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, vol. 2. Gerhard Pfandl, ed. (Silver Spring, MD, Biblical Research Institute, 2010), 79.

⁵ Pfandl, 80.

What is he doing? Why is it taking so long?” Current popular interpretations of Revelation do not answer these questions satisfactorily, whereas the historicist interpretation answers them well because it fits perfectly with the entire great controversy theme we find throughout the Bible. Those who understand the overall story of Revelation know what Jesus is doing in heaven now and why the process is taking so long. Those who have grown up with this understanding often do not even realize the incredible value of that knowledge.

Revelation’s Non-Chronological Structure

Since the historical method of interpreting Revelation means that Revelation traces events and time periods from the cross to the Second Coming, we automatically attempt to read the book as a chronological sequence of events and quickly become frustrated when it does not make sense. It is only when we recognize that Revelation traces and then retraces events and time periods over and over again, that the plot of the book begins to emerge more clearly. The chart in Appendix 12 will be helpful in understanding the timelines of Revelation.

Revelation’s Chiastic Structure

Hebrew writing is different than Greek writing, which is what the Western world is used to. In Greek writing, the climax comes at the end of the story. In Hebrew writing, the climax comes in the middle of the story. The story builds in parallel from both the beginning and the end and meets in the middle. Scholars call it a chiastic structure. So when you read the beginning and the end of the story you will find that the two sections have much in common. When you read the second section and the second to the last section of the story you find they also have much in common, and so on, building toward the climax in the middle of the story. This is how Revelation was written. Therefore, if you want to understand a particular section of Revelation, it helps to study its parallel section in another part of the book. This kind of comparison within Revelation itself, as well as comparing the allusions to other stories, psalms, and prophets, will reveal rich depths that most people completely miss.

The following list shows the parallels in Revelation. Generally speaking, the first half of Revelation is historical and the second half deals with the end of time.

- Rev. 1:1–8 is parallel to Rev. 22:6–21
- Rev. 1:9–3:22 is parallel to Rev. 21:5–22:5

- Rev. 4:1–4:8 is parallel to Rev. 19:1–21:4
- Rev. 8:2–9:21 is parallel to Rev. 15:1–18:24
- Rev. 11:19–13:18 is the climax of the book

Revelation's Sanctuary Structure

Another structure to recognize in Revelation is the sanctuary structure. Revelation can be divided into seven sections, each of which begins with a scene of Israel's temple sanctuary. Each of the sanctuary scenes provides important information about the subject matter to follow. Thus, a deep understanding of the Old Testament sanctuary is also key to understanding Revelation. Here are the seven major sanctuary scenes of Revelation

1. The messages to the seven churches in Rev. 2–3 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 1:9–20.
2. The opening of the seven seals in Rev. 6:1–8:1 begins with a long sanctuary scene in Rev. 4–5.
3. The blowing of the seven trumpets in Rev. 8:6–11:18 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 8:2–5.
4. The great controversy between Satan and his allies and Christ and his people in Rev. 12:1–15:4 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 11:19.
5. The seven last plagues in Rev. 16–18 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 15:5–8.
6. The final destruction and return of Christ in Rev. 19:11–21:1 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 19:1–10.
7. The description of the New Jerusalem in Rev. 21:9–22:5 begins with a sanctuary scene in Rev. 21:2–5.

Another aspect of the sanctuary structure to be aware of is that the book of Revelation seems to be modeled on the daily and yearly temple services. The first half of Revelation is modeled on the daily service and the second half of Revelation is modeled on the yearly Day of Atonement service.

Every day, twice a day, the following seven-part service was performed as a part of the daily sacrificial service.

- The lamps were trimmed (Rev. 1:12–13).
- The doors of the temple were opened (Rev. 4:1).
- The priest killed the lamb (Rev. 5:6).

- The blood of the lamb was poured out at the base of the altar (Rev. 6:9–10).
- The priest collected coals from the altar and put incense into his censer (Rev. 8:3–4).
- The priest ministered with the incense at the golden altar (Rev. 8:3–4), accompanied by silence in the court for possibly half an hour (Rev. 8:1).
- Seven trumpets were blown (Rev. 8:6).

The judgment theme of the Day of Atonement is echoed throughout the second half of Revelation.

- Measuring the temple and worshipers: judgment before the second coming of Christ (Rev. 11:1–2).
- The seventh trumpet: judgment at the Second Coming (Rev. 11:18–19).
- First angel's message: judgment before the Second Coming (Rev. 14:6–7).
- The third bowl plague: judgment before the Second Coming (Rev. 16:5–7).
- Judgment of the harlot, Babylon: judgment at the Second Coming (Rev. 17:1–2; 18:8–10; 19:1–2).
- Judgment during the thousand years (Rev. 20:4).
- Judgment after the thousand years (Rev. 20:11–13).

Revelation's Feast Structure

There is also a feast structure in Revelation that we will not address much in this book, but it will be good to recognize it as we work our way through Revelation. So just briefly, Rev. 1:5 and Rev. 17–18 have a Passover or paschal theme, Rev. 4–5 has a Pentecost theme, Rev. 8–9 has a Feast of Trumpets theme, Rev. 12–22:5 has a Day of Atonement theme, and Rev. 14–20 and 22:1–5 have a Feast of Tabernacles theme.

Revelation 1



Revelation 1:1–3

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to show to his servants what must soon take place. And he signified it, sending it through his angel to his servant, John, ² who testified concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, which he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep the things that are written in it, for the time is near.



Rev. 1:1

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him, to show to his servants what must soon take place. And he signified it, sending it through his angel to his servant, John.

The revelation of Jesus Christ

The word *revelation* comes from the Greek words *apo*, meaning *away from*, and *kalupsis*, which means *veiling*. So *apocalypse* means to unveil something—apparently something that had been kept secret.

The revelation of Jesus Christ is both from Jesus and about Jesus, and it picks up where John's gospel left off, tying together not only the four Gospels but the rest of Scripture as well. In other words, the book of Revelation serves as the climax to the rest of the Bible, where all of the loose ends in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, which has been ongoing for thousands of years, is finally brought to conclusion.

The four Gospels are the story of Jesus' work on earth, but the story does not end there. Jesus promised at his ascension that he would be with us to the end. The way he fulfills that promise is described in the book of

Hebrews. While the Gospels focus on Jesus as the Messiah and sacrificial lamb, Hebrews focuses on Jesus as heavenly high priest and what he is accomplishing for us in heaven, as we wait for his return. Then, finally, Revelation focuses on Jesus as king. For John, writing the book of Revelation, which chronicles the events to occur on earth and in heaven between Jesus' first and second comings, was a natural follow-up to his Gospel.

Which God gave him

Note that John did not make up the book of Revelation out of his own imagination. Here we see that God is the ultimate author of the book because God gave it to John. Therefore, we must pay serious attention to the material in the book as God's message to us.

To show his servants what must soon take place

These events *must* take place. They must take place not merely because they will happen randomly, but they must take place because God is working a plan.

The Greek words for "what must soon take place" are *dei genesthai*. This is an allusion to Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the future, in Dan. 2:28. The Greek Old Testament, called the Septuagint, uses the same words, *dei genesthai*, but says that Nebuchadnezzar's dream concerned the last days. Now, Revelation is showing the same things to God's servants; but rather than happening in the last days, these events would, from John's perspective, *soon* take place.

Jesus also used the same words, *dei genesthai*, in Matt. 24:6, Mark 13:7, and Luke 21:9, where he described the events to take place at the end of time. Put all of this together and we should recognize that what we are about to read in this book refers to the end of time. The time that Nebuchadnezzar saw in the distant future, for John was to arrive "soon."

Revelation, then, tells us what must take place at the end of time, but it does not tell us precisely when these things will take place, nor does it describe precisely how these things will take place. Instead, Revelation simply describes in general terms what will take place at the end of time. And it does this using cryptic symbols that are difficult to understand.

He signified it

The Greek word for *signified* (*semaino*) refers to a cryptic sign or a symbol. A number of different words originate from this Greek word and have been transformed over time. For instance, *semaphore* is communication

coding using flags. Also *semantics* is the study of relations between signs (words) and what they mean. Consider also the word *signature*, which is to symbolize one's name using a code (letters). Ancient kings used a *signet* ring to symbolize their approval of documents.

The same word is used in John 12:32–33 where Jesus mentioned that he would be lifted up to die. Jesus' statement, wrote John, *signified* the way Jesus would die. In other words, it was a cryptic way of describing his death on a cross.

Again, Jesus used the same word with Peter in John 21:18 when he cryptically signified the kind of death Peter would die. The Greek Old Testament also uses the same word in Dan. 2:28 concerning the vision that Nebuchadnezzar saw. It was a vision using cryptic symbols, which is why Nebuchadnezzar's wise men could not interpret it for him.

In this verse, the word *signified* indicates that Revelation is communicating to us by means of cryptic symbols. This concept functions as a baseline. If we do not recognize that Revelation is a book of symbols, we will never understand it correctly.

Those who argue that Revelation is primarily a literal book will do well to investigate John's statement more thoroughly. The future events that John saw in vision were to occur as real events; however, they were shown to him in figurative or symbolic presentations, not literal ones. Therefore, they must be decoded and interpreted. And these symbols can only be interpreted when one possesses the key to the code, which is the rest of Scripture. Without the whole of Scripture, interpreting Revelation would be completely impossible. We will only gain an understanding of the beasts, locusts, plagues, horns, women, symbolic numbers, and so on, by searching for how these symbols are used by earlier prophets and by allusions to Old Testament stories and writings.

And, by the way, we will best understand Revelation when we seek to understand what the first readers of the book understood when they read it. And they did understand it, as we will see in verse 3. The Christians of the first century, it seems, actually used the cryptic language we find in Revelation as part of their security from the persecution they faced. For instance, when one Christian spoke of a woman, another Christian understood that the speaker referred to the church.⁶ It was a language that was gained from, learned from, and deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Unfortunately, we have, in large part, lost that language and we can only begin to recover it by

⁶ 2 John 1

immersing ourselves in Scripture as the early Christians did.

Sending it through his angel to his servant, John

John wrote Revelation but only insofar as he recorded what he saw. The real author of Revelation is God, who gave it to Jesus, who gave it to John through his angel. Then John wrote what he saw, doing the best he could do within the limits of human language.

Rev. 1:2

Who testified concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, which he saw.

Who testified concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, which he saw

We find the word of God and the testimony of Jesus paired three times in Revelation: here, verse 9, and Rev. 20:4. The testimony of Jesus, we learn from Rev. 19:10, is the spirit of prophecy. So John testifying concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus is a way of stating that he was Holy Spirit–inspired as he wrote. John was a prophet like the Old Testament prophets, and the word of the Lord came through him. Often the Old Testament prophets are said to have spoken the “word of the Lord” or the “word of God.” The fact that Revelation uses this same formula means that we should understand that the word of prophecy in this book carries the same authority as other prophets of God.

There are connections also between the word of God and the testimony of Jesus and the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah, the Old and the New Testaments, and the two witnesses that we will encounter in Rev. 11. All of these are symbols that correlate with the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Rev. 1:3

Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep the things that are written in it, for the time is near.

Blessed

The Greek word for *blessed* here is the same word Jesus used in the Beatitudes in Matt. 5. The underlying meaning includes the idea of deep-seated joy. Seven times this blessing is pronounced throughout the book of Revelation. They are called Revelation's seven beatitudes.⁷

The one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy

Revelation was intended to be read publicly, which was a common practice in John's time. The original word for *hear* changes meaning depending on how it is used. One way means to hear without understanding and the other is to hear with understanding. In this case, the word means to hear with understanding. Both those who read the book to the people and those hearing it read could expect to be blessed by the message contained in the book. So the premise that Revelation is a sealed book that cannot be understood is refuted from the beginning in the third verse. God intends for Revelation to be read and understood.

And keep the things that are written in it

Not only is the book to be read and understood but it is to be kept or obeyed. God had a serious purpose in mind for his people when he sent this vision to John. He meant for us to study, to work out the meaning of the symbols, to comprehend how we should respond, and then to act accordingly.

For the time is near

Even in John's day, the time of the end was near. The few thousand years in which the problem of sin has developed and grown into its hideous present form is, in the scope of eternity, only a tiny blip on the timeline. And out of that time we possess only our lifetime. From an eternal perspective, the time is very near indeed, and we must live in that constant expectation because the end of time can arrive at any moment simply by our own death.

⁷ The seven beatitudes of Revelation: Rev. 1:3, Rev. 14:13, Rev. 16:15, Rev. 19:9, Rev. 20:6, Rev. 22:7, Rev. 22:14



Revelation 1:4–8

⁴ John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from the one who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits, which are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us a kingdom, priests before God, even his Father— to him be glory and power forever and ever, amen.

⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Yes, amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”



Rev. 1:4

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from the one who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits, which are before his throne.

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia

We know that there were actually more than seven churches in Asia Minor in John’s time. For instance, Paul wrote to Colossae and in his letter he mentioned the churches in Troas and Hierapolis. And the book of Acts mentions the church in Miletus. The number seven was used for its symbolic value of completion and perfection, which is a formula for numbers that we encounter often in Revelation. The symbolic nature of the number seven indicates that the letters to the seven churches were actually intended for all of the churches, not just the seven that were named. More than that, as we will discover, the letters were intended not only for the churches of

John's day but for God's church of all time.

At the end of the book, Rev. 22:16 makes the same statement again, which means that the entire book of Revelation was written to the churches, not only the first three chapters in which the seven churches are named.

Grace to you and peace

If Paul's and Peter's use of this phrase is any indication, grace and peace was a common expression of greeting among the early Christians. It was a combination of the Greek greeting "grace" (*charis*) and the Hebrew greeting "peace" (*shalom*).

From the one who is, and who was, and who is to come

This title, which refers to God's eternal existence, is an echo of the Old Testament term *Yahweh* in Exod. 3:14. God is the eternal one, past, present, and future—the one reality. The same phrase is associated in Rev. 4:8 with the Almighty, which refers specifically to God the Father.

Interestingly, though, Jesus Christ the Son, who is the exact representation of the Father,⁸ is described in the same terms in verse 8 and in similar terms in the next verse. In the next verse, Jesus is called the faithful witness (who is), the firstborn from the dead (who was), and the ruler of the kings of the earth (who is to come). To the one who loves us (who is) and has freed us from our sins by his blood (who was), and has made us a kingdom, priests before God (who is to come). Then again, in verses 17–18, the pattern repeats yet again, where Jesus said, "I am the first and the last and the one who lives (who is). I became dead (who was), and behold I am alive forever and ever (who is to come), and I have the keys to Death and of Hades (the Almighty)."⁹

The seven spirits, which are before his throne

In Rev. 4:5, the seven spirits are called seven lamps, which is an allusion to the Old Testament sanctuary where the seven-branched candlestick represented the Holy Spirit. Also, in Zech. 4 the seven lamps symbolize the Holy Spirit. In the Greek translation of Isa. 11:2 we find seven aspects of the Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, godliness, and the fear of God. In the letters to the seven churches, each letter ends with the sentence, "He who has an ear let him

⁸ Heb. 1:3

⁹ With thanks to Ken Mayberry who supplied this paragraph.

hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The number seven is a symbol for completeness and wholeness. Thus, even though the Holy Spirit is one, he is described as seven.

In addition, in Rev. 5:6 we will see the Lamb, which represents Christ. There the Lamb has seven eyes, which, it says, are the seven spirits of God. This shows the connection between God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Rev. 1:5

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

From Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is not pictured in symbols here, as are the Father and Holy Spirit. He is named outright. In verses 4 and 5, then, we see the entire Trinity, with the Father described as the one who was and is and is to come, the Holy Spirit described as the seven spirits, and finally Jesus Christ.

The three descriptive phrases of Jesus that will follow echo Ps. 89 in the Greek Old Testament. There, in the Davidic covenant,¹⁰ Messiah is described as the firstborn of Yahweh, the exalted king, and the faithful witness.

Faithful witness

The Greek word for witness is *martus* from which we get our word *martyr*. Martyrdom was a reality in the early church. Many witnesses of Jesus Christ had been executed by the time Revelation was written. So it was a comfort to the believers to be reminded that Jesus well understood their situation because he too was a faithful witness who was finally nailed to a cross.

Firstborn from the dead

But for Christ the cross was not the end. Three days later he rose from the dead. The idea that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead indicates that he is the representative of all faithful witnesses who will be resurrected in the end through their faith in him.

¹⁰ 2 Sam. 7:8–16

Ruler of the kings of the earth

By his status as the firstborn from the dead, Jesus has gained the title of “ruler of the kings of the earth.” In Rev. 4–5 we will see scenes of Jesus’ enthronement after his resurrection when he began to rule again at the right hand of the Father.

To the one who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

John stated unequivocally that Jesus Christ loves us. And his love is so great that he came to earth in order to die to give us the salvation we could receive no other way. His blood, his life in exchange for ours, is the agent that has freed us from sin’s claim upon our lives. This is the gospel, which is foundational to the rest of Revelation.

Rev. 1:6

And has made us a kingdom, priests before God, even his Father—
to him be glory and power forever and ever, amen.

Has made us a kingdom, priests before God, even his Father

This statement comes directly from Exod. 19:6, where God stated his purpose for his people, Israel. His desire was that Israel would become a kingdom of priests, people who would model a true relationship with God. It is not that God intended each person to function in the capacity of an Old Testament priest in the sanctuary, but that God intended every person to live the kind of exemplary life that a priest should live. Priests are ministers and in this regard every person is to be a literal priest in that we are to spend our lives in the task of drawing people to God. For Israel, when the other nations would observe how Israel was blessed and would ask the reason, Israel could point them to God. By making this statement here, God was showing that this same responsibility has been given to his New Testament people as well.¹¹

To him be glory and power forever and ever, amen.

Is it any wonder that John erupted in praise to God for his incredible goodness to us? God’s promises to Israel did not fail when the nation re-

¹¹ Compare 1 Peter 2:9.

jected Christ because in Christ Israel continues to exist and continues to bear the responsibility to be a kingdom of priests that points the nations to God as the one and only God.

Rev. 1:7

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Yes, amen.

He is coming in the clouds

These words allude to Dan. 7:13, which describes the Son of Man coming on the clouds. From the beginning of the book we see that the second coming of Christ is central to the message of Revelation. By the time we finish we will see how every aspect of the book is directing our attention to that event, including an attempt by Satan to counterfeit Christ's second coming. Fortunately, Satan will not be able to come in the clouds. This is one of the ways the faithful people of God will be able to distinguish between the counterfeit and the genuine.

Every eye will see him

Another of the signs of Christ's coming will be the fact that no one on earth will miss the event. Every eye will see him coming in his glory. While there will be counterfeit second comings,¹² when the real thing happens there will be no mistaking it by the simple fact that every eye will see him.

Including those who pierced him

Zech. 12:10–14 describes how the people of Israel will look upon the one they pierced and mourn for him. "Those who pierced him" seems to indicate that those specifically involved in crucifying Christ, the religious leaders and priests of Israel, will be among those who witness the Second Coming with their own eyes. Even though the wicked as a whole will not be resurrected until after the thousand years, as we will see later in Revelation, it seems that there may be small pre-resurrection of certain people so that they can see the one whom they pierced coming in the clouds as he promised.

¹² Matt. 24:24–27

All the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Yes, amen.

In Matt. 24:30, Jesus described how he would return in power and great glory and the tribes of the earth would mourn. This occasion will be one of great joy to those who are expecting and longing for Christ's return, but it will be an occasion of fear and distress for those who persist in rebellion against him.

Rev. 1:8

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

I am the Alpha and the Omega

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Rev. 21:6 uses this phrase again and includes as a clarification “the beginning and end.” Rev. 1:17 and 2:8 both use the term *first* and *last* for Christ. The Greek words can be used in a variety of ways and these instances seem to refer not so much to time but to the origin of life, meaning that in God resides all life from the beginning into all eternity.

First and last are significant words in the Old Testament because they identify God as God, the one and only God.¹³ In Isa. 43:10–13, he states that there is none before him and no one will come after him. He is the only savior.

Appropriately, the book of Revelation closes with these same Greek words in Rev. 21:6 and 22:13, although they are translated often as *beginning* and *end* or *first* and *last*.

Jon Paulien notes that being the Alpha and Omega was the supposed claim of the goddess Hekate as well.¹⁴ There are other instances where Christ claims titles that this goddess also supposedly claimed, so it appears that Jesus was making the statement that other gods may have such titles attributed to them but he is the only one who can actually support such claims.

¹³ Isa. 44:6

¹⁴ Jon Paulien, “Revelation 1–5 [review] / David Aune” (*Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 1999), 37.2. Available at: digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol37/iss2/52.

The one who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty

In verse 4, this description referred to God the Father, and later the title “the Almighty” is used for the Father as well. Here the same description is deliberately applied to Jesus Christ,¹⁵ which is a blatant claim to Christ’s equality with the Father. The point is clear, Jesus is Almighty God. These titles are like a signature telling us that everything summarized here and to be expanded throughout the rest of the book will surely come to pass. The word of God has spoken.



Revelation 1:9–20

⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the affliction and kingdom and patient endurance, which is in Jesus, came to be on the island, which is called Patmos, on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit during the Lord’s Day, and I heard a loud voice like a trumpet behind me. ¹¹ “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

¹² And I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I had turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a Son of Man, dressed in a foot-length robe and wrapped around the chest with a golden sash. ¹⁴ His head and his hairs were white like wool, white as snow; and his eyes were like a flame of fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like polished brass, which had been purified in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ He had seven stars in his right hand, a sharp, two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth, and his face was like the sun shining in its strength.

¹⁷ And when I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. And he

¹⁵ More information on this title for God can be found in the explanation on Rev. 4:8.

placed his right hand on me, saying, “Stop being afraid. I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I became dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”¹⁹ Write, therefore, what you have seen, namely, the things that are and the things that must happen after these things.²⁰ 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 are the seven churches.



Rev. 1:9

I, John, your brother and companion in the affliction and kingdom and patient endurance, which is in Jesus, came to be on the island, which is called Patmos, on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

I, John

It is commonly accepted that the apostle John, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and 1–3 John, is the author of the book of Revelation. The fact that he begins with, “I, John,” may be significant. As we work our way through Revelation we will often see how much of the book interacts with the book of Daniel. And the book of Daniel ends with, “I, Daniel.” It is almost as if John was beginning Revelation with the same formula as a hint that Revelation picks up where the book of Daniel left off. If this was the only instance of such a connection, that conclusion might be more arguable, but it happens often enough that coincidence is unlikely. Comparing the last three chapters of Daniel with the Rev. 1:12–20 confirms this idea.¹⁶

Your brother and companion in the affliction and kingdom and patient endurance, which is in Jesus

John called himself the brother and companion of the church mem-

¹⁶ For additional details see: Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 96.

bers he was writing to. And he was not a brother and companion only in fair weather but also in the foul weather of affliction that required endurance. Like Jesus himself, John lived among his people, suffering along with them while modeling for them the patient endurance that all Christians must accept. He was also their companion in the kingdom, which was discussed in verse 6.

Came to be on the island, which is called Patmos

We do not know for certain how John came to be on Patmos, a small, rocky, desolate island in the Aegean Sea. Tradition has it that Patmos was a penal colony where the inmates were forced to work the rock quarries. Tradition also holds that John was exiled to Patmos by Domitian after the emperor failed to execute him, and that John was later released to return to Ephesus. There is no reason to doubt the tradition.

It was probably about 95 AD that John received this vision. The fact that he was exiled on Patmos without access to editors like he had for his other books, accounts for the difference in the level of Greek language. Greek was a second language for John, and without someone to correct his work, John's lack of skill in the language shows in ways that it does not in his other books.

On account of the word of God and testimony of Jesus

What John was saying with this statement is that because he spoke the word of God and the testimony of Jesus¹⁷ in opposition to the authorities who commanded him to cease and desist, that is why he was exiled to Patmos.

Rev. 1:10

I was in the Spirit during the Lord's Day, and I heard a loud voice like a trumpet behind me.

I was in the Spirit

"I was in the Spirit" is a way of saying that John received an inspired vision from the Holy Spirit. It is a similar experience that Paul described in 2 Cor. 12:2–4.

¹⁷ See the explanation in verse 2.

During the Lord's Day

It may well be that the designation “Lord’s Day” has a double meaning. On one level, for John and the early Christians the Lord’s Day was a designation of the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week.¹⁸ On another level, John and the early Christians were familiar with “the day of the Lord,” which was a designation for judgment day, the end of the world, and a day of deliverance for God’s people, to which the Sabbath was intimately connected.¹⁹ John seems to have invented the name “Lord’s Day” to combine these two concepts. This dual meaning makes sense in the scheme of Revelation because we will later discover how much the Sabbath will figure into end time events. The Lord’s Day as a term to describe Sunday has only traditional and not biblical support.

I heard a loud voice like a trumpet behind me

In the rest of Scripture, the voice like a trumpet represents the voice of God.²⁰

Rev. 1:11

“Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches

The trumpet-like voice instructed John to write in a book what he was about to see and then to send it to the seven churches. The vision was not given for John’s sake alone. It bore a message to the believers as a whole. As mentioned in verse 4, more than seven churches actually existed. These seven were a representative group based on the symbolism of the number seven.

Plenty of circumstantial evidence points to the idea that not only was this book written to the seven churches that were relevant to the place and

¹⁸ Isa. 58:13–14: My holy day, holy day of the Lord; Matt. 12:8, Mark 2:27–28, Luke 6:5: Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

¹⁹ Isa. 66:23; Deut. 5:15; Ezek. 20:10–20

²⁰ Exod. 19:16, Matt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16

time of the seven churches, in addition these messages also fit historical time periods in the Christian church. This will be discussed more as we proceed.

Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Interestingly, the messages to these churches are arranged in a chiasmic structure, meaning that each church has a parallel in another church.²¹ For instance, when we read the message to Ephesus and compare it to the message to Laodicea, we find significant parallels. Ephesus and Laodicea are parallel, Smyrna and Philadelphia are parallel, and Pergamos and Sardis are parallel. By studying a message to one church in relation to its counterpart brings new insights. The center of this structure is the church of Thyatira, which is obviously unique.

Rev. 1:12

And I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I had turned I saw seven golden lampstands.

I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me

First, John heard the voice and then afterward he saw the speaker. This is typical of what we will encounter later in Revelation. Often John heard a description of what he would see, then later he saw it. And often what he saw was not exactly what he heard described. For instance, in Rev. 5 he was told that he would see the lion of the tribe of Judah, but when he looked he saw a slain lamb. They are two different images but they represent the same thing. This formula is important to remember as we work our way through the symbols of Revelation.

When I had turned I saw seven golden lampstands

Lampstands, for those familiar with the Old Testament, immediately draws our attention to Israel's sanctuary.²² We learn from Zech. 4:2–6, 14 and Rev. 4:5 that the burning lamps on the lampstands represent the Holy Spirit, while the lampstands themselves represent those that bear the light,

²¹ For more explanation on chiasmic structures, see the introduction to this book.

²² Exod. 25:31–37

the churches that have the Holy Spirit at work in and through them.²³ It is always a combination of the Holy Spirit working through human beings that gives light to the world. In the Old Testament, Israel was God's light to the world.²⁴ In the New Testament, the followers of Christ continue to fill that function.²⁵ Later, in Rev. 11:4, we will find that the two witnesses are also the two lampstands.

Rev. 1:13

And in the midst of the lampstands was one like a Son of Man, dressed in a foot-length robe and wrapped around the chest with a golden sash.

In the midst of the lampstands

In the Old Testament sanctuary, the priests were responsible for keeping the lamps burning brightly with holy fire while they served among the lampstands in their priestly, mediatorial role. Here we see Jesus filling this role in the heavenly sanctuary, which is described at length in the book of Hebrews.

One like a Son of Man

In Dan. 7:13–14, the Ancient of Days gave all authority to “one like the son of man coming in the clouds of heaven.” In addition, the description here is nearly identical to the description we find in Dan. 10:5–12. These are all clues, as will be confirmed throughout the book, that Revelation has a special connection to the book of Daniel. The Son of Man is Jesus himself because he applied this designation to himself.²⁶ Indeed, it was one of his favorite ways to refer to himself because it makes explicit his connection to humanity, which he came to save, while at the same time highlighting his divinity, since only God rides the clouds in the Old Testament Scriptures.²⁷

²³ See verse 20.

²⁴ Isa. 42:6–7; 49:6; 60:1–3

²⁵ Matt. 5:14–16; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16

²⁶ e.g. Mark 13:26

²⁷ Dan. 7:13; Deut. 33:26; Ps. 68:33,34; Ps. 104:3; Isa. 19:1

Dressed in a foot-length robe

Again we see the sanctuary connection in this passage because this is the same word in the Greek Old Testament for the high priest's robe. Serving as our high priest is Jesus' role in the heavenly sanctuary.

Wrapped around the chest with a golden sash

A significant piece of the Old Testament priestly garments was the sash.²⁸ In Dan. 10:5, this was how Christ appeared as well. In Isa. 22:20, which will figure prominently in this first part of Revelation, a sash is a symbol of authority. In Rev. 15:6, the seven angels that bring the seven bowls of plagues to pour upon the earth also wear golden sashes. Their work is to bring judgment upon the earth. So it is possible that Christ wearing this golden sash is an indication of his authority as judge. Thus, he is both intercessor (priest) and judge (king).

Rev. 1:14

His head and his hairs were white like wool, white as snow; and his eyes were like a flame of fire.

His head and hairs were white like wool, white as snow

This is a similar description to the Ancient of Days in Dan. 7:9, where it is a description of God. The readers of this vision would again recognize that this was a statement that Jesus is God. Much of the way that Jesus was presented to John emphasized his sheer brilliance, which eventually culminates in his face shining like the sun.

His eyes were like a flame of fire

In the judgment scene of Zech. 4:10, we see seven eyes of the Lord that roam the earth. Similarly, in Rev. 5:6, the seven eyes of the Lamb symbolize the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth, which is also judgment language. In Rev. 2:18, Jesus judges Thyatira and in Rev. 19:12 he judges his enemies. Later in Revelation we will also see that eyes represent wisdom, discernment, and intelligence. With all of this evidence combined, the eyes of Jesus like a flame of fire seems to symbolize Jesus' right to rule and judge with wisdom and fairness.

²⁸ Exod. 28:4, 39; 29:9; 39:29; Lev. 8:7, 13; 16:4

Rev. 1:15

His feet were like polished brass, which had been purified in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters.

His feet were like polished brass

Feet of brass is part of the description of the Son of Man in Dan. 10:6, and also of the four living creatures in Ezek. 1:7. It may be that the significance of this description is for effect, but we do have a few hints in Scripture that feet may be understood to represent a messenger. For instance, Isa. 52:7 mentions the beautiful feet of the one who brings good news. Paul, in Eph. 6:15, describes the feet of the one who bears the gospel of peace. Perhaps the focus on his feet could convey the idea that Jesus is the one who brings good news for his people because in him the gospel of our salvation has been accomplished. Another possible symbol that lies behind the idea of brass is that brass is a combination of metals, which may represent the fact that Jesus' took on human nature and is now both human and divine.

Which had been purified in a furnace

John was grasping for words to describe what he was seeing. Not only does the radiance of Jesus' feet bespeak his glory but Isa. 48:10 is just one example among many that describes affliction as a furnace for refining. Perhaps there is also some meaning connected to the trials Jesus faced in order to bring us the good news of the gospel.

His voice was like the sound of many waters

It seems the fact that Jesus' voice is described as sounding like many waters represents his identification with humanity. This description is drawn from Ezek. 43:2 where the glory of God comes in from the east with the noise of many waters. In Revelation 17 we will discover that many waters is a symbol for peoples, nations, and languages, i.e. multitudes of people. This symbol can be either negative, as it is in Rev. 17, or positive, as it is in this verse and in Rev. 14:2, where the saints have a voice like many waters.

This is not a voice of a tinkling stream but a voice of power and majesty, like the roaring of a great waterfall.

Rev. 1:16

He had seven stars in his right hand, a sharp, two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth, and his face was like the sun shining in its strength.

He had seven stars in his right hand

These stars, verse 20 tells us, represent the angels of the seven churches, which are a symbol themselves. In Dan. 12:43, which we know is of particular importance in Revelation, stars represent God's faithful people. This symbol of the seven stars will be further expanded in verse 20.

A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth

This symbol is repeated several times in Revelation.²⁹ The Old Testament background helps us to understand it. For instance, Isa. 49:2 and Ps. 149:6 refer to God's word of judgment being like a two-edged sword. Also in the New Testament, in Heb. 4:12 and Eph. 6:17, God's word is compared to a sword. Each time we see the symbol of the two-edged sword in Revelation it will be in the context of judgment by the word of God.

His face was like the sun shining in its strength

Once before John saw Jesus with his face shining like the sun, at the transfiguration in Matt. 17:2. It was the glorified Christ that John was seeing here. This imagery can also be connected with Hebrews 1:3, which speaks of Jesus as the radiance of the Father's glory. This is the same Shekinah glory exhibited in the Old Testament sanctuary.

Rev. 1:17

And when I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. And he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Stop being afraid. I am the first and the last."

When I saw him I fell at his feet like a dead man

The last time John saw Jesus glorified like this he had the same reac-

²⁹ Rev. 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21

tion, falling on his face to the ground.³⁰ Daniel too fell on his face when he saw Jesus in his glory.³¹

He placed his right hand on me

Again, like Daniel and after the transfiguration, Jesus touched John after he had fallen to the ground. It was a touch of comfort and strength.

Stop being afraid

The grammar of the sentence makes it clear that John was afraid. It was the first result of sin that Adam became afraid of God. So now this is God's constant word to his people when encountering divinity: stop being afraid.

I am the first and the last

See the explanation in verse 8.

Rev. 1:18

. . . and the living one. I became dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.

The living one. I became dead and behold I am alive forever and ever

This is a summary statement of the gospel in its entirety. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the gospel. Without it there can be no salvation for sinners. The book of Revelation is often called the fifth gospel because it is the story of what Jesus is doing in heaven to complete the process of our salvation, which he guaranteed at the cross.

I have the keys of Death and of Hades

Death and Hades are here used as proper nouns because they are being personified. At the end of Revelation they will be punished as enemies of God.³² In Revelation, they act as symbols for demonic powers.

Hades can refer to a place (the underworld realm of the dead) or a being (Hades, the Greek god of the underworld). Although the Greek understanding of Hades is a myth, Jesus used the myth to represent the power

³⁰ Matt. 17:6

³¹ Dan. 10:9

³² Rev. 20:14

behind death, and to make the statement that he has overcome death.

By the way, for some interesting history, Ranko Stefanovic, in his commentary on Revelation, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, describes how the Greek goddess, Hekate, supposedly claimed the credentials of verses 17–18 (the goddess of revelation, the beginning and the end, the bearers of the keys, etc.).³³

Rev. 1:19

Write, therefore, what you have seen, namely, the things that are and the things that must happen after these things.

Write, therefore, what you have seen

What John had just seen was the vision of Christ among the lampstands. This was an important vision for the churches to study and understand, which is why Jesus wanted John to record it.

The things that are

“The things that are” refers to what John would be shown next, the things that are written in chapters 1–3.

The things that must happen after these things

“The things that must happen after these things” refers to what John would be shown after “the things that are.” In other words, in the rest of the book, John would be shown events that would follow those of chapters 1–3. We are to recognize a difference between these two sections of Revelation. God was sending this revelation to encourage the church in the days to come, both in John’s day and the days that would follow. Jesus understands what we are going through.

Rev. 1:20

The mystery of the seven stars, which you saw in my right hand, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

³³ Stefanovic, 102, 106.

The mystery of the seven stars, which you saw in my right hand

In verse 16 we saw Jesus holding seven stars in his hand. Now in this verse, we will hear an explanation of this symbol as well as a little more information on the seven golden lampstands. The fact that the stars are specified as being in Christ's right hand is probably based on the idea that the right hand is the dominant, strong hand. It is, generally speaking, the right hand that wields the power of the body. Often in the Old Testament God refers to saving his people by his right hand.³⁴

The seven golden lampstands

The seven golden lampstands refers back to verse 12, where Jesus walked among the seven golden lampstands.

The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches

Here the symbol of the seven stars is revealed. The seven stars represent the angels to the seven churches. The meaning of that was clear to the Christians who spoke the coded language of first century Christianity, but for us who have largely lost that language some mystery remains. If the seven stars represent the angels to the churches, who then are the angels to the seven churches? The answer is found in the Old Testament. In Mal. 2:7 and 3:1, priests and messengers of God's people are called angels. It seems reasonable to understand that the seven churches themselves (called lampstands in this verse) refers to the people of the churches and the angels refer to the leaders of the seven churches. This idea is strengthened by what we will learn later in Revelation when we will encounter three angels³⁵ and three evil spirits, which are fallen angels.³⁶ In these cases, the angels represent those who are spreading either the gospel or the counterfeit gospel.

The seven lampstands are the seven churches

The seven golden lampstands that we saw in verse 12 represent the seven churches to whom the letters of Rev. 2–3 are written. The people of the churches are the holders, so to speak, of the Holy Spirit flame because it is through human beings that the Holy Spirit often works.

The symbols of stars, angels, and lampstands go even deeper and will be explored further in Rev. 3:1.

³⁴ e.g. Isa. 41:10; 48:13

³⁵ Rev. 14:3

³⁶ Rev. 16: 3