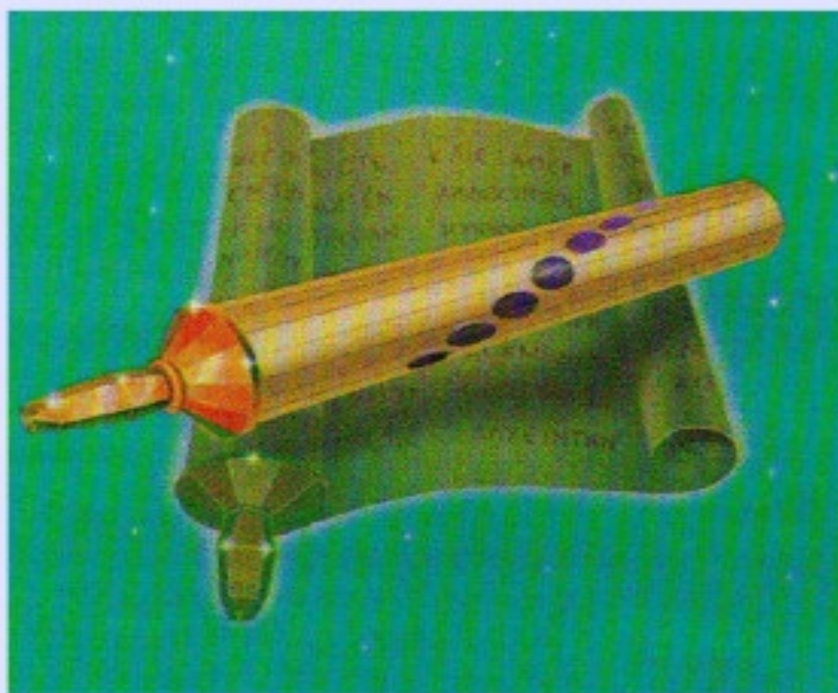


# Exploring the Word of God

# Revelation

Volume 1: Introductory Articles  
and Chapters 1-3



Paul Kroll



GRACE COMMUNION  
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*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

# Exploring the Word of God Revelation, Volume 1: Introductory Articles and Chapters 1-3

By Paul Kroll

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## **A Vision of Victory**

In a time of declining faith,  
we need the Revelation message.

Living faith in God is one of the burning issues of our time. That's because for all practical purposes, God is dead – even to many Christians. They profess to believe in God, but they think and live as if he did not exist.

Such a crisis of faith among Christians is not new. The first-century church also had its own problems of faith. Like today, some Christians of that time were dying spiritually. Many Christians were pressured to compromise with the pagan society they lived in. Many in the church were enticed by the alluring immoral world to break faith with God.

The church was small, persecuted and hated. At times violent persecution tried the church's faith. With the passage of time, expectations that Jesus would return soon gradually diminished. With uncertainty and evil abounding, the church was asking two faith-related questions: Why hasn't Jesus returned as promised (2 Peter 3:4)? How long must the suffering go on (Revelation 6:10)?

False teachers, meanwhile, advised accommodation with pagan beliefs and Roman politics. They led many converts away from Christ and back into the world.

Then a book we know as Revelation or the Apocalypse was written to encourage the church and to restore the faith of the members. Most conservative scholars believe the book of Revelation was written about A.D. 96.

Seven short, stylized letters in chapters 2 and 3 graphically describe the major faith-destroying ideas gripping the church. These letters, written to seven churches in what is now western Turkey, address problems

symptomatic of the church as a whole.

We don't know whether most of the members in the first-century churches accepted the urging of Revelation to become rejuvenated in their faith. But those Christians who took the book to heart would have experienced the power of renewed faith.

Although Revelation was written to the late first-century church, its message speaks to us as well. The book can help stir us to a powerful faith in God. The message of Revelation helps us understand that Christ is the foundation of our faith.

### **Vital message**

Revelation's main concern is with spiritual survival. It reveals how the church can survive in a hostile world. The book proclaims the wonderful, faith-building news that, despite appearances to the contrary, God is in charge of history, the world and our lives.

Revelation assures us of a future in which evil will end, even though we may not personally live to see it. The book tells us that the many adversities and sufferings Christians endure are not in vain. Christians may suffer in this life, but in the end the returning Christ will judge the world and save his people.

The final message of Revelation is that God will intervene in human history through Christ and forever eliminate evil and reward the faithful. It tells us the future belongs to those who put their faith in the crucified and glorified Savior of humanity — Jesus Christ.

J. Ramsey Michaels, professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University, puts it well: "At the heart of the Book of Revelation is a story, the same gospel story that echoes throughout the entire New Testament, about a slain Lamb victorious over death and evil and a God who makes everything new" (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, page 147).

## **Lord of history**

Revelation encourages persecuted and suffering Christians to find strength and hope in God's power, love and justice. To this end, in the book's fourth chapter, God is picture figuratively as sitting on the throne of the universe (Revelation 4:1-11).

In the fifth chapter, we see Jesus Christ, the Lamb, who has made salvation possible (Revelation 5:1-14). He is the key to the book of Revelation and safeguards the destiny of the church. Chapter 5 closes with a chorus of praise for the glorified Christ: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (verse 12).

Revelation tells us Jesus Christ has won the victory over every evil. Through every trial, even death, his people are spiritually safe and secure through faith in him. Thus, the book of Revelation answers the question every Christian has asked: Where is God, and why are we suffering?

The book of Revelation reaches across the centuries to lift the hopes of those who trust in Christ the Lamb, and exhorts them to persevere. It has provided hope for many generations of Christians.

## **Victory proclaimed**

That same message motivates those who follow Jesus Christ today. No matter what happens to the church, God knows the needs of his people. Even though some are killed for their faith, he will vindicate the cause of the righteous. Despite appearances to the contrary, God rules in human affairs, and he will bring his people through every trial.

Revelation proclaims the joy of salvation in the midst of a turbulent and corrupt world. It focuses on the reality of the eternal kingdom of God — the new Jerusalem — in which "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

God will then be with all his people in a final way when the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of Jesus Christ (Revelation 11:15). Until then, as members of the body of Christ, the church, we must be patient — follow God — keep the faith — trust him to work out his wonderful plan — and “wait a little longer” (Revelation 6:11).

### **Timeless Themes**

Many see Revelation mainly as a forecast of specific events that can be pinpointed in our day. But Revelation does not offer — nor has it ever offered — a blueprint of future events. Revelation was originally written to help the first-century church with its spiritual concerns. However, its message is applicable to all Christians at all times. Revelation explains God’s purpose and the causes of the world’s problems, giving assurance and hope to those who follow God’s will. Its main themes include:

1. God is Supreme Ruler.
2. Jesus is the Lamb of God who was slain to redeem his people.
3. Jesus is worthy of worship
4. Jesus is the Judge of the living and the dead. His final judgment of the nations will take place after his second coming.
5. God’s faithful people must live in a spiritually corrupt world until Jesus returns. In spite of trials, his people remain spiritually secure.
6. Christians must remain faithful in their trials and not give their allegiance to the corrupt world characterized by “Babylon the Great.”
7. The patience and faithfulness of the suffering saints will result in their receiving a glorious inheritance at the return of Jesus Christ.

### **Worthy is the Lamb**

One of the most paradoxical parts of Revelation is John’s vision of the lion followed immediately by a slain lamb. As the vision opens in Revelation 5:1-5, John is told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the

scroll sealed with seven seals.

But as John looks for a lion, he sees a lamb instead (verse 6). It is a grisly sight, for the lamb appears to have been slaughtered. This is the first occurrence of lamb imagery in Revelation. It's as though the image has been kept for its dramatic entrance precisely until this point.

The Lamb is Revelation's defining title for Christ. This lamb imagery, in turn, is connected to the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The imagery is central to the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. There the future sacrifice for sin is pictured as a lamb being led to the slaughter. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, for he was the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world.

In the book of Revelation, this lamb metaphor has a double image. It tells us the slaughtered Lamb is coming a second time as the Word of God's wrath to deal with all who oppose him (Revelation 6:16; 19:7, 9, 11-16).

But Jesus Christ, the Lamb, first shed his own blood. That is what makes him worthy to open the scroll and reveal the message of the book of Revelation. The angelic hosts of heaven praise the Lamb, saying he is worthy to open the book's meaning because he was killed. With his blood he purchased people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Thus, there is a paradox about the picture in Revelation 5. Though its central figure has triumphed (the Lion), he appears to have been conquered and killed (the Lamb). Jesus overcame the world by sacrificing himself. His supreme act of triumph was accomplished by shedding his own blood (Revelation 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11).

Jesus' death as the Lamb of God gained a victory over the cosmic powers in opposition to God. The Lamb of God defeated Satan, sin and the power of the grave. That is the message of Revelation 5: Jesus has won the victory



over his enemies by sacrificing his life as the Lamb. Through this act he is worthy to return as the “Lion” to rule the nations.

Thus, Jesus as Lamb tells Christians — his lambs — that they are to suffer the outrageous darts of their oppression in patience. They must be submissive to God and place their unswerving allegiance with him. He will vindicate the cause of those whose faith remains in him.

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# 1,900 Years of Revelation

The mark of the beast. Armageddon. The Four Horsemen.

666. Babylon the great. The seven last plagues.

The bottomless pit. The lake of fire.

These images of terror and catastrophe from the book of Revelation have greatly influenced the popular psyche. Even the secular press uses images such as “armageddon” and “four horsemen of the apocalypse” to describe calamities in our world.

## **Misunderstood book**

Despite almost 1,900 years of fascination with the book of Revelation – A.D. 96 is often suggested as a date for the book – John’s letter to the churches in his care continues to be misunderstood. And badly misinterpreted.

One popular misconception is that Revelation has nothing of importance to say to us. It’s considered to be merely a bizarre piece of first-century writing with no relevance for today. Another wrong idea is that Revelation is a codebook describing a specific outline of history written in advance. Countless interpreters have tried to “decode” the book as a handbook for predicting the end of the world.

This is not new. About the middle of the second century, a newly baptized Christian named Montanus claimed to have charismatic gifts. He taught that the church had entered the final age. Montanus and his followers predicted that the end of the world was near. The new Jerusalem was about to descend upon the nearby village of Pepuza, in what is now Turkey.

Montanus and his followers drew support for such ideas in large part from the book of Revelation. Montanus’ influence spread rapidly and widely among Christians throughout the Roman world. But the prophecy of

Montanus failed. By misinterpreting Revelation, he tarnished the book's reputation to the point that some Christians thought it shouldn't be in the Bible.

The claims of Christian groups from Montanus to the present – that Revelation pinpoints the events, personalities and time period of “the end” – have all failed. This should be a caution for Christians against using the book of Revelation as a predictive handbook.

### **For the church**

We miss a lot by not reading carefully the first chapter of this magnificent vision. It is a message from Jesus Christ to his apostle John to pass on to seven churches in Asia Minor, in what is today western Turkey: “On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea’” (Revelation 1:10-11).

Many people forget that Revelation is written by a church pastor to his churches – to Christians, to those who believe in and accept Jesus Christ and to those who are suffering because of their faith. John is their companion in suffering (verse 9). Revelation had life-and-death meaning for its first hearers because it was written specifically to them. It addressed John's brothers and sisters about dire problems. Some were being persecuted, tortured and even beheaded, as clearly indicated in Revelation 20:4. These believers needed to be reminded that ultimate victory in this world belongs to those who pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, not the emperor in Rome.

So Revelation is written to Christians who live in an often brutal world. In that sense, its message applies to all of us. Essentially, Revelation says we must overcome the world rather than allow it to overcome us (Revelation 3:21).

By using seven church congregations – the number seven often depicted completion to the ancients – John suggests that the spiritual problems and emergencies facing these churches were to be considered representative of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. And by extension, these problems can be seen as threats that Christians in all places and ages must confront.

### **An urgent appeal**

The message to the churches was simple but urgent. Christians in Asia were being challenged to walk through life as witnesses to the truth, even to the point of death. The church members, though, were experiencing their own internal crises, as chapters 2 and 3 make clear. Internal problems besetting the seven churches paralleled the spiritual state of a world in the grip of evil.

John's vision illustrates the consequences of the world's spiritual failing, through judgments such as the seven last plagues. But Christians warned about these judgments as well (Revelation 18:4-5). Revelation tells the church how to escape God's judgment on the world. The church must be in the world and deal with it, but it must not be of the world.

The message of Revelation is that the church must clean up its own spiritual house, do something about its weak spiritual state and take a stand against state persecution. The church must confront the evil in the world pictured by the beast and Babylon. When the church successfully resists the world's evil allure (and the devil behind it), it witnesses to the truth that God exists and that he rules over all.

One of the earliest Christian confessions of faith was, "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9). Revelation was written to bolster that conviction. It pointed in visionary and symbolic language to the "unseen hand" of God. It is God, the book insists, who decides the fate of nations and history. The beast and Babylon attain significance only as opponents of what Jesus Christ is doing. History revolves around him, not the woman who rides the scarlet-colored

beast.

## **Jesus Christ rules**

When John was inspired to depict the future judgment of the beast and the tormentors of the church, it was his way of saying: God is in charge. Jesus Christ is Lord and he will, ultimately, bring his presence to bear on the world. This world of politics and powers is only a stage for the acting out of God's work of redemption.

Revelation's symbolic portrayal of judgment on the world is meant to be a word to the wise as well as a tremendous encouragement. The daily struggles and setbacks of Christians, their battles with faith and temptations to despair – all of this must be understood in terms of the cosmic conflict being fought in the heavenly realm.

## **Calling all Christians**

Revelation answers the question: Who is Lord? The churches John wrote to suffered under evil rulers (Revelation 2:12-13) and from their own human failings (Revelation 3:17). The wicked seemed to flourish. Why? Where was God and why hadn't he rescued his people? Why be a Christian in such a world?

These are the uncertainties Revelation deals with. They are issues *we* wonder about as well. Revelation answers these questions for us today as it did for the church in the first century. The book insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, God rules. He will ultimately end the evil that seems to hold sway in our world. The church is to stay focused on the almighty God, who is the ruler of the universe, and to the Lamb, who has saved them.

The church may seem powerless on earth – and it is, of itself. But the slain Jesus was glorified, and is at the right hand of the Father, controlling the world's destiny. This Christ is not only Lord of the world but also Lord and

Savior of the church.

Faith in God's sovereignty over all things – including evil – is the decisive theme and emphasis of Revelation. After 1,900 years, it is still ahead of its time.

## **Listen to the Music**

By Paul Kroll & Neil Earle

Revelation has its roots sunk deep in the powerful rhythms of ancient Near Eastern language and life. R.H. Charles, in his two-volume work, *Revelation*, in the International Critical Commentary, enjoyed Revelation 1 on its own terms. He listened to the music. In so doing, he noted the important repetitive pattern of “threes,” a pattern that symbolizes, to the Hebrew mind, certainty and confirmation.

Charles knew that in the ancient Near East, literary form was almost as important as content. The form was a key to the meaning. Imaginative speech of the kind we inadequately label “poetry” in English, attractive rhyme schemes and repetition, and colorful symbolism – these features of Hebrew writing send us verbal cues about how we should read the book.

The creativity is obvious. For example, God uses “the tree of life” from Genesis 2 as the motif for Revelation 22:2. Also, the victorious saints in heaven sing “the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” (Revelation 15:3). This is why Hebrew thought structures pervade the book. The 404 verses in Revelation contain several hundred references to the Old Testament.

### **Patterns of threes**

In Revelation, the patterns are set up starting in verse 1. The Revelation is 1) from God 2) through Christ 3) to his servants. Christ (1) in turn sent it by 2) an angel to 3) his servant John – a double pattern of threes.

Most modern translations, except the New International Version and the New English Bible, follow the King James Version in presenting a threefold rhythm in verse 2, referring to John's witness to "the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to all things that he saw."

Blessed, John continues in verse 3, is

1. the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and
2. blessed are those who hear it and
3. take to heart what is written in it.

In verse 4, John sends greetings

1. from him who is, and who was, and who is to come (three!), and
2. from the seven spirits before his throne, and
3. from Jesus Christ, who is
  1. the faithful witness,
  2. the firstborn from the dead, and
  3. the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In verses 5 and 6, Jesus Christ is exalted because he

1. loves us and
2. has freed us from our sins by his blood, and
3. has made us to be a kingdom and priests.

In verse 7, we encounter a form of Hebrew poetry whereby subsequent phrases fill out the meaning of the leading thought. For example, the point "Look, he is coming with the clouds" is amplified thus:

1. and every eye will see him,
2. even those who pierced him; and
3. all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.

In verse 8, we again meet a triple declaration of Jesus Christ as the Alpha and the Omega. He is described as he "who is, and who was, and who is to come."

John makes a threefold declaration in describing the “suffering and kingdom and patient endurance” that are ours in Jesus Christ (verse 9).

Observing these threefold repetitions in Revelation helps us to appreciate the music of the book as well as its message. It deepens our understanding of the force and power of the inspired Scripture. Revelation is not only authoritative and inspired; it is beautiful. Let’s enjoy it in all its rich dimensions.

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## Revelation: Book of Cosmic Symbols

To understand Revelation, it is helpful to think of this writing as first and foremost a book of *symbols*. For example, we see the victorious Christ, riding on a horse (19:11-16). He wields a sword with which he smites the nations. That picture is symbolic of an *event* and divine power — the return of the Messiah, who destroys the forces of evil.

### Contrast of good and evil

Revelation's symbols are often juxtaposed one against another. This use of comparison and contrast is seen throughout the book. In the middle chapters of Revelation, Satan's forces — the beast and false prophet — are pitted against God's earthly representative, the church. The book describes two ages of human existence, each contrary to the other. Satan, the dragon, is the remorseless adversary of God, and dominates this present world. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, rules a world of peace, popularly known as the millennium.



Revelation portrays and compares two opposing ways of life. Two symbols embody these conflicting lifestyles. A harlot pictures the deceived group, deluded by what's called her "spiritual fornication." This refers to her illicit spiritual liaisons with political rulers. Another group of people follows the Lamb, who is Jesus. These are called the spiritually pure Bride of Christ.

The image of an enormous metropolis — Babylon the Great — stands for

the corrupt system that seduces the world. Revelation contrasts this wicked city with the purity and perfection of the New Jerusalem. Ultimately, the latter stands for the ideal and eternal congregation of those who are faithful to Christ.

Even the promise to share in salvation is represented by this-worldly symbols. This use of symbolism occurs in the seven letters to Christian congregations in the province of Asia. For example, the church in Ephesus is promised salvation by being told it will have “the right to eat from the tree of life” (2:7). That is a metaphor for salvation and eternal life.

Norman Perrin outlined this dualistic and symbolic structure of Revelation in which the spiritual realm, the church, and the world system are given their parts to play. He wrote:

At the pinnacle of power on one side is God, the Pantocrator, ruler of all (1:8). On the other is Satan, the Dragon, who has power, a throne, and great authority (13:2). Allied with God is the Lamb who was slain (5:6)... Allied with Satan is the beast from the sea (13:1-2)... All the people on the earth are divided into two groups; those who have the seal of God on their foreheads and whose names are in the book of life (3:5, 12; 7:3; 20:4; 21:27; 22:4) and those who bear the mark of the beast and worship it (9:4; 13:8; 17:14:9-11; 16:2; 20:15). There is also a sharp contrast between the luxurious and voluptuous harlot, who represents Babylon, the earthly city of abominations (ch.17) and the pure bride of the Lamb, who symbolizes Jerusalem, the heavenly city of salvation (19:7-8; 21: 2, 9-11). This literary tension reflects the political tension between the adherents of the kingdom of God and those of the kingdom of Caesar (11:15; 12:10; 16:10; 17:18). (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 142)

## **Symbolism**

To the modern western world, Revelation’s symbols seem weird and alien. They include a multi-headed dragon; two strange beasts; a city shaped

like a cube 1,500 miles high, wide and long; marks on heads and right hands; a figure's mouth with a sword emerging from it, and so on.

These symbols were not strange to John's original audience for whom the book was written. Revelation drew on commonly known pagan myths, Old Testament and Jewish typologies, as well as New Testament Christian traditions and beliefs. These symbols were generally understood to refer to spiritual truths and historical realities. For example, in the Roman world of John's time there were various stories about a god of heaven slaying the sea monster.

Some of Revelation's symbols played off of such myths circulating in the pagan world. However, the book's symbols are heavily based on Old Testament themes, which in turn had been reinterpreted by Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In Revelation, the meanings of symbols existing in the Jewish and pagan world were again reinterpreted in the light of the Christian's experience in Christ. The point is that the symbols were not strange codes that one had to have special knowledge to understand. In the words of G. B. Caird:

The first readers were almost certainly well versed in the sort of symbolic language and imagery in which the book is written. Whether they had formerly been Jews or pagans, they would read the language of myth as fluently as any modern reader of the daily papers reads the conventional symbols of a political cartoon. Much of this language we can reconstruct for ourselves from the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic writings on the one hand and from Greek and Roman literature, inscriptions, and coinage on the other (*Black's New Testament Commentaries, "A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine,"* 2nd edition, p. 6).

This makes sense if we consider a type of modern graphic genre, the political cartoon. G. R. Beasley-Murray calls the political cartoon "the closest modern parallel" to Revelation's symbols (*The New Century Bible*

*Commentary*, “Revelation,” p. 17). Political cartoons use stereotyped images. Beasley-Murray gives some examples of modern cartoon symbols. Two examples are John Bull, who represents Britain, and Uncle Sam, the United States. The lion also represents Britain and the eagle the United States. Two other symbols are the bear for Russia and the dragon for China.

Often these and other political figures are drawn as caricatures. Says Beasley-Murray, “Frequently the situations depicted are deliberately exaggerated, and even made grotesque, in order that the message may be made plain” (*Revelation*, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 17). The operative word is *plain*. That’s what the symbols of Revelation were to John’s congregations. They were plain, simple and quickly understood. Beasley-Murray explains the point further:

The symbols by which the contemporary political forces and the spiritual powers of heaven and hell are portrayed [in Revelation] were as traditional as Britannia and the British lion, the Russian bear, and the Chinese dragon.... What to the uninitiated modern reader appears grotesque imagery, spoke with power to John’s fellow Christians (17).

Most people are familiar with George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, in which animals speak. The book is a political-social statement about the excesses of political leadership and the subjugation of the weak. We do not think the book bizarre because animals talk in it. We know it is symbolic. We also readily understand the meaning of Orwell’s symbols — and enjoy them. In fact, it was precisely because of the form in which *Animal Farm* was written that has made it a timeless piece of literature.

### **Symbols have meaning**

There are several lessons in this for us. First, we should not consider Revelation strange or bizarre. The book was probably easy to understand, extremely interesting and thoroughly meaningful to the original readers. If we

can put ourselves in their place, this biblical writing can be all these things to us as well.

Second, we should not force Revelation's symbols into a literal mode. If the book is a kind of painting of God's purpose, it is much more expressionistic or impressionistic than realistic. In the words of George Eldon Ladd: "Apocalyptic language does not convey its message in precise photographic style, but more in the style of modern surrealistic art with great fluidity and imagination" (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 111). Ladd explains that Revelation's symbols are "not meant to be photographs of objective facts; they are often symbolic representations of almost unimaginable spiritual realities" (p. 102).

M. Eugene Boring explains it this way:

Many of the scenes John describes simply cannot be imaged. Not only can they not be placed on a canvas or movie screen, they cannot be placed on the screen of the mind. The vision of the exalted Christ in 1:12-16, for example, simply becomes grotesque if one attempts to understand it as a reporter's account of what John actually saw in the objective world (*Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 54).

Here Christ is pictured as speaking through a mouth out of which a sharp double-edged sword protrudes. If an attempt is made to understand the anthropomorphic picture of Christ in Revelation 1 as a literal representation of what he looks like, this part of the portrait is bizarre. The portrait becomes meaningful only if we understand John's portrayal of the sword as a symbol of the sharpness and power of God's word (Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17).

Of course, we need to be careful about overly allegorizing Revelation, as much as we need to avoid a strict literalism. This was probably not a difficulty John's original readers faced. They knew the situation in which they lived and the meaning of the symbols. But we are removed from both. In

the words of G. B. Caird:

Our difficulties begin when we try to decide how far to take this picture language literally and how far to take it figuratively. When John echoes the Roman legend that the dead Nero was about to return, how literally does he mean it? Does he believe that Nero was not in fact dead, or that he would be resurrected, or that another paranoiac would come to fill his empty shoes? (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd edition, 7).

In one sense, these issues are only of historical importance, vital only to John's original readers. But if that was all that Revelation's symbols pictured — that is, events, situations and people in John's day — they would have little meaning for us.

However, since Revelation uses symbols to represent spiritual realities, the book has universal meaning for all times and generations. Another caution is in order. We should not dismiss the historical context and meaning of the symbols, nor their possible application to specific situations and individuals. These, however, are not the primary meanings.

The point is, symbols can have different kinds of meaning. The symbol "bear" can have a simple meaning when referring to Russia. That is, bear = Russia. On another level, the bear says something about the kind of political power the nation embodies. On a third level, "bear," already known to be symbolic of a lumbering political giant, can stand for all such empires—including perhaps the massive ancient Persian empire.

The American flag can be described as composed of 13 stripes and 50 stars. That is what the flag is, literally. It also is a symbol representing 13 original colonies and 50 states. The American flag also represents the nation. That is, when we see the flag, we think "United States." But the American flag waving in the breeze during a patriotic parade represents something

much more. It symbolizes a concept — a big idea — the pride of being an American.

In the same way, Revelation's symbols can have various kinds and levels of meanings. Its symbols are not what are called "steno-symbols," those with only a single reference point. For example, if the symbol "bear" were such a symbol it could only be a nickname for the nation. But as we saw, the "bear" symbol has diverse meanings on several levels.

Revelation's symbols are often what are called "tensive" symbols. They are open-ended to some degree in that they can represent several conceptions or ideas. For example, if the first beast of Revelation 13 can be identified with the city of Rome in John's day, this does not exhaust its meaning. The tensive symbol "beast" may also represent the Roman Empire, or refer to a specific individual such as the emperor Nero or Domitian. "Beast" may also stand for all human empires that oppress Christians.

G. B. Caird is correct when he says that it is "misleading to say that in Revelation the monster *is* Rome, and still more misleading to say that it *is* ruler worship. The monster is both an older and a newer phenomenon than Caesar, and the great city is more ancient and more modern than Rome" (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd edition, p. xii).

Revelation speaks of concepts that deal with an ultimate reality about which we have no direct experience or knowledge. That's why it uses symbols and why the book can indicate earthly and heavenly realities only in rough outline.

To cite an example, God is pictured as sitting on a heavenly throne in Revelation. The throne represents, in symbol, to us who are limited to this physical world, the glory, the lordship and universal authority of God. Admittedly, the throne symbol is a poor reflection of God's universal supremacy. But those are the limitations of human language and our

experiential knowledge of God.

## **Common knowledge**

Some commentators suggest that the symbols Revelation used were not readily understood by those of John's time. This idea claims John used coded language so that the criticism it contained of the Roman government would be kept secret from outsiders. However, the average reader would have quite easily picked out the possible references to Rome.

Jews typically equated Rome with Babylon in apocalyptic writings. It was also common knowledge that Rome was the city built on seven hills. Both images are used in Revelation. Assuming the Roman authorities were of at least average intelligence and could read, it hardly seems they would have missed this. M. Eugene Boring points out that the mere reference to God or Christ as king (11:15) would have clearly appeared subversive to Roman authorities.

On the other hand, only a small portion of Revelation's material could be construed as applying to Rome. Then, if John's use of symbolic material was meant to confound the Roman secret police, why is virtually *all* of the book written in symbolic, apocalyptic form?

Whatever the answer, John's purpose is clearly stated: it is to reveal, not conceal. M. Eugene Boring points out: "With reference to the Roman government, John does not veil whom he means; he writes to reveal the essential nature of Roman power, which was not at all obvious to many members of John's churches" (*Revelation*, p. 55).

Revelation is not written as an attack against the outside world. It is written to be read in the church — the worshipful community of the saints. The book would not be very concerned with outsiders' reactions.

But the book is not simply a straightforward letter such as a Colossians or 1 Peter. Revelation seeks to create a symbolic world for its readers and to put



them into it. The book attempts to create for them the same wonder and awe that John experienced. In modern language, we might call Revelation a “virtual reality” experience. In the words of G. B. Caird:

John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd edition, p. 26).

Revelation does not have as its primary purpose the aim of providing the curiosity seeker with information to bolster speculations about an apocalyptic “end-time.” The symbols in the book are meant to bring forth a response on the part of God’s people of continued faith in Jesus Christ as Lord of creation, the world and the church.

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# Revelation, Apocalyptic Writing and the Old Testament

The book of Revelation belongs to a class of chiefly Jewish (and later Christian) literature called “apocalyptic.” The word “apocalypse” has been borrowed from the book of Revelation and applied to these other writings.

Apocalyptic refers, in a broad sense, to a group of books written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 100. Two historical markers are usually given for the span during which the Jewish apocalyptic works were written and edited:

- 1) the persecution of the Jews by the Greco-Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.) and
- 2) the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Roman emperor Hadrian (A.D. 135).

Apocalyptic writings usually had certain characteristics in common. Writers generally claimed that a divine disclosure had been given through an angelic intermediary. God’s secret purpose was said to have been revealed through a dream or vision in the heavenly realm. Almost all apocalypses are pseudonymous. Writers of apocalyptic works usually wrote in the name of heroes from Israel’s history. There are books ascribed to Enoch, Abraham, the Twelve Patriarchs, Moses, Ezra, Enoch and Elijah, among others.

These apocalyptic writings claimed to reveal God’s purpose in history. These writings tried to explain why the Jews, who thought of themselves as God’s people, were part of an oppressed nation suffering under ungodly political institutions. In the words of Robert H. Mounce:

A major role of the apocalypse was to explain why the righteous suffered and why the kingdom of God delayed. Prophecy had dealt primarily with the nation’s ethical obligations at the time when the prophet wrote. Apocalyptic focused on a period of time yet future when God would intervene to judge the world and establish righteousness. (*The Book of Revelation*, The New

International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 19)

Apocalyptic writing is usually dualistic in that two opposing supernatural powers, God and Satan, do battle. The outcome of the conflict is rigidly determined — everything moves forward according to a divinely preordained time schedule and purpose. Writers of apocalyptic speculated that the power of Satan controls this evil age and afflicts the righteous through his human and demonic agents. But he will be defeated by the direct intervention of God, who will create a perfect new world order in which the good will flourish.

The writers of apocalyptic works looked upon their days as the worst of times — filled with suffering and pain for God’s people. These writings were what commentators call “tracts for hard times.” To save the day, apocalyptic writing included a promise that God would intervene in human history, destroy evil and bring the troubles of his people to an end. This hope often centered on the swift return of the Messiah, who would usher in the end of the age and bring in his kingdom. The end was near, and God was going to judge the world and reward his faithful and suffering people.

These basic threads are woven throughout the fabric of apocalyptic thought. When one studies the book of Revelation, these same issues are also discussed: the meaning of history, the suffering of God’s people, the coming of the Messiah and God’s kingdom.

### **A sense of urgency**

Apocalyptic writers did not generally speculate about the end-time as coming in some far-off future. This would have held little meaning for the people to whom they wrote. The apocalyptic writers were interested in the here and now. God’s Messiah was coming very soon to take away the burdens of the Jewish people, and lift them on high over the gentile nations. Writers of apocalyptic, says M. Eugene Boring,

Addressed their own generation with the urgency of those who cry out for meaning in their struggle and suffering. Their question was not “When will the End come?” but “What is the meaning of our suffering?” It was not speculative calculation but the tenacity of faith which came to expression in their conviction that the End must be near. (*Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 43)

G.B. Caird explains in a clear summary the purpose of those who wrote apocalyptic pieces. Their writings were produced

to encourage Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, by showing that the national suffering was foreseen and provided for in the cosmic purpose of God and would issue in ultimate vindication. It is characteristic of these writings that they portray the present crisis...against a background of world history, the present struggle as part of the age-long struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and victory over the immediate enemy as the embodiment of the final victory of God. It is also characteristic of them that they are written in symbolic language. (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd edition, p. 9)

Most first-century Jews were familiar with the apocalyptic literary form. The book of Revelation reflected both the form and content of apocalyptic writings, so the original Christian readers of Revelation — especially those who had come out of a Jewish religious background — would have recognized it as an apocalyptic work. The language, thoughts and symbols would have been familiar.

The thought and content of apocalyptic was based on themes in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. The church as a whole had contacts with the Jewish community and was well aware of what the Hebrew Scriptures said. Christians probably felt familiar with apocalyptic literary style.

Even non-Jewish Christians with no prior contact with Judaism would have recognized the apocalyptic form, because it was used among other peoples as well. Robert W. Wall concludes: “When John began his composition as an apocalypse, he was in effect locating it within a familiar literary tradition known to his readers who were able to make meaning of what he wrote” (*Revelation*, New International Biblical Commentary, p. 12).

John helped his readers understand what to expect by calling his work, “The *revelation* of Jesus Christ...” (1:1). The first word of the book identifies its general purpose and content: The book will reveal the purpose of God in history for his people and explain their situation in the world, as well as their glorious future.

For readers today, however, such cues are not so readily apparent. We live in a world different from the one John and his churches lived in. As we read and study Revelation, we must try to think of ourselves as John’s parishioners. This will require some imaginative thinking. In the words of J. Ramsey Michaels:

To make sense of the Book of Revelation the student must try to understand, and even cultivate, the apocalyptic frame of mind. This means putting away certain twentieth-century biases and reserving judgment about the religious experiences that underlie this book and the images with which it is filled. (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 15)

For us, Revelation may seem strange because (with parts of Daniel) it is the only apocalyptic piece of literature we have read. However, if we read other first-century apocalyptic works, we would come to see the book in a new light. M. Eugene Boring says, “Revelation will never look the same once one has seen even a small sample of the category of thought to which it belongs” (p. 39).

For those interested, a typical apocalyptic work is Second Esdras (or

Fourth Ezra). It is readily available in editions of the Bible that include the Apocrypha or Deutero-canonical books (available at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Esdras+1&version=NRSV>).

A good scholarly work on apocalyptic writings is *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, edited by James H. Charlesworth. Another apocalyptic work is the so-called book of Enoch, available in Charlesworth's book or online in an older translation at [http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH\\_1.HTM](http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/enoch/ENOCH_1.HTM).

### **A new view of old prophecies**

While there are great similarities between apocalyptic writings and Revelation, we should also note some important differences. Revelation interprets the Old Testament in a way that is almost contradictory to the Jewish apocalyptic writings. In a sense, we can view those writings as a challenge to the church — and Revelation as the rebuttal.

Revelation, for example, transforms the nation of Israel into the church. Revelation claims the Old Testament prophecies about the salvation of Israel, the peace of Jerusalem and restoration of the temple do not refer to Jews as an ethnic group — but to a church perfected and glorified. The people of God is not composed of a remnant of Israel but people from all nations who have put their faith in Christ. The true Exodus is the spiritual and eternal salvation of the faithful church. In the words of Robert W. Wall:

John's constant allusions to biblical stories suggest that he composes his book of visions in conversation with the Old Testament.... His message corresponds to the prophetic promise of the triumph of God's reign within history. For him, the new Israel has experienced a new exodus from sin and death and has set out on a journey for a new Jerusalem. (17)

Revelation challenged the claims of the apocalyptic writers, their ideas of history, where God was working, who the people of God were and the nature

of the end-time. These challenges were set down in the apocalyptic format — and they turned the Jewish apocalyptic writings on their head.

The various apocalyptic writings depended on the Old Testament prophecies, visions, examples and types. The Jews took God's promises of the liberation of Israel and his intervention in human affairs, and applied them to themselves, as well as their time and circumstances.

Revelation radically reinterpreted the Jewish explanation of the Old Testament. That is perhaps the book's most important feature and is an important contrast with apocalyptic writings. Says G. B. Caird: "We shall expect, then, to find that John's symbols do not mean exactly what they would have meant to a Jewish writer. We shall expect what Farrar has called 'a rebirth of image'" (11).

Another vital difference between Jewish apocalyptic and Revelation is what we might call the key to history. To the Jews, the return of the Messiah and his intervention in human affairs was the fulcrum point of history. Revelation, however, fixes the crux of history in another place — on the cross of Christ. That is why Revelation 5, the vision of the Lamb opening the scroll, is the pivot point of the book.

The Messiah's return will be vital to God's working out of history. Revelation looks to this event with anticipation as well. But Revelation says Christians need not depend on some saving event in the future. God has already acted decisively in history through Jesus, the Word made human.

### **A pastoral letter**

Revelation is different from Jewish apocalyptic writings in several other ways. Apocalypses were pseudonymous; John writes in his own name. Apocalypses were written in the name of a dead hero of ancient Israel; John wrote in the name of the living Christ.

John's work is also a prophecy as well as a revelation (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-

19). He even calls his book a prophetic work and tells us the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19:10). Thus, it is the word of God — given through John — to the church.

Besides being prophecy and revelation, John's work is grounded in current history. Revelation is a pastoral letter written to the church at large — to real people then living (1:4, 11). Since Revelation was at least part letter, it was meant to be read in the churches (Colossians 4:16). We know this from the book's introduction (1:3) and conclusion (22:6), as well as chapters 2 and 3, which are written to individual churches.

Revelation, then, is a unique kind of writing. It is a combination and blend of three literary types — apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says:

The author clearly indicates that he intends to write a public pastoral letter to seven churches in Asia Minor and that he understands this letter as the "words of prophecy." Nevertheless, Revelation does not read like a letter or homily. It is difficult to identify which complex literary type the author had in mind in writing the book. Did he intend to create a liturgy or a drama, a cosmic myth, a prophetic book, or an apocalypse? Or did he use all of these genres to fill out the epistolary framework which reflects his true literary intention? (*The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 166).

Our understanding of Revelation is complicated by the fact that the apocalypse as a literary form does not exist in our time. John's original readers knew how to understand such a writing, but we have more difficulty with it because it is outside of our experience.

However, if we cultivate a knowledge of the Old Testament and gain some understanding of the culture in which Revelation was written, our ability to understand the book will be greatly enhanced. The most important thing is to approach Revelation on its own terms, as a writing of its time



which was well understood by its original readers — and had a vital message for them.

## **Prophecy, Apocalypse and You**

B. Palmer

Terrifying beasts and heads, horns and dragons fill the books of Daniel and Revelation, making them some of the most controversial and least understood books in the Bible. Unfortunately, many students of the Bible read their own ideas into these symbols and images. In light of this confusion, it is vital for Christians to understand the genre, or literary style, of these portions of Scripture.

Although Daniel and Revelation are sometimes designated as “prophecy,” the two books are more accurately labeled apocalyptic literature, a specific type of prophetic writing. However, neither book is entirely apocalyptic. The early chapters of Daniel are historical, and Revelation includes letters to seven churches in Asia Minor.

**One distinction** between apocalyptic and prophetic literature lies in the history of their development. Prophetic literature dates from the eighth century B.C. to the fifth century B.C. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, was popular among Jews living from the second century B.C. until the second century A.D. (This is not to say that apocalyptic was unknown before the second century B.C. Conservative scholars date the book of Daniel much earlier.)

The historical distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic is important. Most of the Old Testament prophetic messages went to Israel or Judah while the nations still retained some sovereignty. Apocalyptic writings, however, flourished when Israel was no longer a sovereign nation. The Jews had spread throughout the known world, and those among them who produced

apocalyptic writings were struggling to maintain their relationship with God while living under Greco-Roman rule.

**A second distinction** lies in the types of revelation on which the two different genres of prophecy and apocalyptic draw. Apocalyptic is a revelation, usually experienced through dream and vision. The book of Revelation reflects this facet of apocalyptic literature. God inspired John to show that an angel revealed visions to him: “The revelation of Jesus Christ”; he would “make it known by sending his angel to his servant John” (Revelation 1:1). This supernatural revelation given to John is filled with symbols and imagery.

Although prophecy comes from God and is a type of revelation, it is most often expressed as the word of God rather than as a vision. That is why the phrase “Thus says the Lord” appears in prophecy so often.

**Another difference** between apocalyptic and prophecy is the type of imagery used. Prophetic imagery most often includes easily recognized symbols, like plants, animals and farm tools. Apocalyptic imagery is often strange and unknown. In *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Grant R. Osborne comments that “the purpose of esoteric symbols in apocalyptic is to turn readers from the actual event to its theological meaning. In other words, readers are expected to see the hand of God in the future but are not supposed to know the exact sequence of events.”

Prophecy and apocalyptic both stir hearers to repentance and both encourage believers. Even so, the primary purpose of prophecy is to bring people to repentance, while the principal aim of apocalyptic literature is to encourage.

With these distinctions in mind, it is clear that prophecy and apocalyptic share a common goal — to point people to God. By condemning the nation’s sins and seeking Israel’s repentance, prophecy pointed the Israelites to their

God, just as it continues to point us to God. Likewise, apocalyptic books pointed persecuted believers to God through an encouraging symbolic description of the triumphant, end-time return of Christ. Those same visions point us to God today.

For Christians, the most important message of Revelation and Daniel is not precise symbolic meaning and definitions of dragons and horns. The urgent message is that Jesus has not forgotten his elect and will, in due time, intervene in world history.

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# **Revelation's Message to All Times**

We all would like to know what the future will bring for us and our loved ones. Where is the world headed? More personally, we would like to know the answer to the big questions of why there's so much suffering in this world. Why do bad things happen to good people? Christians want to know why a good God allows suffering to occur in their lives and in the world.

The book of Revelation speaks to these questions. It has been called a writing for hard times, and ours are certainly hard times. We see the effects of our times on ourselves, our loved ones, and the world in general. The problems are legion: Civil wars, crime, hate, accidents, natural disasters, starvation and malnutrition, emotional maladjustment, economic dislocation, alienated youth, disease epidemics, and moral corruption.

Revelation speaks to every difficulty we may face as human beings or Christians. But not in the way most think.

## **Who wins in the end?**

Revelation is little interested in giving us a time line of specific world events or a blueprint for world history. It tells us the wonderful news that despite appearances to the contrary, God is in charge of the world and our lives. And there is a future in which evil will be brought to an end. Evil has only a limited time to reign on earth before Christ will return to take over and guide human affairs.

More than this, Revelation explains why evil is irresistible, and why we should put our faith in God and not be swayed by a world that seems out of control. When rightly understood, we find Revelation not to be so much interested in chronological dating of events as in telling us why the world is in such a mess, and what God has already done about it through Christ.

In the words of J. Ramsey Michaels, "The purpose of preaching from the

Revelation is to evoke first wonder and then faithfulness to the slain Lamb, not to explain the book away or reduce it to a blueprint of the future” (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 146). That was the original purpose of the book: to evoke wonder and then faithfulness; preaching should be in keeping with that purpose.

As a literary type of writing, Revelation had much in common with a class of Jewish writings in the first century that scholars have called apocalypses. Jewish apocalyptic writings sought to explain to their readers why they, the people of God, were suffering under oppressive governments such as that of Rome. Apocalyptic writings were called “tracts for bad times.” Writers of apocalyptic wanted to assure their readers that God would vindicate them and eventually overthrow those who oppressed them. This is precisely the role of Revelation as well.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart explain it in these terms. “Apocalypses in general, and the Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed, chronological account of the future. Their message tends to transcend that kind of concern.”

In the same way, “John’s larger concern is that, despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church. And even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge His enemies and save His people” (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 211).

The subject matter of Revelation—including the symbolism that seems so strange to our ears—must be seen in the light of this single concern, which turns out to be a key to Revelation. The “key” turns out to be *who* and not what.

It is God and Jesus Christ who are at the center of the book of Revelation, not specific dates and times or events. J. Ramsey Michaels tells us, “At the

heart of the Book of Revelation *is* a story, the same gospel story that echoes throughout the entire New Testament, about a slain Lamb victorious over death and evil and a God who makes everything new” (*Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, p. 147).

Revelation is a book about bad news and good news. It explains the bad news we experience by showing us the yet unseen good news. It is a way of restating Christ’s words to his disciples when he told them that in the world they would have trials, but to have hope because he had overcome the world (John 16:33).

There is much bad news because of the sinful work of Satan and his system—Babylon the Great. It is a system all Christians must live in, even though we should not partake of its sins. The good news, however, is that Christians win both now and in the end through the power of the Creator God.

The perfect government of God will banish all evil from the human family. That is, in essence, the final message of Revelation. However, human society, in opposition to God and dominated spiritually by an unseen devil, will not fade from history without a struggle. The Lamb will come on the scene as Jesus Christ to destroy these opponents of God’s way.

### **How long, O Lord?**

Revelation was written to encourage the first-century church to focus its faith on the unseen God and Christ. The church of that time was buffeted by many problems. Christians had been ejected from the synagogue and could no longer receive the same privileges from the Roman government as Jews had. They were outwardly persecuted by Jews and pagans alike for their beliefs.

Inside the church, some teachers were saying that accommodation with pagan beliefs and Roman politics was good and necessary. It had been six

decades since Jesus had died. Jerusalem had fallen 20 some years earlier. The expectations that Jesus would return and save the church had not materialized. The church must have been asking: “How long, Lord, before you return?” In the words of Leon Morris:

The church continued to be a tiny group, doubtless adding a few members from time to time, but not becoming, and not looking like becoming, a mighty force to take over the Roman Empire. That Empire continued on its wicked way. Oppression and wrong abounded. Evil men prospered. Idolaters persisted in their idol-worship, and the cult of the emperor flourished. Because they would not conform, the tiny band of Christians found themselves the object of suspicion and sometimes outright persecution....What had become of the message which had induced them to become Christians in the first place? Where was the promise of Christ’s coming? All things continued as they were from the foundation of the world. If God was active in the world it demanded a very strong faith to perceive it. (Revelation, Revised Edition, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, p. 21)

The church must not have quite known how to understand its future. The book of Revelation came into the breach. It explained why there seemed to be a glaring difference between what the church hoped for and what they were living through.

In these troubled times, the apocalyptic-prophetic epistle of Revelation, based on the revelation of God, was sent to the scattered and buffeted church community in its various congregations. In that epistle, God and Jesus Christ called the church to understand that they were sovereign in the life of the church and the world—all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding! Revelation gave them a word of hope and a reason to be faithful.

Revelation tells us the only reality in the universe worth being concerned about is God, who is the ruler of the universe. Besides God, only the Lamb (who has made human salvation possible and will one day bring God’s

government to earth) is worthy to be worshipped.

In this sense, Revelation is a very political book. It asks and answers the question: Who is worthy to be feared and worshipped? Who is the Savior of humanity? It is not Caesar with his armies, but the Lamb who was slain.

God has already judged the devil and human society. The work of salvation in Christ has already been done. God is in charge of church and world—and the end has come. It's only a matter of time when these facts become realized on this earth and all will see God's triumph over evil.

### **A call to repentance**

Revelation calls on Christians to take seriously the teaching delivered to the church on the sovereignty of God in history. It says that Christians must not neglect their salvation—they must repent, where necessary.

Revelation calls members to faith in a time when it is challenged by events that seem to contradict the sovereignty of God. One can see in Revelation this moral urgency, calling the church to repentance in the face of obstacles from enemies and the society at large. Revelation made its point dramatically by using illustrations that had special meaning in the world in which the church lived.

Revelation describes the faith problem in the churches through letters from Jesus to seven congregations in seven cities in the province of Asia Minor. Most are having difficulties of one sort or another having to do with Christian love and faith.

Ephesus has given up its love for the believers and has pursued heresy, perhaps the most diabolical loss of faith. Smyrna is under siege by those who attack its faith, as well as those who might persecute them physically, even to the death. Pergamum allows false teachers—with the code names Balaam and Nicolaitans—to compromise the faith in various ways. Thyatira allows a false prophetess with the code name of Jezebel to compromise their faith in Christ.



Sardis is said to be spiritually dead. Philadelphia is being attacked by outsiders who claim to be the people of God and say the church is a fraud. Laodicea is racked with spiritual pride. It perceives itself to be doing wonderful spiritual works but, in fact, is not expressing true faith.

The seven churches chosen to receive the letter may represent the entire Christian community scattered throughout the world. If so, the church of A.D. 96 had a very serious spiritual crisis, manifested in various ways. Hence the call to repent.

Meanwhile, the rest of Revelation presents the church in its ideal state as a martyr church that is faithful through persecution and even to death. This is the church as it ought to be, having total and humble faith in Jesus Christ. There is a difference between the church as it is now, and the church as it ought to be. This is still true, and the message of Revelation still applies to the churches today.

The purpose of Revelation is to point the imperfect church to its perfected model in Christ. Revelation says the church is not to look to itself nor compromise with the world. Rather, it is to direct its gaze to the Almighty God, the ruler of the universe, and to the Lamb who saved them.

In this connection, the pivotal parts of Revelation are chapters 4 and 5. Here the book introduces us to the reality of God symbolized as seated on a throne, and then to the Lamb who alone can open the scroll of Revelation so the authority of God may, in the future, make its impact felt in full force on the earth.

It is to God that the church must look. It must not take pride in its own accomplishments, not be smug in its own beliefs, and certainly not compromise with a world that is under the sway of Satan—whose works the Lamb is coming to destroy.

To emphasize the difference between the way things are and the way they

ought to be, Revelation uses stark symbols of good and evil, black and white, horribly corrupt and pristine purity. Perrin outlines the dualistic structure of Revelation:

At the pinnacle of power on one side is God, the Pantocrator, ruler of all (1:8). On the other is Satan, the Dragon, who has power, a throne, and great authority (13:2). Allied with God is the Lamb who was slain (5:6)... Allied with Satan is the beast from the sea (13:1-2)... All the people on the earth are divided into two groups; those who have the seal of God on their foreheads and whose names are in the book of life (3:5, 12; 7:3; 20:4; 21:27; 22:4) and those who bear the mark of the beast and worship it (9:4; 13:8. 17:14:9-11; 16:2; 20:15). There is also a sharp contrast between the luxurious and voluptuous harlot, who represents Babylon, the earthly city of abominations (ch. 17) and the pure bride of the Lamb, who symbolizes Jerusalem, the heavenly city of salvation (19:7-8; 21: 2, 9-11). This literary tension reflects the political tension between the adherents of the kingdom of God and those of the kingdom of Caesar (11:15; 12:10; 16:10:17:18). (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 142)

The message for the church in all this is clear. There is a heavenly reality that is much more important than the visible world. The church should put its faith in that true power above and not in the apparent but temporary power of the world around.

This message is made evident throughout Revelation. The picture of the glorified Christ in chapter 1, the throne room of heaven and the power of the Lamb in chapters 4 and 5 accomplish this. In a negative sense, the wrath of the Lamb on the world as described by trumpet and bowl plagues also shows the relative weakness of the world in relationship to God. Finally, the reign of God is pictured by the coming of the rider on the white horse in chapter 19 to judge the world. The final judgment of God in chapter 20 and the coming of the New Jerusalem in the last two chapters speak of the future but coming

rule of God to earth.

The contrast between God's kingdom and the church's position in the world is instructive. The church may seem powerless on earth—and it is of itself. But the slain Jesus was glorified, and is on the right hand of the Father, controlling the world's destiny. This Christ is the ruler not only of the world, but the protector of the church as well.

## **Conclusion**

Revelation is a book of sobering reality. It shows the church to be powerless in the world, and persecuted. The church is not exempt from suffering when God allows it for his purpose. That is part of required Christian faithfulness—to believe in God and Christ despite appearances to the contrary.

But more than this, Revelation explains that the negative aspects of the Christian experience are not to be chalked up to time and chance, or be considered meaningless suffering. The church is integral to God's great plan in history as he works out his mysterious purpose in the world. Suffering is in God's overall purview, and it has meaning, although we do not always understand it.

Revelation, then, tells us the following about the relationship of the church to the world, and God's plan:

1. The whole world is spiritually disordered and under the sway of a confused and evil spiritual being called Satan, who uses the world system in an attempt to subvert God's authority.
2. God and Christ are the supreme powers of the universe and are in control of the world. Christ has already bested the devil, the world, sin and death—the enemies of God. God's plan is as good as done, and in that sense “the end” has come.
3. Nevertheless, God has not yet chosen to use his power to totally eradicate evil and restore his perfect love and justice to the world. This is true despite the fact that he has already pronounced the

world's doom and exercises lordship over all things.

4. Meanwhile, God's people must live in a disordered world until he chooses to bring his kingdom to earth in a final sense in the person of Christ. Christians may be persecuted and martyred in this world even as God himself in Christ suffered, was persecuted and died at the world's hands. While the church may not understand the why of it all, it must keep faith with God knowing there is a purpose for "the way things are" in his plan.
5. Therefore, Christians need to remind themselves of Christ's lordship over the world and his capability to save them to the utmost. They must also realize that there is a real threat to their safety, prosperity and life from the world system. Come what may, they should put their faith and trust in the Lord of the world.
6. While Christians live in the world—indeed, are to be lights to the world—they must in no case become part of the world's system, sharing in its sinful ways. The command of Revelation is: Come out of her, my people. The church cannot compromise with sin or the world's ways, even if this brings persecution or martyrdom.
7. Ironically, it is through suffering and death that Christians overcome the world, just as Jesus did. Thus, no matter what happens to them in this disordered world—Christians should not fear what humans may do to them. If they escape with their lives, they win. If they are put to death, they win. No matter what, they should put their faith in Christ because he has power over all things—including death—and will reward the faithful at his coming with eternal life and give them authority over the world that did them harm.

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# An Outline of Revelation

There are as many different outlines of Revelation as commentaries on the book of Revelation. The outline below is somewhat arbitrary, as all are. Each reader may want to make his or her own outline after studying the book.

Those with only a casual acquaintance with Revelation might assume that it has a progressive and strict linear chronology of events. However, the book is more complicated than that. Revelation takes us to the end of the end-time several times. Then, it backtracks to pick up and expound other important themes. For this reason, the student should not assume that the outline below describes a straight-line chronological progression.

Nevertheless, an outline can be a helpful and handy guide as we study the book. We offer the following outline:

**Prologue and Vision of Christ.** The book begins with an introduction that includes personal greetings from John and points out his divine commission to write the book. This is tied to an inaugural vision of the glorified Christ. This fixes the book's message as both from Christ and in him. (1:1-19)

**Seven Letters to God's People.** Revelation gives the contents of seven stylistic letters to seven church congregations in the Roman province of Asia. These letters include commendations for godly behavior, encouragement to persevere in the faith and warnings to repent where necessary. (1:19–3:22)

**Universal Court of Heaven.** The scene then switches to the universal throne of God, where the reader experiences his measureless authority in two visions. God is worshiped as the Creator and the Lamb as Redeemer. The latter is alone is worthy to open the scroll. (4:1–5:14)

**First Six Seals.** We then see the first six of the seven seals unleashed by God's authority. These include the famous four horsemen of the Apocalypse

as well as the martyrdom of saints and shattering heavenly portents. The latter inaugurate the great day of the Lamb's wrath. (6:1-17)

**The 144,000 and Great Multitude.** Then we see the security of God's people in the midst of a world in tribulation and under God's wrath. The vision describes the sealing of the 144,000 martyrs and the great multitude in white robes. They represent the full number and universal nature of the company of God's people. (7:1-17)

**First Six Trumpet Plagues.** Meanwhile, the seventh seal is announced and the first six of its seven trumpet plagues are unleashed. The first four plagues destroy a third part of whatever on earth each plague strikes. In symbol, these plague visions show that a significant, though not major part of the earth is affected. (8:1-9:21)

**The Mystery of God and John as Prophet.** A short chapter tells the reader that there will be no more delay. The seventh angel is about to sound, announcing that the mystery of God is about to be accomplished. Meanwhile, John is told not to write about one vision he saw but to prophesy about the rest of the visions to many nations and kings. (10:1-11)

**The Two Witnesses.** Next, the end-time work of the two witnesses is described. Whoever is represented in this vision warns a world in spiritual disarray that God is ruler of all things. They herald the coming of God's universal authority in Christ to this earth. (11:1-14)

**The End Announced.** A few verses then serve as an important transition. They tell us to expect the speedy end of the world system dominated by evil. The seventh trumpet sounds and a loud voice proclaims that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of God and Christ. (11:15-19)

**The Powers of Evil and the Church.** If we now expect to see a vision of the final plagues and Jesus' return, we must wait a little longer. Revelation shifts its gaze to describe the historical and end-time conflict between Christ

and the church, and the powers of evil. The church is represented by the woman, while the forces of evil are the red dragon (Satan), the monster from the sea (world political-military power) and the beast from the earth (world religious deception). Satan's attempt to destroy the church fails and it is described in a state of spiritual security with the Lamb. (12:1–14:5)

**The Fall of Babylon Again Announced.** At the same time, our minds are refocused on the end of the anti-God system. The coming of God's government to earth is announced by an angel proclaiming it to the world as the good news. The fall of Babylon is proclaimed, as well as the harvesting of the earth and the winepress of God's wrath. (14:6-20)

**The Seven Last Plagues Strike.** The next vision announces the seven last plagues. The end has truly come. We see the plagues being poured out on a world that refuses to do God's will and repent. The plagues echo those poured out on Egypt as God rescued Israel. The seventh angel announces, "It is done!" The destruction of the forces that oppose God will now occur. (15:1–16:21)

**Babylon the Great: The Woman and the Beast.** This chapter describes a symbolic city. She is every city and no city. Babylon represents human-constructed political, religious and economic systems that have been seen in type throughout history. Their demonic version will dominate the world in the end-time. (17:1-18)

**The Fall of Babylon.** The destruction of the world system, called Babylon in symbol, has been announced several times. Now, we see her fall, but in a surprising manner. She is mainly pictured as a worldwide economic power that comes to a shattering end. (18:1-24)

**God's Reign Announced and Lauded.** The final victory of God is then announced and described. The multitudes of heaven are shouting, "Hallelujah!" because God has acted to exercise his universal authority on

earth. (19:1-10)

**The Messiah Returns to Establish God's Kingdom.** Next, a vision shows the appearance of the Messiah, symbolically pictured as the rider on the white horse. This is a pivotal vision that leads to the coming of God's kingdom on earth. What follows are the effects of Christ's return. The enemies of God—the armies of the nations, the beast, and the false prophet—are destroyed. Satan is symbolically chained and prevented from inciting evil. This makes possible God's kingdom on earth and the salvation of the world. Only those who are not written in the book of life are destroyed in the lake of fire, symbolic of the annihilation of the wicked. At the end, the last enemy—death—is also destroyed. (19:11–20:15)

**All Things Made New.** We finally see the New Heavens and New Earth. New Jerusalem comes to earth and God dwells with his people. This represents the eternal kingdom of God's immortal people. (21:1–22:5)

**Epilogue and Final Words.** John closes by encouraging hearer-readers to do the will of God and put their trust in the salvation of Christ. Christ himself announces his speedy return (22:6-21)



## Prologue – Revelation 1:1-9

### The meaning of “revelation” (Revelation 1:1-3)

At the beginning of Revelation we are given two clues that help us understand and use the book’s contents. The first clue is the use of the word *revelation* to define the book (1:1). The word comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*. For this reason, the book has also been called “the Apocalypse.” In the earliest manuscripts the book has the title, “The Apocalypse of John.”

The book itself tells us it is “the revelation *of Jesus Christ*.” The Greek word is *apokalypsis*, which refers to an uncovering, exposing, unveiling or revealing of something hidden or concealed (Luke 12:2; see the apostle Paul’s use of *apokalypsis* in Romans 16:25; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 3:3).

What is unveiled in Revelation is the grand purpose of God in human affairs. The centerpiece of that purpose is the incarnation, death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus. From those acts springs the judgment of God, which will be revealed in the end-time. The judgment will fall on both the evil and righteous. The one will be condemned (Romans 2:5) and the other saved (1 Peter 1:7).

Revelation summarizes God’s judgment in a unique way in terms of it being imminent. The Old Testament had described the day of the Lord—the time of God’s judgment—as both imminent and far off. While there was a sense that it was coming soon, the relationship between the present and future was ambiguous at best. Revelation, however, appears to say the end-time is just about to overtake us.

In this regard, the contrast between Revelation and a similar type of literary work and message in Daniel is striking. After seeing his apocalyptic visions Daniel was told: “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end” (Daniel 12:9). But John is told to

reveal what he saw: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near” (22:10).

The book of Revelation has an urgency about it because the end is near. Its message must be revealed—and it is wonderful news, even though it contains God’s wrath. Its gospel is good news because it reveals the end of human-directed civilization.

God’s righteous judgment will be revealed against those who oppose him. God’s servants will testify to the world of God’s grace through suffering, and perhaps martyrdom. They will experience salvation “to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5).

What is uncovered by Revelation, then, is neither a code for pinpointing events in history nor a diagram of the future. Revelation discloses the unseen working of God in the history of the world and in the spiritual lives of his people.

The second important clue in the first verses of Revelation is the word *prophecy*, also used to define its content (1:3). Like revelation, prophecy is dependent on God unveiling understanding and truth. “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation,” insisted Peter, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Revelation is not a collection of John’s ideas or his own literary creation. He is not setting down human-created hopes or writing a cryptic work meant to confuse the Roman police. Neither is John writing fictitiously in the name of a long-dead person such as Abraham or Ezra—as did other writers of apocalyptic works of the time. Nor can John call upon his own ecclesiastical office to give his writing its authority.

John is simply the servant-slave of God (1:1). In modern slang, he is the messenger boy. His revelation and prophecy is from the supreme ruler of the

universe, given to Jesus Christ the High Priest of his people, delivered through angelic messengers, and relayed to John to pass on to the churches.

John regarded Revelation as Scripture—useful for the edification of the church (2 Timothy 3:16-17). He calls his work a prophecy, and at its end he warns against meddling with its contents (22:18). This warning recalls Paul, who pronounced a curse on anyone who would preach a false gospel (Galatians 1:8-9).

### **The revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1)**

The book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). From a grammatical standpoint, we could understand the revelation to be *about* Jesus Christ, or as a revelation *from him*, that is, its source. Jesus Christ is the focal point—the message of the book itself. He appears throughout Revelation under a variety of titles, names and images, as well as in many references.

A quick review of the titles in Revelation that refer to Jesus Christ makes clear that he is the active focus and agent of the book. The book is an unveiling of the Person and work of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. Revelation is a thoroughly christocentric work.

On the other hand, Revelation carries a vital message *from* Jesus to church members of John’s day—and by extension to Christians of all ages. The book focuses on the end-time, and stresses its impact on and meaning for God’s people. In that sense, it is a message *from* Jesus Christ to his church.

### **Titles given to Jesus in Revelation**

01. Jesus, Jesus Christ, and Christ (1:1; 21:21, and almost 20 references)
02. Faithful witness (1:5)
03. Firstborn from the dead (1:5)
04. Ruler over the kings of the earth (1:5)
05. Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 22:12)
06. Beginning and the End (1:8; 22:13)

07. Who is, and who was, and who is to come (1:8)
08. The Almighty (1:8)
09. A Son of Man (1:13)
10. First and the Last (1:17; 2:8; 22:12)
11. The Living One (1:18)
12. He who died and came to life (2:8)
13. The Son of God (2:18)
14. Holy and true (3:7)
15. He who holds the key of David (3:7)
16. The Amen (3:14)
17. Faithful and true witness (3:14)
18. Ruler of God's creation (3:14)
19. He who overcame (3:21)
20. He who sits with God on his throne (3:21)
21. The Lamb (5:6; 22:3, and elsewhere in nearly thirty references)
22. Son destined to rule all nations (12:5)
23. Faithful and True (19:11)
24. His secret name, known only to himself (19:12)
25. The Word of God (19:13)
26. King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16)
27. Bright and Morning Star (22:16)
28. Root and the Offspring of David (22:16)

### **John, the book's author (1:1, 4, 9)**

The author of Revelation calls himself, simply, John, a servant (1:1). He is a faithful witness to “the testimony of Jesus” (1:9) and one “who heard and saw these things” (22:8). John does not call himself an apostle in Revelation. He claims to be a prophet (22:9) and calls his book a prophecy in several places (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19). He was obviously very familiar with the Jewish

scriptures, the Christian Old Testament.

We learn that John was exiled to the island of Patmos, presumably because of his being a witness “of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). Revelation tells us very little else about John.

Early tradition unanimously declared that Revelation was written by the apostle John. Justin Martyr, who lived at Ephesus during the first part of the second century, held the author of Revelation was John, one of the apostles of Christ (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 81.15). Irenaeus, who as a boy had known Polycarp, a man closely associated with John, said the author was the disciple of the Lord.

### **What Revelation “signifies” (1:2)**

Revelation communicates its message largely through symbols – various things represented by other words. For this reason, the things Jesus made “known” is better understood by the English word “signified” (1:2). The Greek word comes from the root *semion*, which stands for a sign, or a figurative representation. That is, Revelation signifies, or expresses in signs, certain aspects of the future. G. R. Beasley-Murray says,

The occurrence of the term in the title of John’s prophecy is almost certainly deliberate. The prophet wishes to make clear that he does not provide photographs of heaven, nor do his descriptions of coming events constitute history written in advance. He uses “sign language” to portray the invisible realities of the present and the future of man and his history. (*The New Century Bible Commentary*, “Revelation,” p. 51)

So Revelation does not present a literal newspaper-style history, but it is a coded or symbolic presentation of the future. However, this does not mean we can ignore the fact that these symbols refer to real historical situations and events.

As we make our way through Revelation, it will become clear how much

the book relies on the language of symbol and myth, much of it derived from the Old Testament. (See the earlier chapter on cosmic symbols.)

A symbol stands for a universal principle that explains a large group of sometimes varying events or ideas. That is why Revelation is capable of speaking to people in all generations—not simply to the generation for whom it was originally written or for the generation at the end time.

### **The time is near (1:3)**

The book's contents are presented as though the end-time is ready to break out in the immediate future. John is shown things that "must soon take place" (1:1) because "the time is near" (1:3). The concept of the end as being imminent is encountered throughout Revelation.

By insisting that the "time is near," Revelation forced the original hearer-readers to see themselves as immersed in the shattering events of the last days of human-directed civilization. They could not disregard the book's message by thinking it described events in some far off future.

The message has a sense of extreme urgency. The end is presented as looming over the horizon. The events described in Revelation are often written in the historical present. It's as though the original hearer-readers were eyewitnesses to what was already happening. Revelation insists: "He is coming with the clouds" (1:7); "There will be no more delay!" (10:6); "Your wrath has come" (11:18); "The devil has gone down to you" (12:12); "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon" (14:8);

The Jewish apocalyptic writings were still anticipating "the end" when the prophetic spirit would once again work. On the other hand, Revelation is written from the point of view that the end had already begun with the coming of Jesus.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart say,

Some of the pictures that were intended primarily to express

the *certainty* of God's judgment must not also be interpreted to mean "soon-ness," at least "soon-ness" from our limited perspective. Thus when Satan is defeated a Christ's death and Resurrection and is "cast down to earth" to wreak havoc on the church, he knows his time is "short." But "short" does not necessarily mean "very soon," but something much more like "limited." (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 216)

The sense of the impending End is not a chance idea, accidentally tossed into the book for effect. Revelation is an interactive book, meant to involve hearer-readers in its symbolic world. It assaults the senses; forces people to come to terms with its claims; stirs up the mind to consider one's own spiritual condition. In other words Revelation demands we "take to heart what is written in it" (1:3).

The book's central message is that we should consider our spiritual state, for the times that try our souls are nearly upon us. This world is on a collision course with God's justice and judgment, and his people should forsake the world and be faithful to Christ. Revelation is meant as a lesson to all Christians. The book insists they must, ultimately, choose between Christ and Caesar. Who will they seek to please: God, or the people around them?

### **A blessing for readers (1:3)**

A blessing is pronounced on the one who reads the "words of this prophecy," a statement that defines the book of Revelation (1:3). The "one who reads" refers to the person who was responsible for reading the book *aloud* in church, to the congregation. The hearers themselves are blessed if they listen to what is written in Revelation "and take it to heart."

This is the first of seven blessings in the book (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). It recalls Jesus' words in Luke 11:28, "Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and obey it." The people were expected to do something with the information in Revelation – to apply it to their Christian lives. The

chief purpose of the book, as with much biblical prophecy, is to provide moral exhortation rather than prediction.

The book's message is pastoral. The hearers are not called upon to construct blueprints of the future, but to build themselves up in the faith of Jesus. Revelation seeks to impel the reader to live the Christian life, not try to calculate the year of the beginning of the End.

Most people of the times did not have a personal copy of any portion of the Bible, as we do today. The Scriptures were usually hand-written on bulky scrolls. Few people were unable to study the book systematically. Instead of reading the scriptures in their own homes, Jews heard the scriptures read in the synagogues (Nehemiah 8:2; Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15). This practice was adopted by the church (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

One gets a different impression of Revelation if it is listened to rather than read and studied. Those who have Revelation on audio will find it a surprising and pleasant experience to listen to it—just as the first recipients of the book did.

### **John, to the seven churches (1:4)**

John uses a standard form of introduction to the letters of his time. This tells us the book is not only a revelation and a prophecy, but also a pastoral letter. John is an actual person writing to real people living in a particular time in history. This firmly anchors Revelation in the concrete world of the church.

Revelation is written to seven specific congregations in the Roman province of Asia. This province occupied the western portion of Asia Minor, today the nation of Turkey. There were Christian congregations in other cities of Asia. This suggests that seven churches have been chosen because the number stood for completeness.

John's greeting to the churches wishes them grace and peace from God



and Christ (1:4). This dual salutation is found in Paul's letters as well, as for example in 2 Corinthians 1:2. Paul had adapted a Greek letter opening, and made it his own. It was a trademark that identified his teaching letters. John's use of the formula, "Grace and peace..." shows that he means to follow in the broad tradition of the apostle Paul's teaching.

After his brief greeting, however, John transitions into praise to Christ. He returns for a few lines to the letter form (1:9-11), but just as quickly, he recounts a vision of Christ's glory.

Except for the stylized letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3, John disregards the letter form until the second part of the last chapter (22:8-21). John ends with a final blessing—"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (22:21). This was another convention of Paul's letters. Philippians 4:23 and 2 Thessalonians 3:18 are two very similar examples. (22:21).

### **Praise to Jesus Christ (1:4-8)**

John says that grace and peace come from "him who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4). This title is repeated in verse 8. This description of God is similar to God's self-definition of his being made known to Moses at the burning bush. God identified himself as: "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14). The Hebrew word for God, YHWH, is a form of the verb "to be."

He who was, who is and who will be, is *eternal*. He exists before and outside of time. Since God, from whom the revelation comes, is eternal, he must by nature be sovereign over creation, over history, over the world, and over salvation. Whatever occurs on the stage of human history, God knows it. He is history's sovereign Lord. By this, John directs Jews to see where the God they worship is now working – in the church.

At the same time, Gentiles are also directed to this Name as the one who is the true Timeless One. Similar titles of eternity were sometimes applied to

the pagan gods. In one song, Zeus is identified as “Zeus who was, Zeus who is, and Zeus who will be.” Orphic worshippers would cry out: “Zeus is the first and Zeus is the last; Zeus is the head and Zeus is in the middle; and from Zeus all things come.”

But John says Christ is the *true* beginning, the end, and everything in between (21:6). “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God...” (1:8). Alpha is the first and omega the final letter of the Greek alphabet. In English, when we want to state something similar we say, “From A to Z.”

### **The seven spirits (1:5)**

In an unusual statement, John also brings greetings from “the seven spirits” in the presence of God (1:5). Who are these spirits?

There are three other references to the seven spirits of God in Revelation. In the letter to Sardis the one like a Son of Man holds—or we could say, *has*—these seven spirits (3:1). Two other references to the seven spirits of God are in the throne room vision of chapters 4 and 5. Here they are identified as seven blazing lamps (4:5) and the seven eyes of the slain Lamb (5:6).

Revelation also refers to seven angels “who stand before God” to whom were given the seven trumpets of the seventh seal (8:1-2).

Various explanations have been given for the seven spirits. Some commentators identify them with the seven angels in God’s presence; others say they describe seven manifestations of God’s Spirit, or the seven archangels of Jewish tradition.

Perhaps we cannot identify them with certainty. The enigmatic reference in Zechariah 4:10 to the “seven eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the earth” may indicate a possibility, since Revelation often uses images from the Old Testament, though sometimes with new meaning. These eyes seem to be equated with seven lights or lamps on a golden lampstand in Zechariah (4:2). Zechariah perhaps connects both lights and eyes to the Spirit of the Lord

(4:6). Similarly, in Revelation 5:7 “the seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God” are “sent into all the earth.”

Some conjecture that the seven spirits represent the one Holy Spirit. If that is so, a scripture from Isaiah might form the background to what Revelation is describing in symbolic terms—the various aspects of the Spirit. Isaiah wrote: “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:2). Here we see six attributes of the spirit; the seven spirits would symbolize the complete manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps, then, there is a reference here to the perfect complement of the functions provided by the Holy Spirit among the people of God.

This is one of the first examples in which we see Revelation’s dependence on Old Testament passages. We will see this intertextuality—and its meaning—become more dramatic as we make our way through the book.

### **The faithful witness (1:5)**

John now draws our attention to Jesus Christ (1:5) by describing him through various phrases. Thus, at the very beginning of the book, the source of the church’s blessing and content of the book is identified. We should briefly note these titles and acts of Jesus because of their importance to the message of Revelation.

First, Jesus Christ is the “faithful witness” (1:5). This was his purpose as God in the flesh. He bore witness to the true God by what he said and how he lived (John 3:32-34). But his testimony was rejected and he was crucified because of it.

The title for the Christian martyr mentioned in the letter to Pergamum, Antipas, is also “faithful witness.” In both cases the Greek word for “witness” is *martys*, from which we get the English word “martyr.” The

Greek word is associated with the martyrdom that comes from witnessing to Christ by keeping faith with him (11:3; 17:6). This would be an important reminder to the churches in which Revelation was read. Antipas is faithfully following the model set by Jesus, and readers are thereby encouraged to see themselves in the terms, if they are threatened with death: they will be a faithful witness, like their Savior.

John also tells us Jesus was the “firstborn from the dead” (1:5). This title is found in Colossians 1:18. There Paul tells us that Jesus’ resurrection has given him supremacy over everything in the church. Paul also tells us that Christ is “the firstborn over all creation” (verse 15).

There is no part of the church nor of the world over which Christ is not supreme. This title would be extremely encouraging to the churches for whom the book was written. They were being told that in the near future, they faced a high likelihood of suffering martyrdom if they were faithful to Christ. But the Christian need not fear. Christ has already conquered death and will give the martyr a future beyond death – a future far better than the life they now had.

This title flows smoothly into the next one that John gives to Jesus Christ. He is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). This and the previous title were already united by the psalmist: “I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth” (Psalm 89:27).

This title points to Jesus’ manifestation on the earth as the King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14; 19:16). The title “ruler of kings on earth” contradicted the claim of the Roman Caesars, who thought their rule to be sovereign. The Christians to whom this letter-book was sent were being asked to remember that the Caesars’ power was an illusion—even though Rome might persecute them. Jesus Christ, despite all appearances to the contrary, was the unseen but real ruler over even the king of the Roman

Empire.

Jesus Christ is next identified as “him who loves us” (1:5). How has he shown his love? By freeing us from our sins through his sacrifice (1:5). In the words of Paul, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Later in Revelation we will encounter the slain Lamb as the book’s pivotal concept. Faithful Christians are those who have washed their clothes in the Lamb’s blood and made them white.

This is a good place to introduce another concept that will loom large in Revelation. The redemption of God’s people—the symbolic martyrs—is presented as a second exodus. But God’s people are not saved from political persecution so that they might to move to the homeland of Israel for the purpose of restarting temple worship. God’s people are spiritual Israel—the New Jerusalem—and God is their temple. Their exodus is an emancipation from the slavery of sin. Their restoration is a spiritual one, to salvation and the kingdom of God, where they serve God as a nation of priests.

With this in view, John says in the next verse that Christ “has made us to be a kingdom and priests” (1:6). Revelation again recalls the Old Testament, where God promised he would establish Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). But for John, as for the New Testament, the church is the new Israel (1 Peter 2:5, 9). The church is not a different “nation” with no ties to an Old Testament heritage. Israel of old continues in the church. It is, however, transformed into a spiritual nation. All peoples—Jews and Gentiles—are grafted into it through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 6:16; Philippians 3:3).

In the religion of ancient Israel, only the priest had direct access to God. Isaiah prophesied a time when all the people would be priests of the Lord (61:6). But what did this mean? From the New Testament, including

Revelation, we see that it means God's people have access to the presence of God through the Spirit. The priesthood includes all believers (Hebrews 4:16; 10-19-22). They perform the priestly function in that they offer *themselves* to God (Romans 12:1). John says that God's people, as priests, serve God (1:6).

### **Every eye will see him (1:7-8)**

Revelation now gives us its pivotal theme. Christ's coming represents the time when the supreme God will exercise his dominion over the world, and transform history. Jesus Christ will come with clouds, yet the world will mourn when they see him, including "those who pierced him" (1:7).

This is one of many times when a vision or prophecy is clearly related to Scripture, especially the Old Testament. However, Revelation does not quote the scripture, nor does the book appeal to it as authoritative. Sometimes, as in this case, Revelation may combine two passages, altering their meaning to reflect a new message. In this case, Revelation refers to part of a vision in Daniel about "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (7:13). This is combined with a vision in Zechariah that describes people looking upon someone they have pierced, and mourning for him (12:10).

These two independent prophetic strains are combined in Revelation and adapted to describe the imminent return of the victorious Christ as well as the world's hostile response. This kind of adaptation of the Old Testament points to Revelation as an interpretive book. It recasts old motifs and gives them new meaning and spiritual insight.

Revelation tells us we should not limit the piercing of Jesus to the actual incident (John 19:37). Nor should we restrict it to the people of Jerusalem (standing for the tribes of Israel) in Zechariah 12:10. Revelation lifts the event to the cosmic level by turning it into a symbol. Those who pierced Jesus are people of every age who struggle against the will of God. More precisely, since Revelation is concerned with the end-time, "those who

pierced him” refers to those who will resist the conquering Lamb as he establishes his government on earth.

Despite opposition, Jesus Christ will be victorious. That is because he is Almighty or all-mighty (1:8) The Greek word for Almighty is *pantokrator*. He is the one who has power, authority and supremacy over everything that exists. The word appears only ten times in the New Testament. But nine are in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). There is a purpose for John’s use of this and the other titles. Revelation describes a time of great crisis to fall on the church. How encouraging it is to be reminded that God is supreme over all things and ruler of earth’s kings. The church need not worry about those who may kill the body, but can do no harm to the soul.

### **Partner in suffering (1:9)**

John does not introduce himself by an official title such as apostle, evangelist or bishop. He is simply the spiritual brother of the members to whom he is writing. More importantly, he is a partner in their suffering and endurance. His authority to counsel the church for patience and endurance on Christ’s behalf comes from the fact that he, too, has suffered and remained faithful.

In verse 9, John refers to Revelation’s major themes. They represent three things John and the congregations share—suffering (tribulation, persecution, martyrdom), the kingdom of God, and patient endurance (1:9). This is only one way to get from persecution to the kingdom, and that is endurance.

This recalls the words of Jesus, who said: “He who stands firm [endures] to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13). As does John, the other apostles also encouraged the church to remain true to the faith in the face of persecution and hardships (Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 2:12).

John had mentioned that he was a companion of those in the church who had suffered (1:9). Now, he proceeds to give an example of his own

suffering. John tells us he was on the Greek island of Patmos. Why he was there and under what conditions is explained by the phrase: "...because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9).

It is not likely that John purposely went to Patmos to preach the gospel. Patmos is a tiny, rocky island in the southeast Aegean sea. It is isolated, 30 miles or 50 kilometers west of Asia Minor. Historians tell us there is evidence in Roman literature to identify the islands in this area as places for the banishment of political offenders. (Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.68; 4.30; 15.71).

John was exiled there because of being a disciple of God's word and testifying to Jesus. In other words, John was probably quarantined there for being a Christian leader.

However, we do not have evidence of any widespread persecution by civil authorities in the province of Asia during John's day. This doesn't mean it didn't exist. As we know from the book of Acts, sporadic episodes of harassment instigated by the Jews, in particular, were not unusual. Often, there was an attempt to picture the Christians as defying Roman laws and revolting against the government (Acts 17:7; 24:5).

Local Roman governors or proconsuls of provinces could remand political troublemakers into exile. We have the example of Gallio. He was proconsul of Achaia, in Greece, when Paul's preaching caused an uproar in Corinth. In this case, Gallio decided in favor of Paul, and Christians were protected from government harassment.

But it would not always be so, as Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome demonstrates. We also have Pliny's letter to the Roman emperor Trajan in A.D. 112. Pliny was the governor of Bithynia, the province just north of Asia. From Pliny's letter we can deduce Rome's attitude to Christians about 20 years after Revelation was written. In Pliny's time it does not appear that Rome was actively persecuting Christians. But if a Christian



was accused in a court of law, there apparently was a standard test he or she had to take to demonstrate loyalty to Rome. This included making an offering to Caesar and cursing Christ.

We also learn from Pliny's correspondence that some who were accused of being Christians claimed to have abandoned their faith two decades earlier. This led G. B. Caird to speculate "that there was some kind of severe social pressure at work in A.D. 92" (20-21). Whatever the form or intensity of persecution, John was evidently swept up in the net and banished to Patmos.

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## **A Vision of Christ – Revelation 1:10-20**

### **In spirit on the Lord's Day (1:10)**

While on the island, he says, “I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice...” (1:10). John found himself in a long line of prophets who had received visions from God. He is in the tradition of Ezekiel, who wrote of his visions in words similar to John: “The Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rumbling sound...” (3:12).

John also stands in the apostolic tradition of visionary experiences. Peter had a vision at Joppa (Acts 10:10; 11:5) and Paul did on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9) and in Jerusalem (Acts 22:17-21). Such “visions and revelations from the Lord,” as Paul described them, validated him as a true messenger of the gospel (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Paul said the gospel he preached came through a revelation (Galatians 1:11-12). John referred to God's prophetic revelation in his book because it validated what he wrote as coming from God.

John's use of “in the Spirit” does not refer to the Christian's attitude and relationship to God. Nor does it refer to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which all Christians have. As the content of Revelation shows, John's “in the Spirit” referred to a special state in which spiritual knowledge was received from God.

John says he was “in the Spirit” at a specific time—“the Lord's Day” (1:10). Unfortunately, John does not explain the expression any further. With little to go on, his statement has been variously interpreted. Some see in this the first use of a technical term for the first day of the week—a time of special worship for Christians, perhaps a weekly commemoration of the resurrection.

In support of this idea, mention is usually made of two occasions in the

New Testament. One refers to a time when the disciples broke bread on the day prior to Paul's departure (Acts 20:7). Another mentions an offering being gathered for the poor saints in Jerusalem on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2).

There is another interpretation of John's use of the "Lord's Day." This idea says the expression refers to his being carried forward by the Spirit to the time with which Revelation deals. That would be the time or day when God intervenes in human affairs and ushers in the kingdom. There are many references to this "day of the Lord" in the Old Testament, Isaiah 13:9-10 being a good example.

This would be God's "day" when his rest is on the earth—and God's people enter into it through salvation. Hebrews seem to refer to this time in a cryptic manner (4:3-7). In that sense, we should view "the Lord's Day" in opposition to humanity's day, as represented by "Caesar's days," times set aside to honor the Roman emperor.

Some Greek scholars argue that "the Lord's Day" would be too unusual a grammatical construction if used for the eschatological day of the Lord. However, we should be reminded that these same scholars complain that John's Greek is idiosyncratic. Perhaps, since John does not make much of the expression, the wisest course would be to follow his lead.

### **Write to the seven churches (1:10-11)**

John is now given his commission. He is to describe the visions and write down the words he hears. Then he is to send them to seven congregations in the province of Asia—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (1:11)

The entire scroll—our book of Revelation—was to be read at each of the seven churches. But why choose seven churches (rather than six or eight)?

In his classic 1909 work, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, William

Ramsay suggested that the seven churches were on an established postal route, with Ephesus the point of entry by sea. A mail courier would deliver the mail at Ephesus and then travel 40 miles north to Smyrna. Next, he would go 40 more miles north to Pergamum. The courier would then turn southeast towards Thyatira, about 45 miles away. The next leg would take him 30 miles south to Sardis, and then east-southeast to Philadelphia, another 30 miles. Finally, the mail courier would ride 40 miles southeast to Laodicea.

We know from the New Testament that there were churches in other cities of Asia. This would include congregations in Troas (Acts 20:5-12; 2 Corinthians 2:12); at Miletus (Acts 20:7); at Colossae (Colossians 1:2); at Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13). It's also possible there were churches at Magnesia and Tralles. About 20 years later, when Ignatius wrote his letters, the churches in those two cities were well established.

Perhaps only seven churches are mentioned for another reason. Revelation is a book of symbols representing cosmic concepts. John uses the number seven frequently: 54 times. In the ancient world, seven was regarded as the perfect number. It stood for completion. In choosing seven churches, then, Revelation would be telling us that the message is addressed to the entire church—the church universal—wherever it is found.

The churches in the seven cities were real congregations of Christians. They did hear the message. But so did other congregations, not only in Asia, but in many other places where Christians met. This is attested to by the fact that Christians used and preserved the book and have passed it on to us, 1,900 years after it was written.

One other point should be briefly considered. Some have felt that the seven letters represent seven successive periods of church history. While it is an interesting concept, there is no way to demonstrate its validity. At the end of each letter, the church being addressed is told to “hear what the Spirit says

to the churches” (in the plural). That is, every church needs to hear what has been said to the other six. Thus, the emphasis seems to be on the thought that *all* the characteristics of the seven churches are found wherever and in whatever age Christians live.

### **One like a Son of Man (1:12-16)**

We now begin to read about the first of John’s visions—a picture of the risen Christ in his glorified state. John sees his vision as a kaleidoscope of magnificent Old Testament images and portraits. The vision is a symbolic portrayal of the Lord’s majesty. It is a virtual reality experience of the glory of the resurrected Christ.

What is the purpose of the vision? It sets the tone for the message of the book. It tells us Jesus Christ has total lordship over the creation and the congregation of the saints. He is actively present in the affairs of world and church.

### **The seven lampstands (1:12-13)**

At the beginning of his vision, John turned to see who was speaking, apparently from behind him or to his side. As he spun around, he saw seven golden lampstands or candelabra (1:12). John explains who these symbols represent: they are the seven churches to whom this letter-book is written (1:20). As noted above, the seven churches represent the complete church.

A lampstand carries symbolic meaning. Jesus said God’s people are lamps called to carry the light of the divine presence in a spiritually dark world (Matthew 5:14-16). Christ is the light of the world. Disciples of Christ are lights of the world and stars that shine in a depraved world. However, the light that shines from Christians is a reflected light that originates in Christ.

The picture of seven golden lampstands harkens back to the candlestick of pure gold in Israel’s Tabernacle (Exodus 25:31-38). In a vision similar to John’s, Zechariah saw a single golden lampstand. On the top was a bowl with

seven lights on it (Zechariah 4:2). We again see continuity between the nation of Israel and the church.

Among the seven lampstands, John saw a figure he described as one “like a son of man” (1:13). This is a title Jesus often used for himself, but it can also be used for other humans (Psalm 8:4; Ezekiel 3:17).

We are not told that this is the glorified Christ. However, we soon see that the passage speaks of him. As well, John’s description closely follows the picture of the Ancient of Days in the book of Daniel. Daniel also saw in a vision “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (7:13). This person was led into the presence of the Ancient of Days and was given everlasting dominion, authority, and power over all nations (verse 14). Ezekiel also experienced a vision of “a figure like that of a man” (1:26).

In John’s vision, this dazzling figure is pictured among the seven lampstands. These, we saw represent the seven churches (1:13, 20). This was a powerful statement to the harried churches, showing that Christ is present with his people.

The vision emphasizes the identity of the true spiritual leader of the church. He is the risen Christ, who dwells in the midst of his people. He is with them at all times (Matthew 28:20). This recalls Jesus’ promise: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

### **The glory described (1:13-16)**

John describes several characteristics of the figure he sees. He wears a floor-length robe and gold sash around his chest (1:13). The high priest wore a robe (Exodus 28:4; 29:5; Leviticus 16:4). Princes and kings did as well. The symbolic meaning here is that Christ is both a priest and king to his people.

John tells us that the figure he saw had hair that was white as wool. This is Daniel’s description of the Ancient of Days, a figure that pictures God

(7:9). Thus, John is telling us that Christ shares this feature with his Father. The hoary head is a symbol of great age. This could be a symbol for Christ's eternal existence, which he shares with the Father. By attributing a quality of God to Christ, Revelation points out the exalted state of Christ. The color white in Revelation represents sinlessness or holiness. Perhaps here we are to understand Christ's eternal holiness.

Next, John tells us this figure had eyes like a blazing fire (1:14). This recalls Daniel's vision of a man dressed in linen who had "eyes like flaming torches" (10:6). This characteristic of the risen Savior is repeated twice. First in the letter to Thyatira (2:18) and later, in the description of the victorious Messiah (19:12). It may suggest an unusual ability to see hidden things.

John's figure had feet he described as "bronze glowing in a furnace" (1:15). Daniel's figure had arms and legs with "the gleam of burnished bronze" (10:6). This could be understood as Christ's infinite strength and power.

The figure's voice was "like the sound of rushing waters" (1:15). This is precisely how Ezekiel described the voice in his vision of the glory of the God of Israel (43:2). Daniel's figure had a voice "like the sound of a multitude" (10:6).

Next, John tells us the figure held seven stars in his right hand (1:16). The seven stars are defined for John as being symbolic of the angels of the seven churches (1:20). This is one of several places in which Revelation is self-interpreting. John sometimes tells us the meaning of his visions. Some examples are found in Revelation: 4:5; 5:6; 8; 14:4-5; 12:9; 17:9-11; 12, 18; 19:8; 19:10; 20:14).

That Christ holds the stars in his hand may imply that he fully protects the churches. The thought recalls Christ's words to his sheep, which symbolically represent his people: "I give them eternal life, and they shall

never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

The fact that the stars are in his *right* hand may indicate that Christ loves his people. This would be important encouragement, given the strong rebuke and dire warnings some of the churches are about to receive.

How could one person hold seven stars, when stars are far larger than earth? This is a symbolic depiction, and John and his readers were not aware of how large stars actually are. Visions are not to be taken literally, but symbolically.

### **The sharp sword of Christ (1:16-17)**

John tells us the figure has a sharp double-edged sword protruding from his mouth (1:16). We will see this image used again as part of the returning Messiah’s imagery (19:15, 21). There it seems to represent divine judgment.

The sword is used in Hebrews as a symbol to show the penetrating quality of God’s word (Hebrews 4:12). Paul speaks of the sword of the Spirit as being the word of God (Ephesians 6:17). The sword is an Old Testament picture as well. Isaiah, writing in the character as the Messiah, says, “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword...” (49:2). What is the connection between the mouth and the sword? God needs only to speak, and it is done. In Genesis 1, God spoke and all things came into existence.

This picture—the sword coming from the figure’s mouth—tells us we are being given only a symbolic representation of Christ’s glory. We are not to believe that he has a literal sword in his mouth.

The final element in the figure’s description is his face, which gleamed like the sun in full brilliance (1:16). This recalls another vision in the New Testament. In the Transfiguration, Jesus’ “face shone like the sun” (Matthew 17:12).

John’s vision of Christ glorified had much in common with Old Testament descriptions of God. How John was led to apply them to the figure



he saw, we do not know. What is clear is that Old Testament descriptions of *God* have been applied to *Christ*. This tells us two things. Christ is to be understood to be God. Also, the God of Israel has been connected with Christ, the Savior of New Testament Israel, the church.

John's reaction to what he saw is understandable. Shaking with fear, he collapsed and virtually fainted. "As though dead," is the way John described it (1:17). Daniel related a similar reaction when he saw his "great vision" of the man dressed in linen. He, too, collapsed, his "face turned deathly pale" and he fell into sleep (Daniel 10:8-10). As in Daniel's case, the figure's hand touched John and reassured him (1:17).

### **Christ the living one (1:17)**

What follows, until the end of chapter 3, is a long speech by Jesus. We have a "Thus saith the Lord..." to John and the churches reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets. The Lord spoke and the prophets passed on what was said to Israel, either verbally or in writing. John, however, is a prophet to the New Israel, the church.

Christ begins his speech by describing himself under several titles of divinity (1:17-18). He is "the first and the last," which is roughly the same as the title "the Alpha and Omega" given previously (1:8). This title is a self-description of God in Isaiah. God says "apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 48:12). There is only one God and the God of Israel is One. But since the title is applied to Jesus, he also must be God, but not a "second" God (John 1:1).

Jesus Christ is also called "the Living One" who was dead but lives forever (1:18). The title "the living God" is used of God in both Old and New Testaments (Psalms 42:2; Romans 9:26). It refers to the essential nature of God. He has life within himself—he is eternal. Though Christ voluntarily emptied himself and died for the sins of humanity, through the life that exists

in God, he was resurrected and exalted (Philippians 2:6-11).

This would have great meaning for a persecuted church, whose members might be facing martyrdom. Though some people of God may be put to death, the One who has life within himself guarantees that the martyred shall have life everlasting through him. “Because I live, you also will live,” Jesus told his disciples (John 14:9).

Jesus Christ holds the “keys of death and Hades” (1:18). Hades is a representation of death—the “place” where the dead are, meaning the grave (Acts 2:27, 31). The name Hades has nothing to do with a place of hell or torment.

Christ *holds* the keys. To hold the keys is to have the authority over something (Matthew 16:19). Christ has the right and power to enter into the realm of death and the grave. He can pull people out of death and give them the key to the kingdom of heaven. That is, through a resurrection they can gain eternal life.

This metaphorical term is another way to tell the church that Christ gives life to his people. It is a foundational part of the gospel message. Paul wrote that Christ “has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). Death, the last enemy of humanity, will be eliminated or destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26). This is also the message of Revelation. At the end of the book we shall see that death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire – a symbolic way of saying they are destroyed. Then, only life will exist.

In the context of the book, this is reassuring to the believers. They need not fear the Roman authority who may execute them.

### **Write what you see (1:19)**

John is now commanded to “write...what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later” (1:19). On several occasions in Revelation, John

was told to write down what he saw (1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5).

The grammar here is difficult. Are we to divide Revelation into three parts: 1. What John has seen; 2. What is happening now; 3. What will occur in the future? Or is it a two-fold book? That is, are we to divide what John *sees* into: 1. what is happening now; and 2. What will occur later?

If we are to understand this as a three-fold commission, then “what you have seen” refers to the vision of a Son of Man. “What is now” would refer to the condition of the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. “What will take place later” would refer to the rest of Revelation beginning with chapter 4.

The most-widely held view sees the proper division of Revelation as two-fold. In that case, the command to “write” is a general one referring to everything in the book. A clearer way to put the verse would be to use this paraphrase: “Write what you will soon see, both what is already happening and those things will occur in the future.”

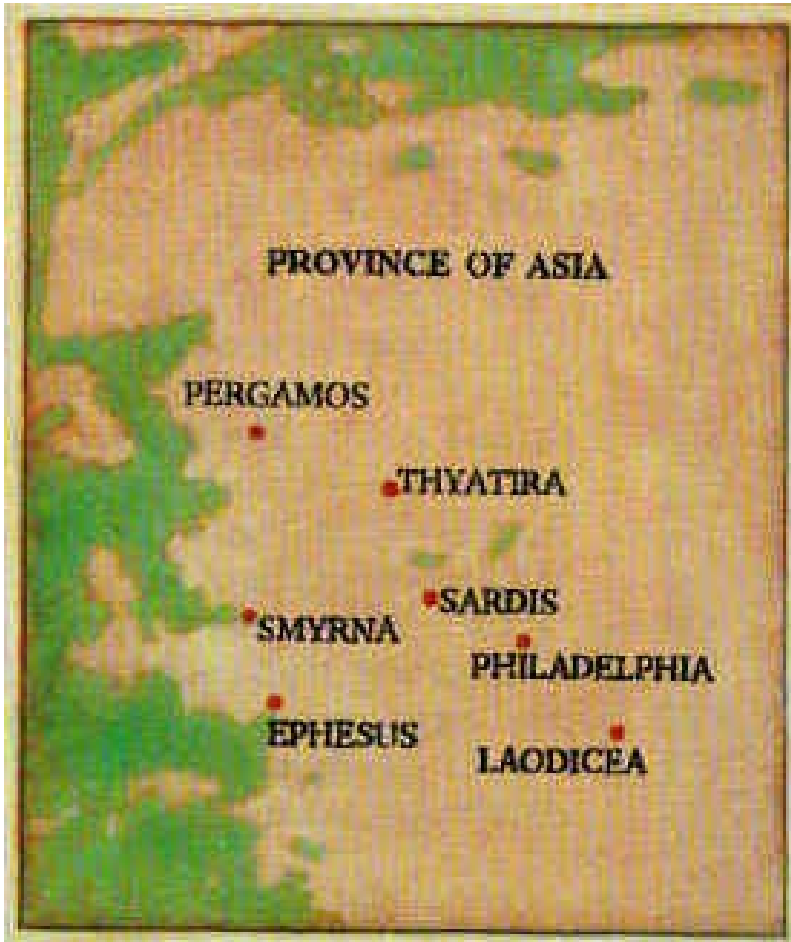
The first category would include the description of the seven churches, and references to historical conditions and situations of John’s time. The second category would contain those visions that describe the time of the end of human government, and beyond.

Perhaps there is another way of viewing this two-fold division. We could say that “what is now” represents the heavenly realities of the “good-as-done” determination of God. The “what will take place later” would then refer to the future working out of God’s judgment on this earth.

There is, throughout the New Testament, a tension between the “already” and “not yet” of the Christian life. The kingdom of God is here; but it is not yet complete. We are born again to a new life; but we are not fully what we are to become until the resurrection. Christ has already returned through the Spirit in human minds; his return is yet future.

Likewise, there is a tension in prophecy. The “end” is coming soon or is already here; the end is far off. Some of this tension disappears if we understand “the End” as a reality in the sense that God has willed and determined it. He has only to speak and it *will* be done. God merely needs to say to “the End”—“Come forth!” (6:1). Everything necessary to make “the End” possible has been accomplished.

## Seven Letters to Seven Churches



Revelation's seven letters to seven congregations in the Roman province of Asia provide us with a glimpse into the spiritual condition of the apostolic and post-apostolic church in a major crossroads area of the Roman world. It has generally been thought that Revelation was written around A.D. 100, though some scholars believe the book may have been written much earlier, in the mid-60s of the first century A.D.

In either case, the problems of faith found in some of the congregations should give us great pause. Since the church of the apostles and succeeding generation was beset by the spiritual crises described in Revelation 2-3, we must also ask ourselves about our own faithfulness to the Savior. On the other hand, some of the congregations exhibited characteristics greatly

praised by Jesus. This is a cause for much encouragement.

If we take to heart both the admonitions about the spiritual weaknesses and praise for the strengths of these congregations we can be both sobered and inspired. Finally, by meditating on the assurance of the promise of salvation given to each church by our Savior, we can receive comfort, joy and peace in our lives.

### **Message to the “seven angels” of the churches**

The last verse of the first chapter provides an introduction to the messages of the seven churches, which were in the Roman province of Asia (today, southwestern Turkey) (1:20). Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation contain seven letters to these church congregations. These were not the only churches in the area, but these seven letters give us a picture of the spiritual condition of the church in the Roman province of Asia at the time the book was written.

The fact that Revelation is written to real congregations of Christians places the book squarely in the real world of human beings. The letters were written to seven churches that existed at a particular time in history. Real people with strengths and problems like our own made up their congregations. These are letters, not prophecies of the future.

Each of the seven letters begins with Jesus speaking to members of his church. One of several attributes of his majesty, given in the first chapter, is repeated and placed at the heading of each letter. The descriptive phrase chosen from the vision is appropriate to each specific church. When such phrases run out, other pertinent statements regarding Christ’s attributes are used.

The letters respectively commend the churches for their strong spiritual works and reprimand them about their specific spiritual problems. Forceful warnings to repent are given to those who are spiritually weak, along with encouragement to persevere in the faith. The letters also contain promises to

those who overcome – promises of great assurance about their eternal life in the kingdom of God. These promises are given in symbolic terms.



Each letter concludes with the same statement: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches...” (2:7 etc.). The word is “churches,” in the plural. This implies that the words written to each congregation are meant to apply *to all seven churches*. This means that the seven individual church messages were meant for *all* the congregations in Asia of John’s day – and, by extension, for the entire church of the time.

We could also infer that the spiritual condition of these seven congregations is characteristic of every group of Christians during the last 1900 years. Certainly, God’s people in all ages should be concerned about the spiritual problems described in each of the letters and take assurance in the promise that the overcomers will inherit all things with their Savior, Jesus Christ.

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## **Ephesus: The Persevering Church**

In the opening letter to the church at Ephesus, Christ is pictured as walking among the seven lampstands, which represent the seven churches (1:20-2:1). This corresponds to the fact that he is the leader of the church and is its Savior (John 10:28). Perhaps there is an allusion here to Genesis 3:8, where the Lord is walking in the Garden of Eden with the man and woman he had created. In each case, the Lord seeks a personal relationship with his people, and wants to interact with them and be their guide.

The statement about Jesus walking among the candlesticks recalls an Old Testament promise: “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). This promise to ancient Israel is now made to the church, the new Israel (Galatians 6:16).

Each letter is introduced with Christ’s assertion, “I know...” (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). Christ is aware of the distresses and persecution the church members may be suffering. He also knows what they have achieved and where they have fallen short.

### **Strengths of Ephesus (2:2-3)**

The church at Ephesus had endured in the faith (2:2, 4). They had suffered for Christ’s name and had not grown spiritually tired. The church had also suffered the assault of false prophets trying to foist off heretical teachings.

The false teachers who tried to infiltrate the Ephesian church are identified under two categories. They are “those who claim to be apostles but are not” and the Nicolaitans (2:2, 6). Neither group’s practices or teachings are specifically identified. The latter group will be mentioned again in the letter to the church at Pergamum (2:15).

The Ephesian church apparently was diligent to eliminate false teaching,



before and after John's day. Assuming the late date for Revelation, about twenty years after the book was written, Ignatius praised the church in Ephesus for rejecting those who spread heretical doctrines (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 9:1; cf. 6:2; 7:1; 8:1).

### **Spiritual problems (2:4-6)**

Ironically, the Ephesian church and its leadership may have gone too far in rooting out heresy. There was a spiritual problem in the church described as a forsaking of "first love" (2:4). This is usually taken to mean the church members' love for one another.

If this is correct, perhaps hatred of heresy had created suspicion and intolerance of each other's differences and weaknesses. Theological orthodoxy and tests of loyalty may have been substituted for mercy and compassion. This could have led to an undue preoccupation with being "correct," resulting in the proverbial "straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel."

This is an important lesson to all Christians. While doctrinal purity is important to the Christian faith, it can unintentionally lead to witch hunting and condemning spirit. We can defend the faith only if we first remember to defend love for one another (John 13:34). Since the Triune God is love in his essential being, Christians will reflect that love as they have been spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The Ephesians' loss of love was no trivial matter. "It is treated as though it involved a fall from the Christian life," wrote G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 39. If the Ephesians did not repent of their lack of love, Christ said he would remove their lampstand (2:5). This implies that they would cease to be the spiritual people of God, even though they may have claimed to do many mighty works in his name (Matthew 7:22-23). (See 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.)

## **Listen to the Spirit (2:7)**

The church was admonished to *listen* to what the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ was saying to Ephesus (2:7). The fact that hearing rather than reading is emphasized infers that Revelation was designed to be read out loud in public worship. The churches were to listen to “what the *Spirit* says to the churches” (2:7). Yet, it is the glorified Christ who is pictured as speaking in these letters. Christ and the Spirit are equated. When the Spirit speaks, it is Christ speaking.

This recalls the words of Paul, who said, “The Lord is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17). That is not to imply a heretical modalism, where it is claimed that there is no permanent distinction between the three persons of the Trinity. The Persons of the Trinity are distinct, as the New Testament revelation of God’s nature makes clear. But each of the three persons has an intrinsic interpersonal relationship in triunity. Thus, there is one God whose three Persons are together involved in our salvation.

## **Promise to Ephesus (2:7)**

As does each of the letters, the one to the Ephesian church concludes with a note of victory and a promise to those who overcome or conquer. The conquerors in Christ in these churches are not to overcome an earthly foe by human force or will. Their struggle is more cosmic and more personal (Ephesians 6:12). They overcome the world by conquering themselves in and through the overcoming victory that was Christ’s (Revelation 2:26). The church’s victory parallels his victory – the eternal victory of the Lamb of God who overcame by living and dying in faith (3:21).

The overcomers at Ephesus are promised the gift of eternal life. The symbolism of salvation for the Ephesians is “the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7). These symbols stand for eternal life in the kingdom of God. The tree of life symbol is used again at the end of

Revelation (22:2). Both symbols go back to the beginning of the Old Testament. The centerpiece of the Garden of Eden was the tree of life, a symbol for eternal life (2:9). This is an illustration of the unity of the two Testaments in their presentation of the gospel.

If Genesis 2-3 describes a Paradise Lost to Adam and Eve because of sin, then the book of Revelation promises a Paradise Regained through the blood of the Lamb. The church resurrected to life (the New Jerusalem) will receive salvation (eat fruit from the tree of life) in the Lamb's eternal kingdom (the Garden of Eden and Paradise of God).

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## **Smyrna: The Persecuted Church**

The church at Smyrna was a suffering church (2:8). It was warned about an impending persecution and that some of its members would experience martyrdom (2:10). The church in Smyrna would soon be persecuted and martyred by Jews and heathens. This would happen for “ten days” (2:10). Most commentators take that figure to mean a short but definitely limited period of time.

Christ’s introductory title as the One “who died and came to life again” would be encouraging to these potential martyrs (2:8). The church members at Smyrna could face martyrdom in full confidence. They would be resurrected to eternal life by the one who himself was victorious over death through a resurrection.

The members at Smyrna were poverty-stricken people. Yet, Christ says they were spiritually rich (2:9). The contrast with Laodicea is significant. The Laodicean church assumed it was rich, but it was spiritually impoverished (3:17).

### **Problems at Smyrna (2:9-10)**

The church at Smyrna apparently suffered at the hands of a group “who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9). These Jews thought they were the people of God but were actually the representatives of his adversary (John 8:31-47). The people referred to were probably Jewish citizens of Smyrna who opposed the church. They may have been pressing the local government to take action against the Christians.

Why are these people said not to be Jews? They were Jews by race and religion. But they were not *spiritual* Jews, in the sense that the New Testament defines a Jew. Paul made the point in his writings: “A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by

the Spirit” (Romans 2:29). The church saw itself as the Israel of God, the “true circumcision” who worshiped God in Spirit and put its faith in Jesus Christ (Philippians 3:3).

### **Promise to Smyrna (2:10-11)**

The church at Smyrna would receive the “crown of life” (2:10). The crown here is *stephanos* in Greek, not the *diadema*, or royal crown. The *stephanos* was the victory wreath or trophy awarded to the winner of the games. A Roman magistrate who performed well also received a *stephanos* at the end of his term of office. In like manner, Christians who serve Christ will receive the victor’s crown in that they conquer the world in Christ, the Lamb, and the victory is modeled in their faithful service to him (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The overcomers in the Smyrna church will not be hurt by “the second death” (2:11). Revelation identifies the second death as the lake of fire (21:8). It is the second or eternal death. This death has no power over the faithful who have a part in the resurrection (20:6).

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## Pergamum: A Church in the Center of Heresy

Christ introduced himself to the church in Pergamum as one who has the sharp, double-edged sword (2:12). This was another reference taken from the “One like a Son of Man” image in chapter one (1:16).



The sword is symbolic of the penetrating word of God (Hebrews 4:12-13). More precisely, it is the discerning aspect of the word that “judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,” and from which nothing in creation is hidden. This would have had great meaning in reference to where the members of the Pergamum church lived – in a city filled with the splendor and power of false religion.

The church was reminded that Pergamum’s power structure had wrongly judged or condemned Antipas, a faithful witness, and executed him (1:5). But God will judge the world system itself in opposition to God, of which Pergamum’s power center partakes.

Revelation describes God’s judgment on “the world” in great symbolic detail. It is represented by the City of Babylon while God’s people are symbolized by the New Jerusalem. This struggle between the world and the saints, pictured in Revelation, led one commentator to label the book as a “Tale of Two Cities.”

The religious climate at Pergamum was not conducive to the Christian life. That’s because “Satan’s throne” was in the city (2:12). While the phrase

has received differing interpretations, it probably refers to Pergamum as a major center of pagan religion, especially the imperial cult. The city symbolized secular power and civil religion working together to do something Satan wanted.

### **Problems at Pergamum (2:14-16)**

While the church in Pergamum was assaulted from the outside, it also faced serious internal religious deception. This is described as the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans (2:14-15). Revelation's use of the Balaam typology underscores the book's reliance on Old Testament symbols. Balaam's story is found in Numbers 22-24. He was a prophet who manipulated Israel into falling under God's curse. Balaam's motive was personal gain (2 Peter 2:15; Jude 6). He had been offered riches and power by Balak, a gentile king, to destroy God's people, Israel.

The prophet found a way to accomplish the king's desire. Balaam devised a plan whereby he caused the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality with Moabite women and to sacrifice to their gods in a community meal during a festival (Numbers 25:1-2). Thus he led Israel into sin by causing the nation to accommodate itself to idolatrous pagan religion and its immortality. Balaam came to stand for an evil individual who seduces God's people into sin.

But in what sense were members of the church committing sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (2:14)? It is generally thought that this phrase refers to food eaten at festivals in which pagan gods were honored, as well as the sexual activities that may have gone on as part of such feasts. However, both expressions could also be understood metaphorically. That is, they would refer to general religious infidelity engaged in by Christians who participated in pagan rites and festivities.

Both a literal and figurative meaning may be in view here in Revelation.

Since sexual immorality was sometimes associated with worship in pagan religion, Christians would be taking sexual license as well as committing religious infidelity if they participated in the religious practices of the city.

The Balaamites may have been teaching the converts that participating in temple feasts or other activities in which the gods were invoked was not wrong because it served a good end. The unknown prophets or self-appointed teachers, metaphorically called “Balaam,” were probably counseling accommodation with the pagan culture. Balaam and the Nicolaitans as well as another heretical group we encounter later – the followers of a prophetess named “Jezebel” – probably all taught generally the same thing. G.R. Beasley-Murray, in speaking of the Nicolaitans, wrote:

They will have maintained that idols are nothing.... Therefore Christians need not hesitate to take part in pagan feasts, whether among trade guilds or in temples.... Nor need they be over-scrupulous about acknowledging the divinity of Caesar, for they can do it in the same spirit as many pagans did – as a gesture of loyalty to Rome, without religious significance. (*Revelation*, p. 86)

Revelation does not reveal the specific identity of the Nicolaitans, nor does it define all their beliefs. Irenaeus and other early church leaders claimed that the Nicolaitans practiced unrestrained indulgence (*Against Heresies*, 1.26.3). The Nicolaitans would have taught loose morals, probably under the guise of a deceptive theological rationale.

Following the teaching of the Balaamites and Nicolaitans, some church members in Pergamum had violated the freedom and grace they enjoyed in Christ. They had lapsed into a sinful accommodation with idolatry and immorality. The seriousness of the poor spiritual condition of some at Pergamum was underscored by Christ’s warning. He would fight against the heretics with the sword of his mouth (2:16). The mistakes of the Pergamum church are important lessons to all Christians who must struggle to keep their



spiritual balance in a darkened world.

### **Promise to Pergamum (2:17)**

Those who conquered in the Pergamum church – who didn't fall prey to this heresy – were promised salvation under the metaphor of the “hidden manna” and “white stone with a new name” (2:17). Manna is another Old Testament symbol. It was the food God supernaturally supplied to the Israelites during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness (Exodus 16:11-15). In Revelation the manna would refer to the spiritual food by which God gives life to his people. It is, like the fruit of the tree of life, a symbol of salvation and eternal life.

The meaning of the white stone is less clear. Several interpretations are possible. That's because stones were used in a variety of situations in ancient times. A white stone given to a person at the close of a trial meant he was acquitted of his crime. This symbolic meaning for the Christian is clear. Children of God have been exonerated of their sins through Christ's cleansing sacrifice. It is through Jesus' atoning blood that we freely receive our acquittal. The ideal of judicial judgment would also link the white stone to the “great white throne judgment” (20:11). This is a symbol of God's final, just and merciful judgment on humanity.

Stones also served as admission tickets to public festivals and assemblies. Metaphorically, this would mean the Christian had been granted admittance to the messianic feast at the Savior's return (19:18-19). A white stone may also have represented a happy and momentous day for the Christian – the receiving of the ultimate reward of salvation. The English equivalent would be a “red letter day.” An interesting custom in Thrace was the marking of good days by a white stone (Pliny *Natural History*, 7.40.131; Plutarch: *Life of Pericles* 64; Pliny, *Letters* 6:11). God's intervention in human affairs and the salvation of the church in the resurrection of the dead will be a wonderful and

momentous time (Revelation 19:1-6).

The color white is characteristic of Revelation. It speaks of white garments (3:5), white robes (7:9), white linen (19:8, 14), and the great white throne judgment (20:11). White, in these cases, represents a kind of spiritual purity.

The meaning of the “new name” written on the white stone appears to have Old Testament roots (2:17). When speaking of Zion – a type of the church perfected – Isaiah repeated the promise of God to his people: “You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow” (Isaiah 62:2).

The new name represents a new status given to the individual by God. We see the custom in the Old Testament. Jacob becomes Israel (Genesis 32:28); Abram becomes Abraham (Genesis 17:5); Sarai becomes Sarah (Genesis 17:15). In the New Testament, Saul becomes Paul (Acts 13:9). The custom of giving a person a new name to go along with a new status was also found in the Roman world. Octavius became Augustus when he was crowned Roman emperor.

For the Christian, the “new name” would have great spiritual significance. Christ will give the member a new status. He will be resurrected into the kingdom of God – with a new existence and unparalleled glory (Romans 8:18-21). The idea of newness in the “new name” is another theme in Revelation. We have a new Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2); a new heaven and earth (21:1); a new song (5:9; 14:3). And God says at the book’s end, “I am making everything new!” (21:5).

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## **Thyatira: The Faithful and Persevering Church**

The person pictured as speaking to the church in this letter identified himself as the Son of God (2:18). While this title is implied elsewhere in the book, it is used only here. Two closely allied titles from John's vision in chapter 1 began the letter – the figure's blazing eyes and feet that appear as burnished bronze (1:14-15).

Christ praised the church for its love, faith, service and perseverance. The range of praise regarding Thyatira's spiritual status was perhaps the widest given to any of the seven churches. It was the only church that is said to have improved its spiritual condition (2:19).

### **Problems at Thyatira (2:20-23)**

However, the church did need admonishment on one vital issue. The church had tolerated the teachings of a false prophetess. She is introduced only by a metaphorical name – Jezebel. Her teaching is defined in the same way as the teaching of Balaam in the church at Pergamum (2:14). Jezebel, says Christ, “Misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols” (2:20). A parallel to the evil queen of Ahab was intended (1 Kings 16:29; 2 Kings 9:30). Both the original Jezebel and this unidentified prophetess threatened to destroy the true worship of God among his people.

The original Jezebel's sin was leading Israel into idolatry, but she was not accused in the Old Testament of leading a sexually immoral life. Rather, her sin was in teaching others to follow religious immorality and faithlessness to the Lord (2 Kings 9:22).

This indicates that we can take the expressions of censure – “eating food sacrificed to idols” and “committing adultery” – in a figurative sense to mean idolatry. We should also be reminded that the Old Testament presented

idolatry, apostasy and infidelity to God in terms of sexual metaphors – as sexual immorality, fornication, adultery and prostitution (Exodus 34:15,16; Deuteronomy 31:16; Jeremiah 3:6; Ezekiel 23:19; Hosea 9:1). John used adultery as a metaphor of idolatry elsewhere in Revelation (17:2; 18:3).

In the church at Thyatira, this Jezebel probably counseled accommodation with the world. Robert H. Mounce says, “The fornication of which Jezebel was not willing to repent was her adulterous alliance with the pagan environment” (*The Book of Revelation*, p. 104).

Her theology, as spread by her counterparts in the Thyatira church, would be especially attractive to members who were in workers’ guilds. To reject guild membership would cause one to suffer economic deprivation. However, to be part of a guild required participation in its pagan religious festivities. The temptation to compromise one’s Christian beliefs must have been strong for many church members. Robert H. Mounce explains:

In a city whose economic life was dominated by trade guilds in which pagan religious practices had become criteria for membership, the Christian convert would be faced with the problem of compromising his stand at least enough to allow participation in a common meal dedicated to some pagan deity. To reject this accommodation could mean social isolation and economic hardship. *The Book of Revelation*, p. 103)

To be a member of a guild almost certainly would have meant participating in religious idolatry, immorality and debauchery. Thus, there is a dual meaning to the accusation that the Jezebel group practices “sexual immorality.” Revelation’s “Jezebel” (as well as “Balaam” and probably the Nicolaitans) suggested the Christian could be in agreement with the world and still be faithful to Christ.

The Jezebel party probably would explain that “an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one” (1 Corinthians 8:4). Participation

in pagan worship was really a meaningless activity. They would have reasoned that believers did not need to hurt themselves economically by refusing to accept a few harmless requirements posed by trade guild membership.

“Jezebel is to be counted amongst those to whom the claims of commercial success speak more loudly than the claims of Christ,” says William Barclay (*The Revelation of John*, volume 1, revised edition, p. 107). The Jezebel party apparently presented its teaching in strong theological wine, providing an excusing rationale that seemed to dispel any contrary arguments. Their theology is called “Satan’s so-called deep secrets” (2:24).

This phrase is usually explained in two ways. It may be an ironic twist on Jezebel’s own claim. Her followers may have claimed to be more spiritually sophisticated. They may have distorted Paul’s teaching, claiming to understand God’s will more deeply than the “self-righteous” majority who thought it ungodly to pay homage to the emperor as a god and to engage in debauchery (1 Corinthians 8:4; Romans 14:17). But Revelation says that the Jezebel party is the one that has fallen into the depths of a spiritual pit Satan has dug.

Another explanation for “Satan’s deep secrets” is that Jezebel, like the later Gnostics, taught that only by descending into the depths of evil could one appreciate the heights of God’s grace. Paul had argued against a similar idea in the church at Rome (Romans 6:1).

A majority of the church at Thyatira did not buy Jezebel’s reasoning. However, the church still apparently allowed this group’s teaching to continue within its midst. It had the “Corinthian disease,” which tolerated sin in the church, possibly in the misguided interest of being big-minded (1 Corinthians 5:1-7).

The issue has more than historical interest. It concerns us vitally. Says

Leon Morris: “Every generation of Christians must face the question, ‘How far should I accept and adopt contemporary standards and practices?’ On the one hand, Christians must not deny the faith. On the other, they must not deny their membership of society” (*Revelation*, revised edition, p. 71).

Christ had been patient, hoping for a change of heart in the Jezebel faction (2:21). But the group had refused to repent of their teachings. Thus, the moment of judgment had arrived. Jesus warned that he would cast the compromisers on “a bed of suffering...unless they repent” (2:22). The Greek word here is simply “bed.” The translators have caught the Old Testament idea behind being on a bed. It meant to be sick or injured (Exodus 21:18). To be cast on a bed would mean someone had inflicted suffering upon you.

The Jezebel faction – if they remained unrepentant – would become an object lesson and be brought to justice. The fact that God is a God of justice as well as mercy – that being a Christian is serious business – would become evident to “all the churches” (2:23). Here is another indication that the message to each church applied to all seven. The majority at Thyatira who did not hold to this “gospel of expediency” was counseled to hold on to their spiritual understanding (2:24). They would have no other “burden” imposed on them.

### **Promise to Thyatira (2:24-28)**

The church members at Thyatira were encouraged to continue in the faith – “until I come” (2:25). They were to be overcomers and do Christ’s will to the end. “This is the nearest we have in the seven letters to a definition of the conqueror,” says G. R. Beasley-Murray. “He *holds fast* the traditions of faith and life delivered to the Church til the coming of Christ (v. 25) and he *keeps* Christ’s works till the end (v. 26) – whether that ‘end’ be the Lord’s parousia or his own death” (*Revelation*, p. 93).

The promise of salvation is described as “authority over the nations”

(2:26). The overcomer will “rule them with an iron scepter” and “he will dash them to pieces like pottery” (2:27). These statements were taken from Psalm 2:9.

Some scholars feel that the original wording gives a somewhat different meaning than the English. Ruling should be understood more in the sense of shepherding. Wielding an iron scepter should be seen more in the context of a shepherd’s staff or club, used firmly but with tender loving care. If so, there is still the problem of how to understand the companion phrase, “...he will dash them to pieces like pottery” (2:27). The sheep are given guidance; the enemies are shattered.

Whatever the case, the meaning is clear: The now powerless church existing under human government will have power over the nations under Christ. The saints will inherit the earth, as Christ said (Matthew 5:55). And they would judge the world in whatever way that “judging” is to be understood (1 Corinthians 6:2).

The church at Thyatira was also promised the “morning star” (2:28). Several explanations have been offered for this symbol. Perhaps Christ is in view here, if we are guided by his symbolic self-description at the end of Revelation: “I, Jesus...[am] the bright Morning Star” (22:16). To “have” Jesus as the Morning Star would mean to be in his glorious presence – to be with him. This would explain the promise that in the resurrection the saints glorified will be with Christ, wherever he is (John 14:3).

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# Sardis: The “Dead” Church

## The “dead” church

The church at Sardis was described as being “dead” (3:1). It appeared to be alive – had “a reputation of being alive” – looked spiritually vibrant on the outside – but was spiritually lifeless. The church was Christian in name only. This recalls Christ’s scathing rebuke of the Pharisees who “look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

Says G.R. Beasley-Murray: “The appearance [of the Sardis church] is that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlour, and the Lord is not deceived” (*Revelation*, p. 95). The church needed to stir up the living Spirit of God in order to come to life.

What was dead about the church and what needed reviving? First, there was no indication of persecution or trouble from outside forces. Neither was there any heresy within, in contrast to some of the other churches. Things seemed to be peaceful and religiously correct. Perhaps it was a church that was too good to be true. Its religiously proper appearance may have only meant that it had fully and silently compromised with the truth and the pagan society around it. G.B. Caird calls Sardis “the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 48).

That might explain its calm and sedated outward appearance. George Eldon Ladd defined the Sardis church as “a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power” (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 56).

Paul had described such Christians by saying they seemed quite religious but denied God’s power in their lives (2 Timothy 3:5). This community of the



living dead needed the power of God to bring them back to life.

Christ therefore gave Sardis a jolting command to “Wake up!” (3:2). The rousing call was meant to encourage the church to take action. The members were to strengthen what little remained, to obey, to repent (3:2-3). Jesus told the church at Sardis to wake up or he would come like a thief does. “You will not know at what time I will come to you,” he said (2:3).

### **Promise to Sardis (3:4-6)**

While most in the church at Sardis were in a dead spiritual state, “a few people” were faithful to Christ, and had “not soiled their clothes” (3:4). They were promised that they would be taken on a walk in Christ, and to be dressed in white (3:4-5).

White garments are mentioned on five other occasions in Revelation. The church at Laodicea needs them to hide their spiritual shame (3:18). The 24 elders wear white garments (4:4). The martyrs waiting for God’s judgment are given white robes to wear (6:11). The armies appearing with the Messiah also wear white and clean linen (19:14). The great multitude of the saved in Revelation 7 wear robes made white in the red blood of the Lamb (verse 14). The color paradox makes the point. It implies that the color white stands for God’s people made spiritually pure and justified by Jesus’ blood.

That means the few in Sardis who were given white robes had been made right and just before God. We should not lose sight of the fact that the robes are given to the Sardians as a gift, reflecting the fact that we do not justify ourselves by good works; we are made spiritually right by the work of Christ.

In the ancient world, white clothing also stood for festivity. Ecclesiastes counseled people to “be clothed in white” – to enjoy their food and drink with a joyful heart (9:8). Those clothed in white will feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God (19:9). It will be their day of victory, a time to put on the best of clothing, clean and white.

The righteous saints in Sardis were also promised that their names would appear in the book of life (3:5). Only those names entered in the Lamb's book of life will be allowed into the New Jerusalem (21:27). The idea of a divine ledger is an Old Testament figure of speech for the Lord's salvation (Exodus 32:32; Psalm 69:28). Daniel was told that at the end-time, "everyone whose name is found written in the book – will be delivered" (12:1).

It was also a common New Testament way to speak of salvation, of having a part in the kingdom of God. Jesus used the term (Luke 10:20), and so did Paul (Philippians 4:3). Hebrews speaks of "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (12:23). The entering of a person's name in a book of life is another metaphor for salvation and eternal life.

The metaphor would have been familiar to the non-Jews in the Sardis church as well. Ancient cities in the Greek world kept registers of the names of their citizens. Criminals were removed from the civil register and lost their citizenship. Sardis, as the western capital of the earlier Persian and Seleucid empires, would have kept the royal archives for to a wide area.

Finally, Jesus promised to acknowledge the name of the overcomer in Sardis before his Father (3:6). This recalls Jesus' promise as the incarnate Son of God: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).

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## **Philadelphia: The Church That Kept the Faith**

Up to this point, phrases from the vision of chapter 1 were used to identify the speaker. Apparently, there was no suitable expression to introduce an important point for the Philadelphians. The letter to the church in Philadelphia begins with Christ identifying himself as “holy and true” (3:7). The Holy One is a common Old Testament title for God (Isaiah 40:25; 43:15). He is also true in the sense that he is faithful and trustworthy. God can always be counted on to keep his promises (Titus 1:2).

### **The key of David**

Christians of the first century lived in an uneasy relationship with Judaism. Most Jewish Christians probably attended the synagogue, took part in ritual worship and used the Hebrew Scriptures as their Bible. Then on the first day of the week they met with those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

At the same time, the church considered itself the rightful spiritual heir of Judaism — the new Israel (Galatians 6:16). It had accepted Jesus as its Lord, the Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures. The church saw itself as composed of spiritual Jews who had received “circumcision” through the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:28-29). This naturally caused a rift between Christians and Jews, as they both claimed to be God’s people.

That meant Jewish Christians often endured exceptional pressure and stress. They were called apostate Jews by their own relatives. Non-Christian Jews accused Christians of being usurpers. They insisted that Jews and not Christians had the open door to God’s presence and the keys to the kingdom.

The Christians in the Asian city of Philadelphia were among those who took the brunt of these claims. Then, in about A.D. 96, John, in the book of Revelation, assured those in the church that they were, indeed, the heirs to

salvation (Revelation 3:7-13).

John wrote that Christ is the One “who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (verse 7). Christ had set an open door before the church that “no one can shut.”

What was this key that unlocked a door that could not be shut? The answer lies in analyzing the key and door metaphor, which is found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He referred to an individual of his time named Shebna who had charge of the palace of the Judean king. Today, we might call him the chief of staff.

The prophet Isaiah said the Lord would replace Shebna with a man named Eliakim. The Lord would “place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (Isaiah 22:22). Thus, Eliakim would be a kind of gatekeeper with power to control entry into the royal kingdom. As the king’s steward, he would decide who could or could not have access to the king.

This story in Isaiah serves as a prophecy of the Davidic Messiah. “The imagery suggests that Christ is the only one who can grant access to God,” writes Norman Perrin. Christ “has given the Christians at Philadelphia access to God and no one can deprive them of it” (*Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, p. 86).

In the book of Revelation, John used this Old Testament metaphor to get across a vital message to the church in Philadelphia, and thereby to all Christians. That is, Christ has the key of David. He opens the door for the church — his royal household — and allows it to come into the presence of God. In short, Christ has granted Christians access to God. No one can deprive them of that access, which means that God gives them salvation.

The key in Revelation does much more than open the way to talking with a national king. In Christ’s hand, the key opens the door into the presence of

God, his kingdom and eternal life. Not only does Christ open the door, he *is* the door to the kingdom (John 10:7, 9). Thus, it is Jesus who presents himself to the church as the way to salvation (John 14:6).

A second interpretation of the open door and key statements is that the open door set before the church was a wide-open opportunity to engage in evangelistic activity and preach the gospel. Paul used a similar metaphor in this manner (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3).

However, Revelation usually uses imagery from the Old Testament, and the Old Testament background of the key and door metaphor works against this idea. The prophet Isaiah was speaking of access to the king, not evangelism to the world. The concept of access is also more in keeping with the context of Revelation. There is no evidence to support the interpretation of these passages as the church's missionary activity.

The book of Revelation has a different purpose — that of providing much-needed encouragement and comfort during trying circumstances. It presents the church not as a soul-conquering body but as an organism fighting for its very life in a hostile world. That's because the church was being intimidated by those who “claim to be Jews though they are not” (3:9). George Eldon Ladd explains the situation:

The immediate background of the phrase was the claim of the Jews in Philadelphia that they were the true people of God who held the key to the Kingdom of God. John contradicts this claim by asserting that the key to the kingdom which had belonged to Israel really belongs to Jesus as the Davidic messiah (5:5; 22:16) and had been forfeited by Israel because she had rejected her Messiah. (*A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, p. 59)

These Jews will ultimately have to acknowledge that Christ loves the church. They will recognize that the church is composed of the true people of God, rather than the Jews as a nation. The Christians at Philadelphia would

have been greatly encouraged when Christ identified himself as the true Messiah, and as one who controls access to the eternal kingdom. When he opens the door “no one can shut” it – and no one can prevent entry to the people for whom he opens it (3:7).

The local Jewish community of Philadelphia may claim that the kingdom belongs to the Jewish community. But they “are liars” (3:9). Christ has used the key of David to set an open door before the *church*, not the synagogue. The door to the synagogue may be closed to the Christian; the door to Christ’s heavenly kingdom is wide open.

But even as the church is persecuted — and its members martyred — it should remember the promises of its leader, Jesus Christ. He alone holds the key to God’s presence and has opened the door to his kingdom and the church’s salvation.

### **Synagogue of Satan (3:9)**

The Jews of Philadelphia who were persecuting and intimidating the Christians are called a “synagogue of Satan” (3:9), as they were identified in the letter to the church in Smyrna (2:9). They will experience a reversal of fortune – be forced to acknowledge that the church constitutes the true people of God (3:9).

The background for verse 9 is also to be found in the Old Testament, but with an unexpected twist. Isaiah had pictured the victory of Israel over its enemies (60:14). In one place Isaiah said gentile nations would do homage to Israel at the start of the kingdom. “They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, ‘Surely God is with you...’” (Isaiah 45:14).

The imagery of Isaiah bears a striking similarity to Revelation 3:9. But a stunning reversal of fortune has occurred. What the Jews hoped to gain from the gentiles, they themselves must render to the Christians. The Jews in Philadelphia must play the part of the heathen and concede that the church

contains the people of God.

Revelation here underscores the notion that the Jews are no longer the people of God as a national or ethnic entity, since they have rejected their Messiah (Matthew 21:33-43, especially verse 43). The new Israel – the church – has taken their place as God has moved forward to fulfill his promise of grace. The church is the true “Israel of God” even though it is largely composed of Gentiles (Galatians 6:16).

Revelation 3:9, however, looks to the time when the Jews will finally acknowledge (thus, “bow down” to) their Savior and the largely gentile church as the people of God. In that time, “All Israel [that is, the Israelite people as a whole] will be saved” (Romans 11:26).

### **Promise to the church (3:10-12)**

Because the church in Philadelphia has kept faith with Jesus, he will keep them from “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (3:10). This expression “hour of trial” refers in Revelation to the affliction on the world to come before God’s kingdom is established on the earth. This period of worldwide ordeal is a main theme of Revelation. The book informs the reader that “the hour of his judgment has come” (14:7). The death of the world system, dubbed “Babylon the Great,” which stands in opposition to God, is described in dramatic symbolic language in Revelation 15-19. The doom of this Babylon comes “in one hour” (18:10). “In one hour” the world’s Babylonish “great wealth” is “brought to ruin” (18:17, 19).

When the world’s anti-God system collapses, the church will face terrible persecution and martyrdom. That’s because it will be called on as a faithful witness to the rule and authority of God in a godless world. But because the names of the faithful witnesses are written in the book of life, they will be delivered and saved for eternal life.

While the church will suffer persecution, it will not be destroyed. That's because the hour of trial comes "upon the whole world" to try "those who live on the earth" (3:10). This does not include the church. In Revelation, the phrase "whole world" or "those who live on the earth" is always used for the godless world or enemies of the church (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8).

Whatever the Spirit says to an individual church such as Philadelphia applies to all the churches (3:13). Thus, it can be understood that the promise of protection applies to the church universal. Various images or metaphors are used in Revelation to describe the protection the church receives during this worldwide trouble. The earth is not harmed until the saints are sealed (7:1-8). The individual worshipers are counted, a sign of God's caring protection on those he personally knows (11:1). The woman, a symbol for the church, is protected in the wilderness (12:14-16).

As we saw earlier, the church at Smyrna was told it would receive "the crown of life" (2:10). Philadelphia was also told not to let any person take its crown. In both cases, the word is *stephanos* – which refers to the wreath of victory awarded to winners of athletic contests. This would have been a meaningful word to the church in Philadelphia, as the city was famous for its athletic games.





Christ promised the faithful in Philadelphia that he would make them pillars in God's temple (3:12). And, they would never again leave his presence. This is another symbol of assurance that the members would gain *eternal* admission into the kingdom of God.

Christ also promised to write three names on the believer – the name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem, and Christ's new name (3:12). Ancient pillars had the names of people they honored inscribed on them. The metaphor means to say that God will honor and bless his people. But in what way?

First, the believer will have God's name. In the Old Testament, the Lord told the priests to pronounce specific blessings on Israel, which concluded with this thought: "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:27).

Second, to be named with the city of God – the New Jerusalem – is a symbolic way of saying that the believer has citizenship in God's spiritual commonwealth (Galatians 4:26; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 12:22).

Third, the believer is to have Christ's own *new* name. Perhaps this refers to a future full revelation of Christ himself, which cannot be grasped until the believer is glorified (1 John 3:2).

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## **Laodicea: The Complacent Church**

Christ introduced himself to the church at Laodicea as “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation” (3:14). These titles were not taken from the description of Christ in chapter 1. Neither do they have any parallels in the final chapters. However, the ideas in the names are implicit to the book of Revelation as a whole.

Jesus is the faithful and true witness. He spoke and did only what the Father commanded him, no matter the consequences (John 3:34; 5:36; 12:49). Christ as faithful witness was a sharp contrast to the Laodiceans, who witnessed only to their own supposed spiritual works.

### **Problems at Laodicea (3:15-19)**

Like the church at Sardis, Laodicea had been bitten by the bug of complacency. But this church was also spiritually arrogant in its self-satisfaction. It was the only church Christ did not commend for anything. Tragic, indeed!

The church thought of itself as rich and in need of nothing from Christ. Although many of the members may have been materially rich, the “wealth” it claimed for itself would be spiritual. What is in view here is Laodicea’s spiritual pride and complacency.

The members needed to buy true riches in the areas of life where they felt they had no lack. This is explained in metaphorical terms as gold refined in the fire (3:18). Christ is the refiner of the human soul, which he purifies as the refiner does gold (Malachi 3:3). What needed refining was Laodicea’s faith so that it would become genuine (1 Peter 1:7).

Laodicea also needed white clothes to cover its spiritual nakedness (3:18). White garments are used as a symbol of righteousness throughout Revelation (3:4, 5; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14). They also represent the proper apparel

to wear at important festivities. The church cannot gain the righteousness of Christ through its own effort. The white garments are spoken of as given to the saints (6:11; 19:8). They are made white by being washed in the justifying blood of the Lamb (7:14). Without the white garments of righteousness, the church is spiritually naked. Nakedness is a symbol of spiritual shame and worthlessness (Ezekiel 16:35; 2 Corinthians 5:3).

The Laodicean church was spiritually blind. Its members thought they could see – thought that they were rich and without any needs. But Christ counseled them to apply a spiritual eye-salve so that they could see how far they had fallen. They needed to be zealous and repent (3:19).

Laodicea's spiritual works are described as neither cold nor hot (3:15-16). This may refer to the water supply available in Laodicea and two nearby cities, Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis was the site of hot, spa-like waters, used for medicinal purposes. Nearby Colossae was known for its cold and pure drinking water. But the waters of Laodicea were considered nauseous and undrinkable, not useful for any meaningful purpose. Like the city's water supply, the church is useless in its service to the Lord, and Christ is about to spit it from his mouth.

The church does not show forth the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The metaphor of the water supply says not so much that the church is half-hearted, but that its works are barren of God's power. The church reflected human ways and aspirations, not Christ's. It was far from the living water it desperately needed from him (John 4:10-14; 7:38-39).

### **Promise to Laodicea (3:20-21)**

In the letter, Christ used a metaphor of himself standing at the door and knocking on the minds and hearts of the smug Laodiceans.

Someone or something standing by a door is a well-known biblical metaphor. Jesus used the door metaphor in the context of his disciples' urgent

need to stay spiritually alert (Mark 13:29). James pictured Christ as the Judge standing at the door (5:9). Jesus spoke of his disciples as waiting expectantly for the master so they could open the door to him (Luke 12:36).

The image of Christ standing outside and knocking may also imply that the Laodiceans have locked him out of their church! But the metaphor is also a symbol of promise. Christ is waiting outside, hoping the Laodiceans will be open to his correction and change their ways. If they do, he will come in and share a meal with them (3:20). The fellowship meal figures prominently as a symbol of togetherness with Christ in the kingdom (19:9).

This leads easily to the final promise – a place on Christ’s throne, the symbol of his ruling authority (3:21). If the members of the church repent, they can eat and drink at Christ’s table in his kingdom and sit on thrones of judgment (Luke 22:30).

The fulfillment of this promise is described under the millennial rule of Christ (20:4) and in the eternal new creation (22:5). But the Laodiceans must overcome in Christ, and in the same way he overcame. Because he conquered, he has been given royal authority – which the church can have as well (3:21).

## **Summary**

To summarize, in chapters 2 and 3 we have seen the deep spiritual problems in the church, at least in the Roman province of Asia at the end of the first century. The cares of this life, the penetrating power of the society around the members and wrong spiritual attitudes have blocked out the church’s view of Christ to one degree or another.

To many members in the seven churches, the world seemed to be the only compelling reality. They had a desperate need to see behind the scenes, and discover the unseen reality of Christ and God. Members needed to refocus their minds on the real power of the universe, the place where salvation lies –

in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Revelation takes up this theme in chapters 4 and 5, revealing where the true salvation of the church lies, which is in the heavenly rule of God and the salvific work of the Lamb. The world system of evil to which many were falling prey will be judged by God and replaced by his eternal kingdom, the New Heavens and New Earth. That's the rest of the story in Revelation.

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## About the Author

Paul Kroll worked for Grace Communion International for many years, writing hundreds of articles for our magazines. He wrote a commentary on the book of Acts, now published as a series of seven e-books. He is now retired. He wrote this material in the mid 1990s. The book was edited by Michael Morrison, who received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and instructor in New Testament for [Grace Communion Seminary](#).

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