Revelation 1

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# Introduction to Revelation

As the Apostle John advanced in years he expected he would finish out his ministry Pastoring the church in Ephesus. His ministry there had been long and distinguished. He was widely respected in Asia Minor as well as in Ephesus. However, when the persecutions under Domitian reached Ephesus the city officials knew they had to take action against John or their own lives might be in jeopardy. Instead of killing him they sent him to a sparsely inhabited island in the Aegean known as Patmos.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was not a regular Roman Banishment Island. However, it served similar purposes for the Ephesian officials.

As John sailed into the small harbor his thoughts must have been very different from our own. Even to this day it is a harsh and rocky island. A small city tucked into the harbor signals a welcome to the modern visitor. The island is dotted with literally hundreds of tiny chapels for the faithful of 1900 years who have gone to remember John and to pray to the God he served. Its whitewashed houses and shops greet today’s guests. Their giant cruise ships are the picture of luxury and comfort. Although still pristine, Patmos has come a long ways. In John’s day it was dry and barren. Only a few thousand fishermen and hardy farmers worked the hills and shores. Maybe his own faith felt as isolated and dry as this island as he looked upon it 1900 years ago.

John loved people. He was a compassionate and loving shepherd of the Church. His forced banishment was terrible on two counts. He was sent there alone. To be by himself on that forsaken island was like being locked in a dark cell. John thrived on preaching, teaching, and being with his people. Alone was like death to him. To make matters worse, he had no communication from his Church back in Ephesus. From the hillsides he could see the ships sailing by. Only rarely would one stop. When they came, John would hurry to the dock in hopes of some word of his congregation. He wondered how they were standing up under the persecution and killings. He knew they would be suffering and he would have preferred to be with them, to encourage them, but he could not.

John must have wondered at the wisdom and will of God. A Pastor needs to be with his people, not stuck off in some isolated island. Why would God allow the Romans to do this to him? He didn’t know. Days turned into weeks. Only the coming and going of the Lord’s Days gave any rhythm to his monotonous weeks. As each Sunday came he would climb the mountain to greet the Lord’s Day sun. He would look toward the distant coast of Asia Minor some 60 miles away. Even though he could not see the hills over the horizon of the sea, at least in his memory he could arrive at Ephesus. In his mind, he could see the congregations gathered in their churches and places of worship all through that province. He knew that whatever Christians had survived would be gathering to read the Scriptures and to pray. Although he could not be with them in person, he could join them before the throne of God. His congregation in Ephesus, and their Pastor on Patmos, would be joined in common devotion to God and the unity of the Holy Spirit.

On that particular Sunday Morning, John was praying as usual. He felt the stirring of the Holy Spirit as he prayed. In a sudden moment, God showed him the needs of the congregations. He prayed for them. The heavens themselves seemed to open. John saw all manner of events and places. It seemed to him that the whole of the future was being played out before him in the mists of heaven. He saw the love and patience of God in the face of hardened and offensive rebels. Again and again God gave them opportunity to repent, but they would not. He would ultimately triumph over his enemies, but not without many opportunities for them to turn to God. John quickly gathered his scroll and quill and began to write the Revelation that he received.

**The Stated Purpose of this book**

*1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw-- that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. 4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

The opening phrase is important to set the tone of this book. This is not the revelation of the future or of prophecy. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ. In this book we will see the love of Jesus, the power of Jesus, and his longsuffering grace before his final kingdom is established. In the end, it will be Jesus Christ as Lord and King.

The purpose of this revelation is to allow the Christians to understand what will “soon take place.” In verse one John speaks of the soon coming of Jesus. In the very last verses of the book he revisits that thought. “He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The coming of Jesus is seen by John to be soon. The early church thought of themselves as being in the last days and the coming of Christ to be expected soon. After 2000 years we understand that these are descriptions of time periods and that “soon” is a relative term.

These things about the coming events were revealed to John with assistance from an unidentified angel. These words are not their own however. They are the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. John offers the highest defense for the words he writes.

The blessing the reader will enjoy is knowing what is to come. By understanding the words and their meaning, the reader is prepared for the future.

John’s words are directed toward the seven Churches of Asia, including Ephesus where he was still the Pastor. These would all have been churches where he would have visited and preached. As the one remaining original Apostle, and Pastor of the leading Provincial Church, John’s influence and supervision was recognized and accepted.

John’s greeting is distinctively trinitarian. God the Father is identified as the one who was, who is, and who is to come. That is, God is eternal. He has existed from before the beginning and will exist after the end. The Holy Spirit is identified as the seven-fold Spirit before the throne. The actual words indicate seven spirits. We understand him to be describing the seven lamps, the seven eyes, or the seven functions of the Holy Spirit.[[3]](#footnote-3) Jesus is given several titles. He is the “faithful witness,” “firstborn from the dead” and “ruler of the kings of the earth.” John knows that Jesus has risen from the dead. This book is really about the Lordship of Jesus being recognized by the whole earth. Increasingly, Jesus turns up the heat on the earth so that everyone will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and King of the whole earth as well as heaven.

The apostle who was loved by the Lord is still, after six decades, reveling in the love of Jesus. John does not stop with the love of Jesus. He goes on to add that Jesus has freed us from our sins. We are more than forgiven, we are freed from sin.

At the Exodus, God revealed his intention for Israel. From the very beginning of relationship God had one goal:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."[[4]](#footnote-4)

That ancient hope is being realized in the coming of the Kingdom of God to the earth in the person of Jesus Christ. John recognizes that this has already happened through the Christians. For these reasons, among others, Jesus is to receive glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

**The Coming King**

*7 Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

The coming of Jesus will be global and visible. There will be no secret coming to Brooklyn, New York, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses said. He will not come into some investigative judgement in heaven as the Adventists said. This coming of Jesus will be known to all. Every eye will see him, not just believing eyes. Even the Romans who killed him will see him come.

This Alpha and the Omega is not the Father, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses believe. Revelation 22 is clear in saying that this Alpha and the Omega is Jesus.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We learn that Jesus is also eternally existent. The same words that were used to describe the eternal existence of the Father are here applied to the Son. The Father did not create the Son. Rather, each existed from before the beginning. Jesus is eternal. He is co-equal with the Father as to age. One did not come before the other. Jesus is even called the “Almighty.” This is the same “God Almighty” who appeared to Abraham.[[6]](#footnote-6) John is helping us to understand there is nothing inferior about Jesus Christ, the coming King.

**John’s Identification and Call to Write**

*9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 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*."

Again John identifies himself simply as a brother. He shares their suffering and patient endurance of it. He also shares the kingdom. Because of his ministry, he is on the island of Patmos.

There is a clue in verse 10 as to the time when this book was written. It is the use of the term Lord’s Day. An earlier document called “The Didache” or “Teaching of the Apostles” was written as early as 70 AD. Some think it was at the turn of the century. The fact that the Didache refers to the Lord’s day and then feels obligated to indicate that this is referring to Sunday is decisive for a very early date. By the time Revelation was written, John did not find it necessary to qualify the meaning of the term “Lord’s day.” By then, everyone knew. But the Didache must have been in that transitional period when some clarification would be needed to define what must have been a newer term. The Didache’s writer indicates “But every Lord’s day (Sunday) do ye gather yourselves together, and break bread and give thanksgiving.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Only by the time of John’s Revelation had the first day of the week acquired formal terminology associated with Christian worship. John says, “On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit,…” John would only have used this term if it were already widely used and understood. Further, since the letter is addressed to the seven churches of Asia, and a particular blessing was offered to those who would hear the reading of it, John must have known that it would be read in the churches on Sunday, their day of worship. By noting in the earliest part of the letter that he received this revelation on the Lord’s Day, he would have been establishing an immediate rapport with the believers who were also in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day. In the forty or so years from Paul’s letters to that of John, reference to Sunday had moved from the first day of the week, to a more formal “Lord’s Day” designation. From this we would speculate that sometime in the last forty years of the first century, a complete transition out of the synagogue and Sabbath worship had occurred. It was now to Churches, not synagogues, that the letter was addressed. Further, the reference is not to the Sabbath, but to the Lord’s Day.

John was in the Spirit on that day. This was the necessary preparation for the revelation he received. It is a curious phrase, “in the Spirit.” What did John mean by that? He was all alone, expect the Spirit was with him. In his own heart he was being moved along by the grace of the Spirit. He was not worshipping a distant God. The Spirit was present and he was “in” the Spirit.

Being in the Spirit, allowed John to hear the voice of God. To John, the voice was as loud as a trumpet and the message just as clear. He was to write what he saw and send it to the seven nearby Churches of the province of Asia. Today we would call this area the west coast of Turkey.

**The Son of Man**

*12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. 15 His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. 20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches*. (NIV)

This is an impressive person that John sees when he turns around. He sees seven golden lampstands which he identifies as the seven churches in question. His attention is not drawn to the lampstands but to the person. John certainly does not mean to use these seven lampstands as periods representing the future history of the Church. There is nothing here to suggest that idea. Indeed, he barely concerns himself with the lampstands. His concern is with the striking figure.

He is “like a son of man.” This is not an idle or meaningless expression. This suggests to us Daniel’s “Son of Man:”

"*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The book of Revelation has as many allusions to the Old Testament as it does verses. The whole book can really be seen as a restatement of the themes of the Old Testament prophets. John’s son of man is none other than the one who will come in the clouds of heaven. He is dressed for the part of royalty with “*a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.”* The kingly and high-priestly figure wears the breast-plate-like sash.

Although his hair and head speak of venerable age, his eyes are blazing fires. The ancient of days has seen no deterioration of his power or natural force. He has powerful feet that give off a radiant glow like heated metal. His voice matches his appearance. Earlier John described it as sounding like a trumpet. Here it has deepened and broadened like the thunder of a giant waterfall.

In his hands he holds seven stars. In verse 20 he will tell us explicitly these are the “angels of the seven churches.” I suspect these are the leaders of the seven churches of Asia. John himself would be one of these patient sufferers under persecution.

It is difficult to say precisely what John means when he addresses his comments to the “angels” of the various churches. The word translated angel can also be translated as messenger.[[9]](#footnote-9) In Malachi 2:7 the priest is viewed in such a role: “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction-- because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.”

In a similar vein we have Tertullian who says that great leaders could be called angels because of the mighty deeds which they did. In this case, these heads of the churches could be humans who did mighty deeds and thus earned the title that John gives them. Tertullian is writing one century after John.

Now He called him an “angel,” on account of the magnitude of the mighty deeds which he was to achieve (which mighty deeds Joshua the son of Nun did, and you yourselves read), and on account of his office of prophet announcing (to wit) the divine will; just as withal the Spirit, speaking in the person of the Father, calls the forerunner of Christ, John, a future “angel,” through the prophet: “Behold, I send mine angel before Thy”--that is, Christ’s--”face, who shall prepare Thy way before Thee.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Clement of Alexandria used a similar line of reasoning to call Jesus an angel. He said, “. . . but to the fresh and new people has also been given a new covenant, and the Word has appeared, and fear is turned to love, and that mystic angel is born—Jesus.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He did not truly believe Jesus was an angel, but the term was used in its loosest sense, not its technical narrow sense.

On the other hand, Origen who was one generation after Tertullian viewed the angels as angels and says so very explicitly.

All of which things were disposed, as I have said, not indiscriminately and fortuitously, but by a most appropriate and just decision of God, who arranged them according to deserts, in accordance with His own approval and judgment: so that to one angel the Church of the Ephesians was to be entrusted; to another, that of the Smyrnaeans; one angel was to be Peter’s, another Paul’s ; and so on through every one of the little ones that are in the Church, for such and such angels as even daily behold the face of God must be assigned to some angel that encampeth round about them that fear God. [[12]](#footnote-12)

With all due respect to Origen, I tend to view the “angels” as leaders or Pastors of the seven Churches in question. It seems unlikely that an Apostle would direct angels to do anything since this is nowhere else proposed. Pastors, on the other hand, were subject to the Apostles. We would do well to remember that John had very recently been Pastoring the Church at Ephesus. Only when banished under the persecution was he removed from the city and deposited on Patmos. Given his recent care of the church, it is not surprising that he would immediately write about the church and its spiritual progress.

Whether the angels are Pastors or actual heavenly creatures it is clear that the message is to the Churches. Out of the mouth of Jesus comes a sharp double-edged sword. This sword is not for waving like a tooth-fairy’s magic wand. It had a biblical purpose that the Psalmist clearly states.

May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands, to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the LORD.[[13]](#footnote-13)

John will reveal that Jesus is the rightful King of the earth. The double-edged sword is not about the effective weapon of the Romans. Rather, it is about the kings of the earth and their nobles being shackled and sentenced like prisoners as the rightful King takes his place.

The king with blazing face is unstoppable and John falls at his feet like a dead man. He was “slain in the Spirit” and fell forward on his face. The eternal one is first and last. The one who was crucified and dead, is now alive forevermore. Death and Hell have been defeated. It is time for the people to hear the news and John is to be the delivery boy.

Verse 19 may well be the key to the whole book. It is what John was instructed to write. *"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”* John must write all that was revealed to him. Part of it was to apply to the issues immediately facing the seven churches and others. That was the “what is now” portion. The other part applied to the future, “what will take place later.” In the first part of the book we have the issues of what was taking place then, in the seven churches. The later portion of the book deals with events beyond John’s immediate future.

1. Tertullian, Apolocy V, (page 22) said, “Domitian, too, a man of Nero’s type in cruelty, tried his hand at persecution; but as he had something of the human in him, he soon put an end to what he had begun, even restoring again those whom he had banished.” From this I infer that Domitian may have ultimately restored John to Ephesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Revelation 22:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rev 4:5 says “Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.” Isaiah saw the seven-fold Spirit coming upon the Messiah in Isaiah 11:2-3 “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--and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Exodus 19:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rev 22:13-16 “ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Genesis 17:1 “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. cited in Dake’s Bible, page 191 Reference given as Volume 7, page 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Daniel 7:13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. aggelos (ang'-el-os); to bring tidings; a messenger; especially an "angel"; by implication, a pastor. The term is translated messenger 7 times and angle over a hundred times. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., “An Answer to the Jews,” Ante-Nicene Fathers; Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian; vol 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., “The Instructor, Book I,” Ante-Nicene Fathers; vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alexander Roberts, and James Donaldson, eds., Origen, “Origen De Principiis, Book 1”, Ante-Nicene Fathers, (Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Vol.4, pg. 265 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Psalm 149:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)