

REVELATION

Study 2: The Revelation of Jesus the Messiah

In our introduction to the Book of Revelation, we described the book as a prophetic apocalypse that was written by John in the form of a letter to seven specific churches living under the power and influence of the Roman Empire. It uses symbolic language, imagery and numbers drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures to communicate a clear message that calls Christians to patiently endure the tribulation that they are facing and to remain loyal and committed to King Jesus no matter the cost.

Now that we have better understanding of the historical context and what we are reading when we read the Book of Revelation, we can now begin our study of the actual content of the book itself. In this study, we will read and discuss the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. We will examine the book's prologue, John's greeting to the seven churches and John's vision of the risen Jesus while he was exiled on the island of Patmos.¹

Prologue to the Book

Revelation 1:1-3

John makes it clear to his readers right from the start that what he has written for the church is not simply his own message to the church. It is the revelation of Jesus the Messiah. The Messiah is the real author of this message to the church. He *made it known* to John. And John says that God has given this revelation to his people in order to show them *the things that must soon take place*.

John is using specific language in these opening lines to connect his prophetic apocalypse to another apocalypse found in the Book of Daniel² where God reveals to the prophet Daniel his plan to one day establish his reign over all the earth. God reveals to Daniel that there is a time coming when the God of Israel would become the King over all nations, and all nations would need to give their loyalty to him.

¹ Patmos was an island located about 35 miles from Miletus off the west Asian coast.

² Read Daniel 2

In the Book of Daniel, God made it known to Daniel the things that would take place in the future (in the *'latter days'*). However, in the Book of Revelation, John is declaring that Jesus has made it known to him the things that must soon take place. John is essentially saying that Jesus wants his people to realize that the long-anticipated clash between the kingdom of God and the man-made empires of this world is something that is happening now. The things that were future to Daniel are the very things that are taking place in John's lifetime. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, the *latter day* kingdom of God has finally come to conquer the whole world.

This is where many of us need a more biblical definition of what we call the *"end times"*. John is declaring that Jesus has launched the latter days (aka. *the end times*). But this shouldn't surprise us because this lines up with the heart of what Jesus went around teaching and proclaiming during his ministry. The Gospel writers summed up Jesus' entire message in this one simple statement, *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the good news."*³

And so, this opening prologue gives us a heads up that the Book of Revelation contains a message about the clash and the conflict between the kingdom of God and the man-made empires of this world. John makes it clear that this book is a direct word from God with a prophetic message from King Jesus himself. And so John expects those who read and hear this prophecy to experience God's blessing if they will respond in obedience to its message. They must do so because the time is near and many of the events described in the book are about to soon take place.

Opening Greeting to the Seven Churches

Revelation 1:4-8

After the opening prologue, John greets the seven churches in Asia, but it is a greeting that comes from the throne of God himself. John first sends greetings from the Almighty God describing him as *Him Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come*.⁴ He then sends greetings from the divine Spirit

³ See Mark 1:15 and Matthew 4:17 & 23

⁴ This is linked to God's self-description in Exodus 3:14 as "I Am Who I Am" and in Revelation 1:8 as "the Alpha and Omega". David deSilva also points out that a similar description as traditional given to Zeus. "Greeks and Romans used similar language to talk about the eternity of their chief deity: "Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus shall be; O might Zeus!"" David deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances*, 79.

describing him as *the seven spirits who are before God's throne*.⁵ And then lastly, John sends greetings from Jesus the Messiah and describes him as *the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of kings on earth*.

It's important to note that these three descriptions of Jesus are significant to the overall message of the book and the response that John hopes to inspire in his readers.

First, Jesus is described as *the faithful witness* who remained loyal to the Almighty God to the point of death. This is our calling in the midst of suffering. As Jesus was a faithful witness to the point of death, so must his followers be faithful witnesses to the point of death.

Next, Jesus is described as *the firstborn of the dead* – the first to experience the resurrection – who has launched the new creation and inaugurated the eternal kingdom of God. This is our hope in the face of death. As Jesus was raised from the dead, so will his faithful followers be raised and reign with him in a new restored creation.

And lastly, Jesus is described as *the ruler of kings on earth*. Jesus is the one who holds all authority over the government rulers and kings of this world, even Caesar. This is our confidence when we are tempted to compromise. Powers of evil and oppressive structures will be held accountable by the One who now holds all authority over the universe. As loyal servants of our King, we must not compromise with 'the way of the empire' but remain committed to 'the way of the Lamb' instead.

This reflection on who Jesus is and what he has accomplished leads John to further praise Jesus and the Almighty God for the gospel of our redemption and restoration.

Jesus is described as the one whose loving sacrifice initiated a new exodus where the church has now become God's new kingdom of priests. Christians are God's chosen people who are to help restore God's order and to remain loyal to him no matter what because there is a Day coming when the Messiah will return in judgement to finally set the world right again. This is the redemption plan

⁵ See Zechariah 4:1-4. The prophet Zechariah had a vision of seven burning lamps that represented the divine Spirit who would rebuild God's temple and establish God's rule over all the nations. And so, the seven spirits who are before God's throne is most likely a reference to the presence and power of God that was released into the world after the resurrection of Jesus and that continues to build God's kingdom by implementing his rule throughout the world. John later identifies the seven burning lamps before God's throne as the seven spirits of God (Revelation 4:5). Another allusion to this passage in Zechariah is found in Revelation 11:4, "These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands that stand before the Lord of the earth."

of the Almighty God of human history. He will make all things new, and the entire world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Messiah, forever and ever.⁶

John's Vision of the Son of Man

Revelation 1:9-20

After introducing the book and greeting the seven churches in Asia, John describes the details of how he received this prophetic message that he has written. John refers to himself as our "brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus." Again, this *tribulation* associated with the *kingdom of God* and the call to *patiently endure* this tribulation is a major theme throughout the entire book.

Now, we should point out that due to the way the Book of Revelation has been interpreted and taught in America over the last hundred years or so, when many people hear that word *tribulation* they immediately think about some future time period of unprecedented suffering on earth that Christians may or may not have to experience. However, the great tribulation that is described in the Book of Revelation actually refers to a conflict that the first-century Christians were already experiencing.⁷

This great tribulation was a conflict that was forcing Christians to choose between compromising with the way of the Empire or staying loyal to the way of the Kingdom. And so, to patiently endure the tribulation, like John says, means to patiently endure the ongoing conflict between the kingdom of God and the dominate world-system operating behind your own society and culture.

For the first-century Christians living in Asia, this meant to patiently endure whatever the Roman Empire threw at them while resisting the temptation to resort to any violent resistance or passive compromise. For twenty-first century Christians living in America, this means that we too must be willing to patiently endure whatever is thrown at us while resisting the temptation to participate in power politics or to passively give-in to cultural pressures. This patient endurance and willingness to sacrifice (and suffer) is the way of the Lamb and how the kingdom of God conquers the world.

⁶ Revelation 11:15

⁷ See Revelation 1:9, 2:9-10, 2:22 & 7:14

Now, John said that he was “in a spirit given ecstasy on the Lord’s day”⁸ when he heard a loud voice behind him that instructed him to write an account of what he was about to see and send that account to the seven churches in Asia. This obviously startled John, and so he turned around to see who it was that was speaking to him. And when he turned around, he saw an incredible vision of the risen Jesus standing majestically among seven golden lamp stands – which he is later told represent the seven churches in Asia.⁹

The images and metaphors that John uses to describe the risen Jesus¹⁰ remind us that Jesus “is not merely a heroic human being.”¹¹ Jesus is the anointed King who shares in God’s divinity and reign over all the nations. He is the High Priest who tends to the affairs of his church. He is the Righteous Judge who sees into the heart of man and speaks blessings and judgements. And he is the Divine Warrior who is leading his army to the ultimate victory.

If you were a first-century Christian wondering where your God was in the midst of everything that was going on in your society, John’s vision of the risen Jesus would have brought you comfort and hope. It is a powerful reminder that even though things may seem out of control and that the world is being run by a dominate empire, the risen Jesus is paying attention and actually holds all power.

In fact, the image of Jesus holding the seven stars in his hand is a reference from Greco-Roman culture that further highlights his authority. Ancient astrologers had noticed that there were seven stars in the sky that moved differently from all the rest – the sun, the moon, Mercury, Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn. Greco-Roman culture had connected these seven stars to their pagan gods, but to say that you hold the seven stars in your hand would be a very Roman way of saying that you are the one who controls the universe. Jesus is the one who holds all authority in heaven and on earth.

When John saw the risen Jesus, he became paralyzed with fear and fell at his feet. But Jesus lays his hand on John and tells him to not be afraid. Imagine how comforting it must have been to hear those words. These words would have reassured John’s first readers and should reassure all of us today that Jesus is among us, he will protect us, he holds all power and he will lead us and help us patiently endure whatever may come.

⁸ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament In It's World*, (London: SPCK, 2019), 830

⁹ Read Zechariah 4

¹⁰ John mixes features that were used by the prophet Daniel to describe the “Ancient of Days” in 7:9-10, the “one like a son of man” in 7:13-14 and the heavenly messenger in 10:5-6. He also uses images from Ezekiel, Isaiah and Judges.

¹¹ Michael J Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 82

John's vision of the risen Jesus here in chapter one should bring comfort and hope, but it is also meant to challenge his people as well. The one who has defeated death and who is worthy to be worshipped alongside of the Almighty God as *'the first and the last'*¹² has a prophetic message that he wants to deliver to his people. He sees and knows what his people are going through, and he has something to say about it.

¹² This is meant to closely resemble the description of God as the Alpha and the Omega and Isaiah's words in Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god." and again in Isaiah 48:12, "Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am he; I am the first, and I am the last."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Michael J Gorman, a New Testament scholar, says that “Revelation 1:3 is the interpretive key to the book with respect to our motivation for reading it and our basic strategy in doing so.”¹³ It leads us to read Revelation as a prophetic-pastoral message from Jesus himself intended to transform our worldview and way of life now rather than just informing us about the future.

In what way does the beatitude in Revelation 1:3 and understanding the Book of Revelation as a prophetic-pastoral message from Jesus himself prepare you for how to approach the book?

2. In greeting the seven churches, John describes Jesus as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of kings on earth. He then goes on to declare that Jesus has made us into a kingdom of priests to his God and Father.

What do these descriptions – the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of kings on earth and a kingdom of priests – tell us about our role in God’s plan and our purpose in life?

3. The tribulation mentioned by John in Revelation 1:9 refers to the ongoing conflict between the kingdom of God and the dominate world-systems that operate behind human societies and culture – a conflict that John and the first-century churches were already experiencing.

In what way does understanding the “end-time” tribulation as an ongoing present reality rather than a specific conflict in the future affect how you view/understand the cost of following Jesus?

4. John’s vision of the risen Jesus standing majestically in the midst of the seven churches brings comfort and hope, but it is also meant to challenge his people as well.

In what way does this first chapter of the Book of Revelation and John’s vision of the risen Jesus cultivate a sense of urgency and a demand for Christians/churches to respond to this book?

¹³ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 82