

"A Revelation of Jesus Christ": Revelation 1:1-20

Covenant Church
Pastor Zack Phillips
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Revelation 1:1-20 (NRSV)

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 testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to 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.

⁹ I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹ Now write what you have seen, what is, and

what is to take place after this.²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Introduction

1. How to read? Revelation gives us the answer in the first three words “Apocalypse of Jesus Christ”
 - a. The *genre* of apocalypse
 - b. “of Jesus Christ”

The recognition that the narrative of Revelation is about Jesus—and not about the future or about the United States and Russia or about Middle East peace or other puzzles to solve—is for me the crucial insight for understanding this work.¹

I. The (Divine) Identity of Jesus

Revelation’s concern with *proper* worship:

Rev 19:9-10a And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!...

Rev 22:8-9 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!”

1. “I am the first and the last”

Isa 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 (see also Isa 48:12)²

¹ David L. Barr. *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. Polebridge Press, 2011. Kindle edition.

² Cf. Richard Hays, “Faithful Witness, Alpha and Omega: The Identity of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*. Edited by Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012: p. 75

God ³	Jesus
Rev 1:8 [The Lord God:] “I am the Alpha and the Omega” Rev 21:6 [God:] I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end...	Rev 1:17 [Jesus:] “I am the first and the last” Rev 22:13 [Jesus:] I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

2. Revelation’s physical description of this “Son of Man”⁴

Rev 1:13b-16	Daniel 7:9
The One like a Son of Man is... I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. <i>His head and his hair were white as white wool,</i> white <i>as snow</i> ; his eyes were like <i>a flame of fire</i> , his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.	The Ancient One is... 9 As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white <i>as snow</i> , and <i>the hair of his head like pure wool</i> ; his throne was <i>fiery flames</i> , and its wheels were burning fire.

Revelation 22:1-4 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But *the throne of God and of the Lamb* will be in it, and *his* servants will worship *him*; they will see *his* face, and *his* name will be on their foreheads.

Worship around the throne in Rev 4-5:

In Rev 4, “our Lord and God” receives “*glory and honor and power*” (4:11)

In Rev 5, the Lamb receives “*power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*” (5:12)⁵

³ For this observation, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: p. 26

⁴ Cf. Hays, “Faithful Witness,” 72-73.

⁵ Cf. Hays, “Faithful Witness,” 76.

II. The (Political) Sovereignty of God/ Jesus

1. Jesus is “ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5) and he has made us “a kingdom” (1:6)—even though this is what the beast/empire seems to be!

Rev 13:7-8 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. *It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth* will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

“A second important sense in which Revelation stands in the tradition of Jewish apocalypses is that it shares the *question* which concerned so many of the latter: who is Lord over the world?” —Richard Bauckham⁶

Cf. Isa 40:12-17, 21-24⁷

2. Reminder: ours is not the worst moment in world history
3. “Who is and who was and who *is to come*” (1:4; see also 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5).

III. To Propel Us to Jesus-Worship

1. Apocalyptic poetry that is a letter—and also prophecy/exhortation!

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. —John J. Collins⁸

SOME JEWISH APOCALYPSES: 1 Enoch 1-36 (ca. 200 B.C.); Daniel 7-12 (160s B.C.); 1 Enoch 85-90, the Animal Apocalypse (160s B.C.); Jubilees 23 (second century B.C.); 1 Enoch 93:1-10; 91:11-17, the Apocalypse of Weeks (first or second century B.C.); Testament of Levi 2-5 (first or second century B.C.); 1 Enoch 37-71 (early first century A.D.); Testament of Moses (early first century A.D.); 2 Enoch (late first century A.D.); 4 Ezra (end of first century A.D.); 2 Baruch (ca. A.D. 100); Apocalypse of Zephaniah (first or second century A.D.); Apocalypse of Abraham (first or second century A.D.); Testament of Abraham (first or second century A.D.)⁹

⁶ Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 8.

⁷ Observed by Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 26.

⁸ Quoted at Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 6.

⁹ Cf. Charles H. Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994: p. 4.

SOME EARLY CHRISTIAN APOCALYPSES: Jude, 2 Peter, Mark 13, Matthew 24–25, 2 Thessalonians 2; the Shepherd of Hermas, the Book of Elchasai, and Hippolytus's On Christ and the Antichrist.¹⁰

¹⁰ Cf. Barr, *Tales of the End* and Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, 4.

“Signs are the only appropriate means of communication because John seeks to express things that cannot be said in ordinary speech, rather like a poet.” —David L. Barr¹¹

- a. Symbolism—particularly numbers, animals, colors

“[N]umbers...signify qualities not quantities.” —David L. Barr¹²

- b. Highly-wrought/ artistic

Seven beatitudes

Seven Alpha-Omega/ first-last/ beginning-end

2. Against a cryptogram?

- a. **Rev 1:1a** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what *must soon take place*;

Rev 1:3b ...*for the time is near*.

- b. **Rev 1:3a** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and *blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it*;

- c. **Rev 22:10** And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

Dan 12:4 But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.

3. Engage our senses, our aesthetics, our imaginations to propel us to deeper faith, hope—and worship!

I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle... There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination... St. John uses words the way poets do, recombining them in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived. He takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us....¹³

Isa 11:2-3a LXX (NETS)

- 2 And the spirit of God shall rest on him,
[1] the spirit of wisdom and [2] understanding,
[3] the spirit of counsel and [4] might,
[5] the spirit of knowledge and [6] godliness.

¹¹ Barr, *Tales of the End*.

¹² Barr, *Tales of the End*.

¹³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988: pp. xi-xii.

3 [7] The spirit of the fear of God will fill him.