

REVELATION 1

The Introduction

The opening chapter of John's Revelation does what a good introduction to any book is expected to do: lay out the major players and the plot, while giving a few hints as to what will unfold along the way. John's introduction, which includes all of chapter 1, does exactly that, although at this point the plot is more difficult to discern than are the players. At the same time this opening chapter introduces some of the "apocalyptic furniture" that will become an essential part of the story. This is especially true of the "son of man" (v. 13)—imagery taken from Daniel 10—and of the churches themselves who appear as seven golden lampstands. But these are mild images in comparison with many that will follow, which are very often bizarre, as for example in 13:1, where we are introduced to the understandable image of "a beast," including the fact that it has heads and horns; however, a beast with "seven heads" and "ten horns" we do not know, and for the most part have considerable difficulty "seeing" even with the imagination.

What is striking about this introductory chapter, therefore, is how little one here encounters the kinds of imagery that the reader will meet later on with full force. Indeed, if one were to read only this chapter, plus the next two sections (chs. 2–3 and 4–5), one could feel quite at home, since most of its imagery falls into categories or images that are either understandable or at least manageable on the basis of one's prior knowledge of the Old Testament. In which case the occasional apocalyptic image is not especially startling. But all of that changes at chapter 6, and will continue so through chapter 17, with a single recurrence in the great battle of 19:11–21. Otherwise, from 18:1 to the end the imagery is very much like that of the Prophets, where "real" (as distinct from "bizarre") images become the general rule to the end of the book. All of this to say that ordinary readers, who have had no acquaintance at all with apocalyptic, should not presently sense they are stepping into

a whole new world. That will come eventually, but is somewhat rare at the beginning.

THE REVELATION AS APOCALYPSE AND PROPHECY (1:1–3)

¹The revelation from 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, ²who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and keep what is written in it, because the time is near.

John introduces his book with the word that is responsible for its name, *Apocalypsis*, which in Greek means simply “revelation.”¹ But in these opening sentences the reader is also faced with some of the idiosyncrasies of John’s style, which at times leaves the reader guessing as to John’s own intent. Thus he begins here with three Greek nouns, without modifiers or definite article. So did John intend “the revelation” or “a revelation”; and did he intend “revelation of Jesus Christ,” with Christ as the object of the revelation, or as the NIV has it, **the revelation from Jesus Christ**, with Christ as its source? The reason for going the latter route is to be found in the clause that follows. The significance of this small point lies with the rest of the book, since from here on Christ is the one who now gives the revelation that John here says **God gave him [Christ] to show his servants**. The term “servants” in this case is to be understood as a general, but especially meaningful, term for all believers; they are those who serve both God and others.

The content of what “God gave him to show his servants has to do with **what must soon take place**, a clause that anticipates the content of the rest of the book. Unfortunately, this brief clause has also served as the source of an considerable number of speculations about the end-times. But as the narrative that will soon unfold makes relatively clear, this phrase has less to do with the End as such, and mostly to do with the somber events awaiting the churches of John’s day. Himself an exile on Patmos, what John had come to see clearly as awaiting a new genera-

1. The Greek word itself, of course, has made its way into English as “apocalypse,” which by definition for most people means “any widespread destruction or disaster” (the fifth entry in the Random House *American College Dictionary*).

tion of believer's was the church's coming collision with the Empire over who should rightly be proclaimed as "Lord and Savior"—the Roman emperors or the humble Galilean whom they had crucified, but who their followers asserted had been raised from the dead.

But the question of whose servants these are, God's or Christ's, is not immediately clear in the Greek text, although the rest of the sentence seems to make it decisive that the "his" in every case has God as its antecedent. The NIV translators have tried to clarify the issue by making a new sentence out of John's second clause. Thus, **he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John**, where the initial "he" can refer only to God. At the outset, therefore, one learns that God "made" this revelation "known" to John by way of one of "his angels," one of the heavenly beings who throughout the book "shows" John these things, while John in turn **testifies** (= bears witness) to all that he has been shown, which John at this point puts in the active: **to everything he saw**.

The surprising moment comes at the end of this opening sentence, where the reader is told that what John "saw" was **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**, a phrase that is as ambiguous in Greek as it is in English.² On the basis of its further occurrences in the book, the first phrase almost certainly means "the word *from* God" (= the word God spoke), which in this case, and in most instances throughout, primarily comes to John visually. But the second phrase is especially uncertain, since in what follows it can refer to either the testimony that *Jesus himself had borne* through his life, death, and resurrection or to the testimony that John had borne *about Jesus* that had brought about John's exile on Patmos. While either of these is a possible meaning in terms of the narrative that follows, both the abbreviated version that occurs in 6:9 ("the word of God and the testimony they had borne") and the present emphasis—which is not on the "life of Christ" per se but on John's witness to that life through this book—suggest that the intent here has to do with John's own witness that came to him from Christ himself by way of his angel.

In the final sentence John further describes this word/testimony as **the words of this prophecy**, language which, because of its primary meaning in English as "the foretelling or prediction of what is to come," can be misleading when used in the New Testament. To be sure, there is

2. This phrase recurs in 1:9, and is repeated in reverse order in 20:4.

a future aspect to this “prophecy,” but it is primarily a word spoken into the present situation of the seven churches; and its primary urgency is not about the *final* future event (recorded in chs. 20–22), but the *near* future for John and his readers. What makes John a truly Christian prophet is that from his position at the end of the first Christian century he clearly recognizes that the church and state are on a deadly collision course, wherein the church will suffer in the near future, but will know Christ’s triumph at the end (the “real” future). Thus at the outset John uses apocalyptic language that is intended to merge what is seen with what is spoken. That is, for him this was a “seen” word; but to communicate it to the church it had to become a written word, “the testimony” that Jesus Christ gave by way of one vision following another.

The concluding benediction is on both **the one who reads aloud** [in a culture where only about 15 percent of the people could read or write] **the words of this prophecy** and on **those who hear and keep what is written in it**—John’s version of being both “hearers and doers of the Word.” This reading/hearing phenomenon is made urgent by the final clause, **because the time is near**, which has created a different kind of urgency for later readers. But what John almost certainly intended is that the pending difficulties that the recipients of this Revelation were about to experience already stood at the door for *them*—as the unfolding of subsequent second- and third-century history actually bore out.

THE JOHANNINE PRESCRIPT (1:4–8)

⁴John,

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 spirits³ before his throne, ⁵and 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, ⁶and 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.

⁷“Look, he is coming with the clouds,”⁴

3. That is, *the sevenfold Spirit*.

4. Daniel 7:13.

and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”⁵
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.”

John follows his first introduction, which informed his readers that what follows is an *apocalypse* from Jesus Christ, with a second, *formal* introduction that has all the earmarks of a first-century letter (vv. 4–5a). However, this is then joined by several features that mark off this Apocalypse as something unique in the history of literature: first (vv. 5b–6), a benediction with an appropriate “amen” at the end; second (v. 7), an invitation to the reader to be looking for Christ’s coming, using well-known language from Daniel, Zechariah, and Genesis, which also concludes with an “amen”; and finally (v. 8), an announcement from “the Lord God,” who is identified twice with language that emphasizes God’s being the eternal God, thus the only God there is.

To get there John begins with the standard greeting of a first-century Greco-Roman letter: author, to the recipient, greetings. Since he has already identified himself (in v. 1), he now begins with the simple identifier **John**. The addressees are also put simply: **to the seven churches in the province of Asia**, who will be identified as to the specifics in verse 11. The salutation itself is very Pauline, and probably reflects his influence on the church at this early period. John has also kept the Pauline word order, “grace to you and peace,” which, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is changed in translation to a more normal English order, **grace and peace to you**. “Grace” in this context refers to all the benefits that come from God to his people, while “peace” reflects the standard Jewish greeting, *shalom*. Thus the one benefit (“grace”) comes *from* God, his goodness bestowed on his people; the other (“peace”) is the resulting benefit that God’s people experience in their relationships with one another—and thus is not here a reference to the internal peace of a “well-arranged heart.”

At this point the salutation takes on a decidedly Trinitarian character, which is unique to this document in the New Testament, both in appearance as such (especially in their order of appearance) and the

5. Zechariah 12:10.

fact that only Christ is specifically named. Two matters are significant about John's order. First, by his sandwiching "the seven spirits" between the Father and the Son, John makes it clear that he intends this to be a *symbolic* reference to the Holy Spirit. The order itself makes any other interpretation so highly improbable as to be nearly impossible. Second, John places Christ in the final position deliberately because of our Lord's significance to the Revelation itself, which is made clear by the doxology that follows (vv. 5b–6). At the same time, each designation has its own significance.

John first identifies the "grace and peace" as coming from God the Father: **him who is, and who was, and who is to come**, a designation that will occur twice more in the book (1:8; 4:8). In 11:17 and 16:5 God is designated simply as "the One who is and who was," because both of these later references have to do with God coming in judgment. The designation itself is a deliberate play on the divine name found in Exodus 3:14, where with a play on the verb "to be" God reveals himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (or perhaps "I will be who I will be"). In John's narrative this becomes simply a means of identification; it will be elaborated further in verse 8.

The present Johannine designation of the Holy Spirit, **the seven spirits** [or "sevenfold Spirit"] **before his throne**, will occur three more times in the Revelation (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). It is used by John only when the perspective is that of heaven. When he refers to the Spirit's activity on earth John uses more traditional language, notably as the one responsible for his visions (see esp. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) and as the bearer of the prophetic word that is being spoken to the churches (as at the conclusion of the seven "letters" in chs. 2 and 3: "... what the Spirit says to the churches"; see also 14:13b and 19:10). The background to John's present usage lies (typically) with two passages from the Old Testament: Isaiah 11:2, where the Spirit of God is prophesied to rest on the Davidic Messiah, who is designated by six characteristics (in three doublets), which in the Septuagint became a sevenfold designation for the Spirit (Spirit of God, Spirit of wisdom, Spirit of understanding, etc.); and Zechariah 4:2–6, where Zechariah sees a golden lampstand with seven lamps on it and with two olive trees on either side (for a continuous supply of oil), which is explicitly interpreted by the prophet in terms of the Spirit. John now blends these two Old Testament moments as his symbolic way of speaking about the one Holy Spirit. These turn out to

be the first of some two hundred echoes of, or references to, John's and his readers' Bible, which we now know as the "Old Testament."

In especially Christian fashion John also includes the exalted Son of God as the source of the "grace and peace" he wishes for them. Thus he adds **and from Jesus Christ**, who is then identified by three further phrases, each of which is especially pertinent to the "Revelation" that follows. And just as the designations for God the Father and the Spirit are derived from the Old Testament, so are these for Christ—in this case from the very important Psalm 89, which begins (vv. 1–37) as a song of rapturous delight in the Davidic kingship but ends (vv. 38–51) as a bitter lament over its present demise (from the perspective of Ethan the Ezrahite).

First, Christ is **the faithful witness**, language derived from (but not reflecting the context of) Psalm 89:37, where "the moon" is called "the faithful witness in the sky." That language is now transferred to Christ. The word translated "witness" (*martyrus*), which eventually came to mean "martyr," is here a forensic term, and thus a live metaphor for John, reflecting Christ's having stood trial and then being sentenced to death. Indeed, this language will occur again only in 2:10 and 13, where it clearly refers to those who have borne witness "unto death." Thus "Antipas, my faithful witness, . . . was put to death in your city" (2:13). In turn these linguistic realities are what caused the Greek word to make its way into English not as a word for "witness" but as a reference to someone who is put to death by others "on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause."⁶

But, second, Christ is also **the firstborn from the dead**, language that echoes Psalm 89:27 ("I will appoint him to be my firstborn"), a passage that reflects the psalmist's confidence in the continuation of the Davidic kingship. Here is language that carried meaning for John's own readers but could get lost on contemporary ones, since it is based on the reality of primogeniture in these cultures, where the firstborn son was the primary heir, and thus had both position and privilege. The significance of this designation is to be found in Exodus 4:22, where Yahweh says to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son"—even though historically he was in fact second. Eventually this language was applied to David and his heirs (see esp. Ps 2:2 and 7, where the Davidic king

6. From the Random House *American College Dictionary*.

is addressed, “you are my Son”). For John, of course, Christ is not just God’s “firstborn” in terms of position, but is especially “the firstborn *from the dead*,” who thus through his own resurrection is the guarantor of the final resurrection of all who belong to him.

Third, and still echoing Psalm 89:27 (“the most exalted of the kings of the earth”), Christ is designated **the ruler of the kings of the earth**. Given the present difficulties of the church at the hands of the Empire, one can scarcely miss the essentially prophetic nature of this final appellation. For John’s own readers it may look as though Rome were the ultimate power on the earth, since she not only ruled the greater portion of the so-called known world, but will be recognized later in the book as having dominion over the various petty “kings.” These latter John regularly designates as “the kings of the earth”; they are the local provincial rulers, similar to those mentioned by Luke at the beginning of his narrative about John the Baptist and Jesus (3:1: “Pontius Pilate . . . governor of Judea, Herod the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene”). But not so, says John—they are not earth’s true rulers; rather, the One who was slain by the Romans had in fact been raised from the dead by God the Father, and he has thus assumed the role of “*ruler of the kings of the earth*,” whether they currently acknowledge it or not. Indeed, later on in 17:14 and 19:16 Christ will be called “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” The present designation is therefore John’s way of reminding his readers that the “king of kings” is not the Roman emperor; rather, he is the One who was crucified by an earlier emperor, but, having been raised from the dead, has attained his rightful place as “ruler of the kings of the earth.” As such the risen Christ is in fact ruler over all those who have set themselves in opposition to God’s rule.

The very thought of this threefold acclamation about Christ—that God’s “faithful witness” is also “the first born from the dead” and has thus assumed his role as “the ruler of the kings of the earth”—causes John to burst into doxology. But typical of Johannine theology, the doxology is not offered to God the Father, but to Christ himself!—the first of many such remarkable moments in this book. This in turn sets the stage for the especially “high Christology” that marks the Johannine corpus as a whole. Thus, and now especially for the sake of his readers, John acclaim Christ in two ways, both of which are intended to turn the focus onto his readers, many of whom are already undergoing

severe persecution. Christ, himself “the faithful witness,” is above all **him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood**. It is of considerable interest, therefore, that John reminds the early believers in Asia Minor that, even though many are headed for persecution and martyrdom, they are nonetheless “free people” in Christ.

One should note in particular the present tense (“loves us”) followed by the past tense (“freed us from our sins”). It is of some interest that later scribes were disturbed by this apparent grammatical oddity and thus changed it to “who *loved* us and has freed us.” But these later scribes have missed John by several furlongs! For John’s readers, many of whom were already experiencing persecution, the first truth about Christ is that he (currently) “loves us” with a present love that gains its significance and power from the fact that he is the One who (already) “has freed us from our sins by his blood.”

All of this continues to be expressed in Exodus (now New Exodus) language. God’s own “firstborn” people, Israel, who became so by means of God’s sovereign election, have now been reconstituted through Christ and the Holy Spirit. But that is not all; the same Christ who “loves us and has freed us from our sins” is also the one who **has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father**. This somewhat ambiguous acclamation, using language borrowed directly from Exodus 19:6, probably means first of all that God’s newly formed people are a new kingdom, replacing the former Davidic kingdom. Redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice on their/our behalf, people like the recipients of this Revelation—and us—have been freed not from Egypt but from the power of sin itself, reconstituted to be God’s own newly formed people. At the same time they/we are to serve as his “priests” on behalf of others, especially those who continue to be slaves to sin and thus to the power of Satan.

This reminder sets John off in praise and acclamation, but he does so in a way that could seem quite ambiguous to the later reader since in English it is not at all clear as to whom the “to him” refers in the concluding acclamation, **to him be glory and power for ever and ever!** In order to remove the ambiguity the NIV has (rightly) put a dash before

7. Greek λύσαντι, which is read by all the early and most important witnesses, as well as by half of the later majority; perhaps as a mistake of hearing, the other half of the later witnesses have λούσαντι (“washed”), which had the misfortune of being present in the manuscript that stood behind the KJV.

the “to him,” while the NJB reads “to him, then,” making sure the reader recognizes that the pronoun “him” here refers to Christ, not to God the Father. That this is John’s own intent is made certain by his use of the personal pronoun (“to him”) rather than the relative pronoun (“to whom”), which could only refer to the Father. The significance of this for the later reader is the especially high Christology that is *assumed* in this doxology, which is directed from beginning to end to Christ himself, the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.”

Furthermore, the praise that is due him (Christ) is that regularly offered to God the Father: “glory and power.” “Glory” is one of those biblical words that is so common that many, if not most, readers simply go on to what comes next. But if “glory” is sometimes an elusive word, difficult to pin down with precision, it is the word used in the Old Testament primarily to offer praise to the eternal God. At the very outset of the Apocalypse, John sets it out as the primary word of doxology now afforded to Christ. And such “glory” attributed to God is frequently accompanied by recognition and acclamation of his “power”; thus David sings of Yahweh, “Yours, LORD, is the greatness and *the power* and *the glory* and the majesty and the splendor” (1 Chr 29:11). For John the acclamation of such “glory and power” is now directed toward the Son, “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” What else, then, could John do but conclude with a resounding **Amen!**, which means something like “so it is and shall forever be.”

What happens next is even more surprising. One might well assume the “amen” at the end of verse 6 is to mark the end of the salutation as such, which in a sense it was undoubtedly intended to do. But before John moves on to identify himself and his readers, he bursts into acclamation. First (v. 7), John celebrates the coming of Christ, with special emphasis directed toward those who do not know him; and second (v. 8), he sets all of this out by way of divine affirmation. In so doing, he in the first instance echoes several moments from the Old Testament Prophets; then, second, he pronounces God the Father’s own stamp of approval on what John is about to record for the sake of his reader and hearers.

Thus John turns from doxology (vv. 5–6) to acclamation. Citing first a well-known passage from Daniel 7:13 and then reworking a passage from Zechariah (12:10) that had come to be understood as messi-

anic, John acclaims Christ's second coming up front in his Apocalypse. But his immediate interest is not on the salvation-of-God's-people aspect of that coming, but on its affect on those who do *not* know him. Thus in the language of Daniel he first announces Christ's coming: **Look, he is coming with the clouds**, language that suggests both his coming from the heavenly realm and doing so with great power. Then picking up from Zechariah, John adds, **and every eye will see him**. His reason for citing the Zechariah passage is found in the next line, having to do with the believers' enemies, especially the Romans who were ultimately responsible for the crucifixion itself. That is, even though Jesus had been betrayed by his own people, he had in fact been turned over to the Romans for crucifixion, as one more messianic pretender. Thus John goes on with the Zechariah passage: among those who will see him are **even those who pierced him**, an indirect allusion to Rome's implication in the crucifixion that could scarcely have been missed by John's original readers.

John then concludes the citation from Zechariah by adding his own, much broader, application to the prophetic text. What in Zechariah was a prophetic word about the mourning *in Jerusalem* over the one who had been slain is made *universal* in John: **all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him."** It is not altogether clear what was intended by this extension of Zechariah's prophecy, but most likely it is in anticipation of what it will be like for the Romans, who were responsible for the crucifixion, as well as for all others, when Christ appears again at what the later church has come to call his "second coming." Thus this citation stands in direct contrast to the doxology in verses 5b–6. The coming of the one whose death "freed us from our sins" will at the same time bring great mourning to those responsible for it—a reality that is so certain, and thus anticipated, that John bursts out with the double acclamation, "Yes! Amen!," which the NIV rendered, **So shall it be! Amen!**

The final word, however, is not John's, but God's. Thus this remarkable introduction to the letters and visions that follow is punctuated by a divine word from **the Lord God**. First, God announces himself as the One who embraces all that language could possibly express, **the Alpha and Omega** (in English, "the A to Z"), and thus everything in between. Whatever human language could possibly express regarding God and all reality, the God who is speaking to John and thus standing behind this Apocalypse is the eternal, all-embracing God, who stands

at the beginning of all things and is continuously there, and thus at the end—and this only from our limited point of view, since God is eternal and therefore timeless. Thus God is also the One **who is, and who was, and who is to come**, a choice of word order that is hardly accidental on John's part. Whatever else is true about God, he is the Eternal One, always the "I am"; so John begins with the present tense, and then points backward and forward to stress God's eternal nature.

The final word then punctuates what has preceded by stressing that God is **the Almighty**, language that recurs throughout the Old Testament, and which occurs twice (vv. 4–5) in the oracle from Zechariah 12 that immediately precedes the one John has just echoed. This designation, which occurs elsewhere in the New Testament outside the Revelation only in 2 Corinthians 6:18, will occur some eight more times in this book. Thus John concludes with a word that stresses the absolute, unparalleled power of the one and only God; he alone is "the Almighty." It is not difficult to see in this emphasis a Christian response to the Empire, whose emperors and armies had caused her to regard herself in terms of invincibility.

One should note also, finally, that the description of the divine speaker as "the Lord God" and "the Almighty" is language once again derived directly from the prophetic tradition. In this case John is reflecting Amos 4:13 (in the LXX), where the oracle concludes, "the Lord God Almighty is his name." In the present instance, and almost certainly for effect, John divides up this divine name by inserting the phrase "the One who is, and who was, and who is to come" between "the Lord God" and "the Almighty." Thus the concluding self-identification puts most of the emphasis on God's being the Eternal One, but whose identity here concludes with God's being the All-Powerful One.

At the conclusion, one might ask further, why all of this as a way of introducing John's Apocalypse? That is, how does it function so as to introduce the reader/hearers to what they are about to encounter? The answer to this seems to be twofold: first, it theologically grounds what they are about to see in God the Trinity; second, at the same time, it focuses especially on Christ and his work, which John does both by description (v. 5a) and by doxology (vv. 5b–6). Thus the way is paved for the introduction to the first vision in verses 12–20. But before that, in a piece of extraordinarily straightforward historical narrative, the readers are given the circumstances of the author and the cause of his writing.

THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE: JOHN INTRODUCES HIMSELF AND HIS RECIPIENTS (1:9–11)

⁹I, 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. ¹⁰On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

If one thinks of the Revelation in terms of a majestic drama, then the function of the first chapter is to introduce the reader to the three primary *dramatis personae*. Thus verses 1–8, which function very much as the preamble to the whole, at the same time introduce the major “player,” Christ himself. The function of the present paragraph is to situate the second “player,” the author John, in his own context, while at the same time introducing his primary readership, who are the third major “player,” and who will then be elaborated in some detail in chapters 2 and 3.

Thus John begins with an extended identification of himself and his present situation, locating himself both *relationally* and *positionally*. He first identifies himself as his readers’ **brother and companion**, which he then elaborates in three ways, held together by a single definite article (**the**) and each modified by the concluding phrase, **that are ours in Jesus**. The order of these identifying words is especially noteworthy. First, John is their **companion in suffering**. Interestingly enough, the Greek word translated “suffering” here is *thlipsis*, a word that will occur only four more times in the book, three of which have to do with the present plight of believers (in 2:9 and 10 to describe the situation of the church in Smyrna, and in 7:14 to refer to that of the martyrs). This is the word that describes their present situation in the world dominated by the Roman Empire.⁸ It is a word that also occurs frequently in Paul’s letters to describe the current situation of believers in an otherwise hostile world.

But John is also their “companion” in the **kingdom**, the word he used to describe believers in the doxology in verse 6. Here is the word that especially reminds them of the “kingdom” greater than that

8. The word is further used to describe the fate of the woman Jezebel in 2:22.

of Rome, since the latter's rule is only temporal, and thus temporary. Finally, John is also their companion in **patient endurance**, another word that will recur in the letters to the seven churches (2:2–3; 2:19; 3:10) and will be part of the reminder vis-à-vis emperor worship in 14:12.

Notably, each of these realities (suffering, the kingdom, and endurance) finds its place and significance as **ours in Jesus**. Thus whatever else may be true of John as a Christian prophet, he is also part of a believing community with whom he shares both the life of the kingdom and the associated hostility from the same Empire that executed their Lord. It is of further interest that this designation of our Lord by his earthly name alone, which will recur at the end of the verse, will appear seven more times in the Revelation,⁹ and in each instance it has to do with his own “witness,” or “testimony,” as in the rest of the present sentence.

At the same time John also locates himself *geographically*: **I . . . was on the island of Patmos**. This is a little piece of land in the Aegean Sea about forty miles southwest of Ephesus. Whether it was otherwise inhabited in John's day cannot be known, since it is basically a mountain crest jutting up out of the sea, about eight miles long and five miles wide and shaped like an elongated C. John's presence there suggests that it was probably used by the Romans as a penal colony, whose amenities in John's day simply cannot be known. It was almost certainly under the political jurisdiction of the province of Asia, and thus of Ephesus. The reason John was a prisoner on Patmos is clear enough—because he was a follower of the risen Christ. His way of putting it is simply to repeat what he says about the present book in verse 2 (*q.v.*): **because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**.

Finally, John locates himself *temporally* and *spiritually*, as being **in the Spirit on the Lord's Day**. This is the first known instance in written history of the term “the Lord's Day,” which only by the mid-second century¹⁰ is used undoubtedly as a term to refer to Sunday, as the day on which the resurrection took place—or at least the day the tomb was discovered to be empty, since we do not know when the resurrection itself happened. Two items are especially noteworthy here. First, the English possessive “the Lord's” is not in the Greek genitive (possessive)

9. See at the end of this verse, plus 12:17; 14:12; 17:6; 19:10 (2x); 20:4; and 21:16.

10. In the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* 35 and 50, although it might appear earlier in Ignatius's *Letter to the Magnesians*, in a reference that is in considerable dispute.

case, but is rather an adjective coined from the noun “Lord,” and means something like “in honor of” or “pertaining to” the Lord. Although some debate surrounds this word, it should be noted that by the mid-second century this word was used to distinguish Christian from Jewish devotion,¹¹ thus indicating that it had already been in use for a considerable length of time. Given the significance of Sabbath observance for the earliest followers of Jesus, who were Jewish, the only possible explanation for the phenomenon of calling Sunday “the Lord’s Day” is the probability that they held a weekly remembrance of the resurrection.

In this setting John announces, **I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet**. Whether John intended this to mean that the voice itself sounded like a trumpet, or whether this is merely associative language (the voice had the effect of a trumpet call) cannot be known. But in either case one can be quite certain that this is an echo of the three-fold mention of Israel’s hearing “a very loud trumpet” at Sinai (Exodus 19:16/19 and 20:18). Whatever else, John probably intended this to be a wake-up call for the recipients. But sounding “like a trumpet” as it did, it is nonetheless still a “voice,” one that had something to say to John himself.

The content of what the voice says is in effect a command for John to write the document we know as the Revelation; but it comes to him by way of the vision he is about to be given. He is first told **to write on a scroll what you see**. This is followed by a second command, having to do with its primary destination: **send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea**. These churches when connected by road make a long, thin horseshoe-shaped semi-circle from Ephesus through Smyrna to Pergamum in the north—still on or close to the Aegean Sea—and then inland in a south-southeasterly direction down to Laodicea, which is about eighty miles east and slightly south of Ephesus. The spiritual conditions of these churches, in light of the coming holocaust, is what will dominate John’s concerns in chapters 2 and 3.

THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE: JOHN’S VISION OF CHRIST (1:12–16)

¹²I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and among the

11. See Ignatius’s *Letter to the Magnesians*.

lampstands was someone like a son of man,¹² dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hair on his head was 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 coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

After describing his response to the booming voice he had heard, John then **turned around** to look at the figure himself, expressed in abbreviated form: **I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me.** What John offers first, however, is the setting: **I saw seven golden lampstands,**¹³ which are almost certainly to be understood as the *menorah*, a lampstand with seven candles burning brightly. The “lampstands” themselves will be identified at the end (v. 20) as the seven churches to be addressed by letter in chapters 2 and 3. But John’s immediate interest is not in the lampstands as such, but in the figure who is standing in the midst of them, whom John will go on to describe by way of elements from Daniel 7 and 10 (plus Ezekiel 1).

The description includes seven particulars (hair, eyes, feet, voice, right hand, mouth, and face), five of which have to do with the head; only the feet and right hand are from elsewhere on the body. The figure, John says, was **like¹⁴ a son of man**, which all of his readers will know from the Gospel narratives is the title Jesus used of himself. But it does not appear here in titular form; rather it is expressed in the precise language of Daniel 7:13, where the mysterious figure (from the perspective of the readers of the OT) who stood before Daniel was described as “one like a son of man.” For Daniel this would have meant simply “a human figure,” almost certainly intended to describe Israel’s hoped-for Messiah. But at the same time, and thus creating a unique collage of

12. See Daniel 7:13

13. Although the number of lampstands is Johannine, the description of them as “golden” reflects both Israel’s original lampstands in Exod 25:31–40 and that appearing in Zechariah’s vision in 4:2.

14. Greek ὁμοιον. This is the first of 21 occurrences of this word in the Revelation—47 percent of the total in the NT. But since 14 of the others occur in Matthew and Luke, all in parables and three of which they have in common (in the so-called Q source), John in reality has over 50 percent of its NT uses (understandably so, given the parabolic nature of this text).

images, John describes his array as that of Israel's chief priests: he was **dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his waist**. In so doing, John is deliberately borrowing language from the Septuagint, where it is used exclusively for the full-length tunic of the high priest; thus his readers would readily understand that Jesus, the "son of man," is also being presented as the great high priest.

As to the particulars, the **hair** on his **head** is described as **white like wool, as white as snow**, language taken directly from Daniel 7:9, where it describes the Ancient of Days. Thus, as in the Gospel that bears his name, John has no difficulty portraying Christ as divine. The imagery in this case is probably intended to picture absolute purity. Christ's **eyes were like blazing fire**, language now borrowed from Daniel 10:6, most likely intending to portray him with eyes that are penetrating and all-seeing. The imagery of the **feet . . . like bronze glowing in a furnace** is also taken from Daniel 10:6, but with some slight modifications. John thus presents Christ with imagery that stands in sharp contrast to that in Daniel 2, which had feet consisting of a mix of clay and iron. Here the picture is of someone absolutely sturdy and unable to be tarnished, and thus not subject to decay or falsehood.

Christ's **voice** is likened to **the sound of rushing waters**, language borrowed from the description of God in Ezekiel 1:24. The picture is that of confluent streams noisily joining and rushing seaward. John next pictures Christ's **right hand** as holding **seven stars**, imagery that no longer describes Christ's "appearance" as such, and which is also expressed without the "like" comparison of the previous ones. This imagery in fact has no Old Testament background, but did have a long history in astrological mythology (since most ancients believed that human life was influenced by the seven planets). John has thus co-opted pagan imagery and will give it a Christian point of reference—as the "angels" of the seven churches. Their relationship to Jesus lies with their being held by him "in his right hand," the place of authority.

The most significant features, **his mouth** and **his face**, are described at the conclusion. In many ways the mouth is the most significant feature, since what follows concerning the churches is all spoken by Christ himself. As with that of his right hand, the description of his mouth has to do with what is related to it. Thus, in this case echoing Isaiah 49:2 (where the mouth of God's servant has been made like a sharpened sword), **coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword**.

This imagery, also used in 2:12, 16 and 19:15, 21, indicates that Christ will speak words of both salvation and judgment, but especially of judgment. And finally, Christ's **face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance**, imagery that most likely anticipates the conclusion of the book (21:11—22:5), where at the eschatological summation of all things the sun is no longer needed for light because of the presence of God and Christ.

Although it is difficult for many people in a verbal culture like ours, having been raised on the sights and sounds of television, to visualize this portrayal of Christ, for John's readers it would most likely have been readily available to their imaginations. Here stands the true high priest—the heavenly one, Christ himself—and as such he has something to say to the church, two generations after his death and resurrection.

JOHN'S RESPONSE AND THE LORD'S COMMAND (1:17–20)

*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 now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

19"Write, therefore, what you have seen: both 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 angels¹⁵ of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

The rest of the opening vision takes the form, first, of response on John's part (v. 17a), followed by Christ's own words of identification (vv. 17b–18) and his commissioning of John to write down what he sees for the sake of the seven churches (v. 19), with a concluding interpretation of the key elements of the vision itself (v. 20).

John, who is himself obviously in the vision, first tells his readers of his own response to such an encounter: **when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead**. As with everything else to this point, this too has its biblical roots, echoing Ezekiel's response to his theophany in 1:28 ("when I saw it, I fell face down"). What John is describing is the posture of obeisance, which is proper before a deity, but not before a

15. Or *messengers*

created being, even an angel (see Rev 22:8–9). While John was in this position, Christ **placed his right hand on me**, the same hand that held the seven stars. At the same time this scene echoes Daniel's experience in 10:10 and 18. The first words John hears, **do not be afraid**, are the typical biblical response to one who finds favor in the context of such a vision or encounter. In this case it is almost certainly an intentional echo of Isaiah 44:2 (cf. Dan 10:12; Luke 1:13, 30), given the source of the next phrase.

What immediately follows are words of identification, which at once both echo what God had said of himself in verse 8 and then identify the speaker in terms that can refer only to the risen Christ. Thus Christ begins, **I am the First and the Last**, language used by Yahweh to identify himself in Isaiah 44:6 (cf. 48:12) and used by John to identify God in verse 8 above as “the Alpha and the Omega.” It is now used by the living Christ as a means of self-identity, again reflecting John's especially high Christology. The same is true of the second identifier, **I am the Living One**, which is the ultimate identifier of Israel's God, Yahweh (see e.g., Deut 32:40; cf. Rev 4:9). But in this case, this language takes on its own special meaning by the next identifiers: **I was dead and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!** (the latter term also echoing Deut 32:40). Thus, and without attempting to explain the impossible, the One who is both “the First and the Last,” and is therefore “the Living One,” is so in a special sense in the person of the Son of God, since in his humanity he also experienced death and resurrection. In the marvelous language of Charles Wesley, “'Tis mystery all; the Immortal dies.”¹⁶ But for John the emphasis now lies solely on the fact that the one who “was dead” is now “alive for ever and ever!”

But that is not all; the once dead, now living Eternal One, by way of his own death and resurrection now **holds the keys of death and Hades**. Two matters are being asserted here by John: first, Christ himself has been raised from the dead to live forever; and second, in so doing he has stripped death and hell of their power. As a great preacher in the black tradition once told it on an Easter Sunday, playing the role of Satan, he shouted to the demonic host, “He's got away! He's got away! And He's got the keys!”

16. “And Can It Be?” (1738).

One should note finally that everything about this vision is intended to describe a theophany, a divine self-revelation. First, there is the careful collage of images that combine the heavenly and earthly Son of Man, and do so with images used only for God. Second, there is the prostrate John, who is reassured with the “right hand” and the “do not be afraid” that he is safe in the Divine Presence. But especially, third, there is the self-disclosure language of verses 17–18, language that deliberately echoes God’s own language in verse 8. For John all of this is certified by the resurrection: “I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!” For John that is the “key” to everything that follows; having experienced death, Christ through his resurrection has stripped Satan of his means of power—death and Hades—and thus “holds the keys” for loosing from Satan’s grip those who are his own.

The christophany itself is then followed by the commission given to John to **write . . . what you have seen**, which is then elaborated so that his readers will understand that what follows has to do with **both what is now and what will take place later**.¹⁷ The rest of the book then follows along these lines. Chapters 2 through 5 are all about “what is now,” while chapters 6–11 are about “what will take place later.” These two concerns are then taken up in greater detail in chapters 12–14 and 15–22, respectively. But before any of that, John is given the interpretation of the two sets of seven, the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands, since these items will figure significantly, as the first matters, in what follows (chs. 2–3).

Couched in the language of Jewish apocalyptic, what is being interpreted is **the mystery of the seven stars . . . and of the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars, John is told, are the angels [angeloi] of the seven churches, while the seven lampstands are the seven churches**. The word *angeloi* is one of the more difficult to put into English in much of this book, since its basic meaning is simply “messenger”; but in the Greek Old Testament it was used especially to refer to the *heavenly* messengers who have been regularly referred to as “angels” in English.

17. The NIV seems to have understood John’s intent correctly here, whose text in the Greek reads (literally): “what you have seen and what is and what is about to happen after these things.” The reason for adopting the NIV’s rendering is a recognition that the three verbs “saw, are, will be” are not in fact coordinate—and almost certainly were not intended to be. That is, the first verb (in the past tense) has to do with John and what he has “seen” in the pictures that follow, while the second and third verbs have to do with the present situation of the churches and what lies ahead for them.

Thus the NIV translators have tried to cut through the difficulty by putting “angels” in the text, with a footnote that offers the alternative, “messengers.” None of this is problematic for this introductory passage; but when John is told at the beginning of 2:1 to “write to the *angelos* of the church in Ephesus,” then the mental pictures that are conjured up by such a word do become a bit more problematic. Whether John intended a heavenly messenger or not is moot, as is his language that suggests that each church has its own *angelos*. What John seems most likely to have intended is *not* that each church had its own angel, as it were, but in keeping with the apocalyptic genre, that a different (perhaps angelic) messenger was appointed to deliver Christ’s message to each of the churches, while at the same time each church becomes privy to the others’ mail!

Thus John is herewith commissioned to **write . . . what you have seen**, and to deliver the individual messages of chapters 2 and 3 to each of the seven churches, while he is delivering the whole to each of them as well. And all of this is quite intentional on John’s part; each of the churches is to take heed to what Christ has to say to them individually, but they are also to learn from what he says to each of the others. It is the apocalyptic genre that allows such things to happen, without the option of any of his readers either to mourn or gloat vis-à-vis the others. They are all in this both individually and together; and they must all pay careful attention to what Christ says to the others, even as they are to pay special attention to their own letter.