

## I. PROLOGUE (1:1-20)

1:1-20

### BEHIND THE TEXT

The book of Revelation begins with a sentence fragment that serves as title, gives a summary of the contents, and establishes authorship (vv 1-2). This multifaceted title is followed by a beatitude that reflects the liturgical usage of Revelation (v 3). John was writing for a church that was part of an oral culture in which the NT documents were carried to the churches and read aloud in a worship setting. The beatitude enhances a sense of worship.

The book seems to start over with a letter opening typical of the epistolary style of the first century (vv 4-9). The author and recipients are identified and the salutation takes the form of a blessing, an adaptation typical of Pauline letters (vv 4-5*a*). A doxology then gives praise to the source of the blessing (vv 5*b*-6). It is followed by a proclamation of Christ's return that sets the agenda for the rest of the book (v 7). God speaks words of self-disclosure that tie together the multiple references to the source of the revelation and serve as a transition to the inaugural vision (v 8).

The final element in the introductory framework for the book is John's inaugural visionary experience (vv 9-20). In this vision, which echoes prophetic call narratives (e.g., Exod 17:14; 34:27; Isa 30:8; Jer 30:2; Hab 2:2), John twice receives the command to write (Rev 1:11, 19). He hears the instruction a total of twelve times (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 12, 14; 10:4; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). John does not protest his inadequacy as was so common in OT prophet narratives, but the challenge to reduce the sights and sounds of visionary experiences to words on parchment cannot be minimized. John had the responsibility to faithfully express the truths expressed by those visions.

## Seven

The number seven (*hepta*) makes its appearance in the prologue and occurs a total of fifty-five times in Revelation. From the time of Pythagoras, Greek culture commonly related the number seven to fullness based on the idea of completeness of the seven planets. The idea, however, may go back to the Sumerians and the observation of the four phases of the moon in seven-day periods. The OT equation of seven with fullness originated with the seven-day creation account that highlighted God's completed work.

Sometimes seven is both literal and figurative, as in the sevenfold sprinkling of blood (Lev 4—16). Literally, the command is to sprinkle blood seven times, but it also signifies a complete, effective act. Other times seven is figurative, as when Israel is warned that God will punish them “seven times” if they do not repent (Lev 26:18; see vv 18-28). The number represents the completeness of their punishment, not a literal multiplication.

A literal-figurative tension in reference to the number seven makes it at times difficult to discern which is predominant. God's fullness is shown by seven churches and seven spirits (1:4; 4:5), seven angels (1:20), seven lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), and seven seals (5:1). The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes (5:6). The seven angels have seven trumpets (8:2), and there are seven thunders (10:3) and seven plagues (15:1). Seven also describes the fullness of the forces hostile to God. The dragon has seven heads with seven crowns (12:3); there are seven enigmatic kings (17:10); and “seven hills on which the woman sits” (17:9).

## IN THE TEXT

### A. Title (1:1-2)

■ **1-2** The first words of Revelation introduce the whole book and serve as a descriptive title. **Revelation** (*apokalypsis*) conveys both the content and the nature of the book; a dramatic, specialized form of Christian prophecy (see Introduction: “Literary Features and Structure”). It is the **revelation of Jesus Christ**. The Greek genitive construction can mean that the **revelation** is given by or from Jesus or that it is about Jesus. Because of the qualifying phrase,

which God gave him, the subjective genitive (*by or from Jesus*) is probably predominant although it is certainly also about Jesus.

The chain of communication is set. It is from God, to Jesus, to an angel, to John, to his **servants**. The immediate recipients, the **servants**, are designated in v 4 as the “seven churches in the province of Asia.” The message was given to a particular audience within a moment in history with relevance for the whole church throughout history.

The content is **what must soon take place**. **Must** (*dei*) expresses the necessity of the eschatological drama that is grounded in the divine will and God’s commitment to the completion of the plans for creation (Grundmann 1964, 2:23-24). The certainty of the consummation of history is reassuring. The difficulty is found in the two thousand years between this announcement of immediacy and expectations of the modern reader. Several solutions have been proposed.

One perspective holds that this phrase means once the time comes, the end will happen quickly or without delay. Another suggestion is that the expression reflects divine rather than human time (see 2 Pet 3:8). Some (Caird 1966, 12) believe that the crisis referred to is the early persecution of the church. Or it may be that John was anticipating the end of the old order with the universal recognition of Christ (Sweet 1979, 58). The most satisfying view is one that takes seriously the nonlinear nature of biblical prophecy. **Soon** (*en taxeî*) is a relative term in the context of eternity, and chronology is secondary to timeliness (Mounce 1998, 41).

Unlike many works of the apocalyptic genre, the writer tells us four times that his name is **John** (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8; see Introduction: “Authorship”). This repetition highlights the eyewitness nature of his testimony. He is identified as Jesus’ **servant** (*doulôi*) as are the recipients of the revelation (see comments on v 9).

The content of the communication is **the word of God** (see also 1:9; 6:9; 17:17; 19:9; 19:13; 20:4), which John received as did the OT prophets (Jonah 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Zech 1:1).

## The Word of God

In the OT, God spoke in the Law (Exod 20:1; Ps 119), through nature (Ps 19:1-4), and to people, primarily prophets (1 Kgs 12:22; 1 Chr 17:3). This continuing communication was eventually written down, so the Scriptures are known as the word of God (Mark 7:13; John 5:38).

In the NT, Jesus himself is the word of God (John 1:1, 14). As the writer to the Hebrews explains, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:1-2).

In Revelation, “the word of God” is that to which John testifies (1:2). It is the reason for his being on Patmos (1:9) and the reason for the martyrs’ deaths

(6:9; 20:4). In each case, the phrase is linked to the “testimony” of or for Jesus (implied in 6:9). This combination implies that “the word of God” refers to direct communication from God or to the Scriptures, which include God’s spoken words. They in turn point to the living “Word of God” (19:13).

The visions that portray God’s purpose, judgment, and mercy are further qualified as **the testimony of Jesus Christ**. The Greek genitive construction could mean the testimony borne by Jesus Christ or the testimony about him. Beale rightly argues for a “general” genitive that includes both options because of an “intentional ambiguity” that may be generally applied to genitives in Revelation (1999, 184). The last phrase of v 2, *hosa eiden, to everything he saw*, is in apposition to “word” and “testimony” and highlights the visionary experience at the heart of Revelation.

All of this, God **made . . . known**. The Greek verb *sēmainō* (“make something clear” [Friberg, Friberg, and Miller 2000, 348]) stands in tension with Revelation’s symbolic and enigmatic character. A secondary meaning based on the word’s etymology, “show by a sign” (Liddell 1996, 727), may be more appropriate here (see also John 12:33; 18:32; 21:19). It could indicate the difficulty of understanding the message and the need for interpretation (Aune 1997, 15). At the very least it illustrates the richly textured language of the Apocalypse.

## B. Beatitude (1:3)

■3 The beatitude in v 3 is the first of seven in Revelation (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14) and is echoed at the end of the book (22:7). Both the communication process and the response are **blest**. The mere reading of Revelation brings blessing, but hearing and obeying complete its purpose and result in greater blessedness.

Note that here John refers to Revelation as **prophecy** (*prophēteias*) as he does a total of seven times (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). **Prophecy** refers not as much to predictive foretelling as to forthtelling “the word of God,” which demands an ethical response (see Introduction: “Literary Features and Structure”). The recipients are to **take to heart** (*tēroutēs*, “keep on,” “guard,” “obey,” Swanson 1997, GKG5498) the revelation. It is a call to preserve, protect, and live out “the word of God” that is the testimony of Jesus mediated by an angel revealed through visions and recorded by a prophet.

The reason for diligence is that **the time is near**. **Time** (*kairos*) is an important eschatological term. Here it is associated with a gracious, divinely ordained juncture centered around God’s plan of salvation. Given its association with final judgment in Revelation, the connotation of a “fateful and decisive point” (Delling 1965, 459) is also present. Because of this crucial timing, the recipients of the Apocalypse must **take to heart** the ethical demands of John’s visions. They must respond to “the word of God” from Jesus about what he

has accomplished for them in his life, death, and resurrection as well as what he will do for them in the future.

## C. Letter Opening (1:4a)

■ **4a** Revelation is the only Jewish or Christian apocalypse that is framed as a letter with both an opening (1:4-9) and closing (22:21). Following ancient letter-writing style, Revelation's salutation includes the author, **John**, and the recipients, **the seven churches in the province of Asia**. Both have already been introduced in the opening verses of the book (on John see v 1; Introduction: "Authorship"). The recipients are designated as historically and geographically specific **churches**. Their names are attached to their imbedded letters in chs 2 and 3 and represent only a fraction of the fifty or so congregations in Asia Minor at that time (Van der Horst 1989, 106-7). **Seven** is a recurring number in Revelation signifying fullness (see sidebar: "Seven," 1:1-20). As a figure of speech called synecdoche (where the part represents the whole), the seven churches stand for all the churches in Asia Minor, and beyond the original historical setting to the universal church.

## D. Benediction (1:4b-5a)

■ **4b-5a** The second part of the letter opening is a blessing of **grace and peace** from their ultimate source, the triune God.

The prayer for **grace** (*charis*) is a variation of the normal Hellenistic letter greeting, "welcome" (*chaire*). It carries a wealth of meaning for Christians, for whom it signifies God's love in action in the provision of salvation. In Pauline fashion (e.g., Gal 1:3), John couples it with the customary Hebrew greeting, **peace** (*eirēnē*, reflecting the Hebrew concept of *shalom*), which connotes wellbeing, prosperity, salvation, a covenant relationship with God, and eschatological blessings (see von Rad 1964, 402-6).

The blessing is typically Pauline, but the triune source of that blessing is unique to Revelation. Father, Holy Spirit, and Son are in unusual order; even more unusual is the three-seven-three pattern of the references to the Father: the **One who is, and who was, and who is to come**. The expression is a reflection of Exod 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM" (see Isa 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12 for probable expansions of the divine name). The Greek construction here is unusual, and it is probable that the "incorrect grammar" is intentional. The nominative may have been kept to highlight an allusion to God's self-disclosure to Moses (Exod 3:14). Some (Beckwith 1978, 424) argue that John considered the divine name indeclinable as an illustration of God's unchangeable majesty. The threefold name instills confidence in the God who transcends history and is able to deliver his servants and bring prophecy to fulfillment.

The blessing comes also from **the seven spirits**. Some have understood the spirits to be the seven angels of Jewish angelology (Aune 1997, 34) or the seven planets of pagan mythology (Caird 1966, 15; see also Malina 1995, 65).

However, as part of the Trinitarian formula, the number seven (see sidebar: “Seven,” 1:1-20) refers to the fullness of the Spirit of God (see NIV text note on this verse: “or *the sevenfold Spirit*”). In the throne room vision (4:5 and 5:6), the **seven spirits** are identified as “of God” and further described as “seven lamps” (4:5) and the Lamb’s “seven eyes,” the spirit of Christ (5:6). Their position **before** God’s **throne** causes some (Mounce 1998, 48) to doubt their identification with the Spirit of God. They are understood to be a “heavenly entourage” with a special ministry. Despite this unusual placement, the inclusion of the **seven spirits** in the threefold source of blessing calls for a divine identity.

The third part of the source of blessing is **Jesus Christ** (see also 1:1, 2) who is given three titles from Ps 89 (vv 27, 37). He is the **faithful witness** who both bears and embodies the message of love and grace. In Rev 3:14, this christological description is expanded to “faithful and true witness.” A martyr in Pergamum named Antipas is also called “faithful witness” (2:13). **Witness** (*martyrs*) is the word from which the English word “martyr” derives and a **faithful witness**, as evidenced throughout church history, may result in death. Certainly it did for Jesus as he was **faithful** to his Father’s will. However, the essential meaning of **witness** in Revelation, both for Christ and those who seek to follow him, is to testify in both action and words to God’s salvific plan. For followers of Christ, this can be summarized in the compelling word “Christlikeness.”

1:4b-5b

Jesus is also the **firstborn from the dead** (see Col 1:18; also Acts 26:23). His **faithful witness** resulted in death, but his resurrection conquered death and provided the way for those who overcome to enjoy eternal life (see Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). **Firstborn** (*prōtotokos*) often referred to a firstborn son (although it also applied to an only son) with all of the prestige, status, and inheritance privileges associated with the position, especially in the context of royal succession.

The third title highlights Jesus’ resurrection and the inauguration of a new era over which he is sovereign as **ruler of the kings of the earth** or “King of kings” (17:14; 19:16). Although unrecognized by the rulers of the Roman Empire, the resurrected and victorious Jesus Christ is the sovereign ruler. He offers healing for the nations (see 22:2), and all who respond will benefit from his sovereignty (see comments on 21:24).

## E. Doxology (1:5b-6)

The three-part description of the person of Jesus flows naturally into praise. The doxology (one of five in Revelation: 4:8b; 5:13-14; 7:12; 19:1) includes a threefold listing of Jesus’ work as loving, freeing, and making.

■ **5b** The use of the first person invites the recipient to participate in the praise. He **loves us**. The present tense of *agapaō* highlights the ongoing nature of the love that led Jesus to the cross, is at the very heart of Revelation’s

message, and continues through all eternity. He freed us from our sins by his blood. This construction occurs only here in the NT. To be freed (from *luō*) means “to loose” (Friberg, Friberg, and Miller 2000, 250). It is a symbol of former slavery or captivity to sin. The release that comes through Christ’s death is described as a ransom in 5:9 (see notes there). Those freed from slavery to sin belong to God, and the first person plural includes both the writer and the recipients. From the very beginning of the book, it is noted that we are slaves or servants (*douloi*) of God (see 1:1). A textual variant exchanges *lusanti hēmas* (has freed us) for *lousanti hēmas* (“has washed us”). “Washed” is a possibility in light of 7:14 where the image is of being washed with Christ’s blood. In this case, however, *lusanti* is the preferred reading with better textual support (Metzger 1994, 729).

■6 The contrast in v 6 is striking. We are slaves but we are also citizens with a special mission because Jesus Christ has made us a kingdom and priests. Citizenship in the kingdom of God is available to those freed from sin if we place ourselves under God’s rule. Priest (*hierēis*) is used only three times in Revelation (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), each time to describe Christians and indicate the priesthood of all believers. Priests have direct access with God and the responsibility to intercede for others.

All believers join with Jesus Christ in a new kingdom to serve his God and Father, and it is to him that glory and power are ascribed. Glory (*doxa*) recognizes all that is supreme in God’s nature (Zodhiates 2000, G1391) and power (*kratos*) emphasizes God’s victorious command and ultimate sovereignty (Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley 1995, 467). This is the God who reveals, has provided freedom from sin, and will complete the prophecy of the book. He “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4) is to be praised for ever and ever. This great doxology concludes with a final Amen, a Hebrew response of affirmation and solidarity.

## F. Christ’s Return and God’s Words (1:7-8)

Verses 7-8 are transitional, both concluding the salutation and introducing John’s visionary experiences. Christ’s imminent return is proclaimed and God provides titles of divine disclosure.

■7 Verse 7 begins with look (*idou*), a marker to draw attention to or to validate what follows. It is used twenty-six times in Revelation and has sometimes been translated as “behold.” It is derived from the verb “see” (*horaō*) and could mean “pay attention” or “listen” (Friberg, Friberg, and Miller 2000, 202). Here it carries the meaning of certainty or assurance (Aune 1997, 53).

He is coming with the clouds is the first of many statements about the culmination of history that bring the reader to expect a soon end. But the reader is then brought back, provided with more perspective, and encouraged to engage further in the prophecy. The book always strains toward the end but holds time and eternity in tension.

The statement recalls Daniel's vision where the Son of Man is given dominion over the nations (Dan 7:13-14). The rest of the verse universalizes Zechariah's oracle of the eschatological redemption of Israel after their repentance (Zech 12:10). **Every eye will see him** but **those who pierced him** are especially mentioned. It does not mean just the one who literally thrust the spear into Jesus' side on the cross (John 19:34) or the Jews who rejected Jesus but all those who share the hostility of that act, both literally and figuratively.

The verse returns to a universal statement; this time it is the judgment of **all peoples** (*pasai hai phylai*; lit., "all tribes"). In the Zechariah passage, it was the tribes of Israel; here it is all the tribes or **peoples of the earth** who as a necessary part of repentance will **mourn** because of their rejection of the Christ. While it could refer (as does Matt 26:64) to sorrow or even despair because of the judgment brought by Jesus, the double affirmation with which the verse ends argues against this. Salvation rather than damnation seems to be emphasized by the two concluding exclamations.

To the Hebrew **amen** that also concluded the doxology (Rev 1:6) is added the Greek affirmation, *nai* ("yes"; see Louw and Nida 1988, 1:664) **so shall it be!** In this way the recipients' two cultures are included and the importance of Christ's return and people's reaction to it is highlighted.

■ **8** The final element before the beginning of the visionary experience is God's own words. Only here and 21:3-8 (but see 11:3) are God's direct speech recorded. Here the words of self-identification round out the introduction by authenticating the message and further explaining its source. The speaker is identified as **the Lord God**. Both are significant titles in themselves and used frequently in Revelation (4:8, 11; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 18:8; 19:6; 21:22; 22:5, 6). *Kyrios* (**Lord**) is the Greek LXX translation for *Yahweh* (or *Adonai*). *Theos* is the most common word for **God** in the NT and was often used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *Elohim*.

**The Lord God** claims three divine titles. The middle title **who is, and who was, and who is to come** repeats in slightly different order the description of God in the blessing in 1:4 (see comments there). Here the Eternal One is first described as **the Alpha and the Omega** (also 21:6; 22:13). The first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet indicate completeness in a similar way as "the Beginning and the End" (21:6; 22:13) and "the First and the Last" (1:17; 2:8; 22:13). In each case, the two elements encompass all that is in between them; God has supremacy over all of history and all that there is. Such a God is **Almighty** (*pantokratōr*) and more than able to bring the plan of redemption to completion.

## Almighty

The title *pantokratōr* appears nine times in Revelation (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22) and only one other time in the NT (2 Cor 6:18). In Rev-



elation, it is most often used as God's self-designation or in ascriptions of praise in liturgical settings.

Although in the LXX "Almighty" frequently translates *Shaddai* (with emphasis on power), the title also indicates the richness of God's grace. Every good gift comes from God, who never grows weary of pouring out mercy (Girdlestone 1998, 32).

*Pantokratōr* refers to God's omnipotence, but this does not mean unconditional force or determining all that happens. The "all" in "all-powerful" is inclusive rather than coercive. There is no other competing power. In that supreme position, God has empowered humans with free will so that divine power is a sovereignty of love. This Almighty One redefines power through the cross and the sacrificial Lamb (see Rev 5:9).

## G. Inaugural Vision (1:9-20)

God's self-identification concludes the introduction to the book and establishes the authority and type of communication to follow. An epistolary opening establishes the pastoral nature of the work and includes a beatitude, doxology, summary of the essential message, and authenticating words from God.

Following this introduction is another beginning. The author again identifies himself and provides the setting, purpose, and source for the inaugural vision as well as all those that follow in the rest of the book.

### I. Setting (1:9-11)

Another epistolary opening (see v 4) emphasizes the pastoral nature of the Apocalypse and situates it within a geographical and historical context. The recipients are identified through an audition that serves as a reminder of the pastoral nature of the message.

■ 9 The writer identifies himself as he did in the letter opening (1:4; 1:1, 9; see also 22:8), but here he uses the emphatic first person. **I, John** (*egō Iōannēs*) is a striking parallel to Daniel's self-identification (Dan 7:15; 8:15, 27; 9:2; 10:2, 7; 12:5). He associates himself with Daniel, but he also identifies with the recipients of Revelation as **brother** (also in Rev 6:11; 12:10; 19:10; 22:9) and **companion** (*sygkoinōnos*). Both words indicate the equality and unity of John and the recipients as believers. They are fellow participants in three areas: **suffering, kingdom, and endurance**. The relationship of these three is difficult. The Greek construction is three datives with only one article. Are they separate elements, or is the first modified by the second and third? It is probably enough to say that they are related and mutually interpretive.

**Suffering** (*thlipsei*) was a reality for Christians in the first-century Roman Empire and suffering was expected to increase (see Introduction: "Occasion and Purpose"). The required response is **patient endurance** (*hypomonē*), which is the basic attitude of the righteous. Perseverance is a hope-filled wait-

1:8-9

ing for Jesus, but it is also a requirement for salvation. It enables the Christian to conquer (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). It helps the believer to look forward to the full realization of the **kingdom** while facing the temptation to compromise with the present world or to succumb to its hostile attacks (Hauck 1967, 585-88).

**John** gives the setting of the vision as **the island of Patmos** (see Introduction: "Date and Place"). He says that the reason for his presence there is **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**. The same words describe the content of his visions in 1:2. Variations of the two phrases are also found in 6:9 and 20:4. The Greek preposition *dia* can express both cause ("because of") and purpose ("for"). As a result, three possibilities have been proposed for John's presence on Patmos: (1) He was exiled there by the Roman authorities because of his Christian witness; (2) he was there to proclaim the gospel; or (3) he was there to receive a revelation. The first was held by many church fathers and is the most likely because of the association of the phrases with martyrdom in 6:9 and 20:4.

The genitive clauses are also multifaceted. They can include both subjective and objective meanings (see comments on 1:1-2). John was exiled on Patmos because of his declaration about God, words that came from God and were spoken to honor God as well as for his testimony about Jesus, a testimony that Jesus inspired and that was dedicated to him.

■ **10** The inaugural vision took place **on the Lord's Day**. Some have understood the phrase to refer to Easter, arguing that the weekly day of worship was developed out of the yearly commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. Another view is that John was transported into the future to the eschatological Day of the Lord prophesied in the OT (Bacchiocchi 1977, 111-31). Neither is likely (see Bauckham 1982, 230-31; Aune 1997, 83-84). **The Lord's Day** was the Christian designation for Sunday, the day set aside for worship and celebration, adopted sometime in the first century.

On this day when Christians were meeting together, John was **in the Spirit** (*en pneumati*). The wording echoes that of Ezekiel (2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5) and lends prophetic authority to what follows. It occurs three more times in Revelation, following angelic invitations to come: to "heaven" (4:1); to "a desert" (17:3); and to "a mountain great and high" (21:9-10). Some (Caird 1966, 59; Aune 1997, 83) understand that "spirit" refers to John's spirit rather than the Holy Spirit, perhaps emphasizing a more subjective spiritual experience. Given the source of the message and its blessing, this explanation is weak.

The commission to write in v 11 and the sevenfold admonition to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" in chs 2 and 3 demand a greater emphasis on God's direction. It is difficult to explain what it means to be **in the Spirit** or "in the Spirit's control." From a distance of two millennia it is not possible to reconstruct the experience of a visionary in a culture where the nonrational and ecstatic played important roles. John's description implies a suspension of

his normal consciousness in order to receive visions and auditions revealed by the Spirit (Bauckham 1980, 68; Smidt 1994, 235; Wesley 1997, n.p.) or “the exaltation of the prophet under inspiration” (Swete 1906, 13).

The first experience John has while **in the Spirit** is oral rather than visual. He hears a **loud voice** (*phōnēn megalēn*), a phrase that occurs twenty times in Revelation. Similar to Ezekiel’s experience (Ezek 3:12), the voice comes from **behind** him, building tension as to its source. Like the voice Moses heard on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16; 20:18), it sounds **like a trumpet**. The use of the *shofar* (horn used as a musical instrument) in OT theophanies (Ps 47:5; Isa 18:3; Joel 2:1; Zech 9:14) most likely influenced the description of the voice in this prophetic setting.

## Voices

Many heavenly voices speak throughout Revelation. They sometimes form heavenly choirs. They speak to John and other characters instructing, explaining, commanding, and praising. Loud voices imitate trumpets, thunder, and harps, but their source is not always clear. They may come from angels or other heavenly creatures. Because of the tendency in early Judaism to avoid the personification of God, they may be circumlocutions for God’s voice. Their origin gives authority and truthfulness to their proclamations.

Other heavenly voices respond to God in worship and praise. As the natural response of all but those opposed to God, these unnamed voices have a range of possibilities. The twenty-four elders, four living creatures, angels, and the church triumphant all proclaim their praise to God.

■ **11** The trumpet-like voice is more than a loud sound; it is articulate, commanding John to **write** and **send**. The command emphasizes his intermediary role in receiving the message from God and faithfully passing it on to the churches.

The finished **scroll** would have been about fifteen feet long (Kenyan 1951, 34) and was to be sent to **the seven churches** enumerated in v 11. It is more likely that one original **scroll** was carried to each church in succession than that each received a separate copy. The location of these Asia Minor churches forms a circle, beginning with Ephesus and moving clockwise finally reaching Laodicea, suggesting that it may have been a mail delivery route. The message was for all of the churches; all were to hear what the Spirit said. Each church will be discussed in relationship to its letter in chs 2 and 3 (see also comments on 1:4 and Introduction: “Audience”).

## 2. Vision of Christ (1:12-20)

John responds to the voice and turns to see his first vision. The image he sees of the risen Christ is highly symbolic and like all of Revelation’s metaphors should not be taken literally because they point to realities greater than themselves (see Introduction: “Literary Features and Structure”).

■ **12** John turns **around to see the voice** that had commissioned him to write all that he would see (1:11). Since it is not possible to see a voice, this may be metonymy (the voice represents the one speaking). Seeing and hearing are often juxtaposed in Revelation in ways that are jarring or at least unexpected. John turns around to see the voice but the vision may or may not explain its source. The ambiguity enhances the sense of wonder and mystery of Revelation's world. What he sees and hears when he turns is far greater than anticipated.

He sees **seven** [see sidebar: "Seven," 1:1-20] **golden lampstands**, surrounding the exalted Christ (1:13; 2:1). Zechariah 4:1-14 describes one golden lampstand with seven lamps that represent "the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth" (v 10). It is the golden menorah of the tabernacle (Exod 25:31-40; 37:17-24; Num 8:1-4) and of the temple where there were ten of the seven-branched lampstands (1 Kgs 7:49). In Zechariah's day, the lampstand represented Israel's commission to rebuild the temple, empowered by God's presence. Here the seven lampstands symbolize the new Israel, the universal church, represented by the seven churches (see Rev 1:20). They are **golden**, a symbol of value and purity (see sidebar: "Golden Crowns," 4:2b-8a) and their task is to be the reflected light of Christ.

■ **13** Standing in the midst of the lampstands/churches is **someone "like a son of man"** (also 14:14). The background is Dan 7:13 where "one like a son of man" was presented to the Ancient of Days. There has been much discussion about the meaning of this designation, including "a human being" (Swete 1906, 15) and an angel (Charles 1920, 1:27). "The Son of Man" is used frequently in the Gospels by Jesus as a self-designation perhaps to show his humility and/or his identification with humanity. In Revelation, the phrase does not include the definite article and emphasizes Jesus' glory. His appearance points to his divine status (vv 13-16), and he speaks of his own timelessness and power (vv 17-18).

The identification continues as John weaves together descriptions of heavenly beings from Dan 3, 7, and 10 and applies them all to Christ. The phrase **dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet** (see Dan 10:5) translates the Greek *endedymenon podērē*, which denotes dignity or high office and is commonly understood to represent priestly attire (against Aune 1997, 95-96). The context of the menorahs suggests cultic associations, but again the imagery is imprecise. Other priestly garments are not mentioned. The only other apparel described is the **sash around his chest** that, like the lampstands (v 12), is **golden** to show value and purity. Its position around the chest rather than the waist was common for floor-length robes but may relate to ancient Greek figures who used such a "belt" for securing a short sword that would anticipate Jesus as warrior (Rev 19:11; Aune 1997, 94).

■ **14** The description shifts from garments to the figure himself. **His head and hair were white like wool or snow** (see Dan 7:9; see also *1 En.* 106:2, 10). In this phrase "and" (*kai*) is epexegetical (explanatory) so that it could read

“his head, that is, his hair” or “his head of hair” was white. In the Daniel passage, the white hair describes “the Ancient of Days” and evokes the cultural values of wisdom, respect, and status that come with age. Ancient interpreters stretched the symbolism to include a reference to Jesus’ tenderness to sinners, the eternal mystery of his incarnation, or even Christians themselves (see Weinrich 2005, 13-14).

His eyes . . . like blazing fire recall Daniel’s vision of a heavenly being’s eyes “like flaming torches” (Dan 10:6). The metaphor was common in Greek and Latin literature and referred to the special quality of the eyes of the gods. Swete (1906, 17) associates it with “the penetrating glance . . . that flashed with quick intelligence . . . and righteous wrath.”

■ 15 The exalted figure of Christ is apparently barefoot. This may be an ancient reference to divinity (see Aune 1997, 95-96) or to Israelite priests who wore no special foot covering while performing cultic duties. The imagery of feet . . . like bronze glowing in a furnace recalls Daniel’s vision (Dan 10:6). **Bronze** (*chalkolibanōi*) is found only in Revelation (1:15; 2:18) and is also translated “burnished bronze” (RSV, NRSV) or “fine brass” (KJV). The comparison may have been to a purer form of the copper-tin alloy used in Roman coinage (Aune 1997, 95). Various allegorical meanings were promoted in the early church, including Jesus’ divine-human nature because the second part of the compound word *libanos* means “frankincense” (see Weinrich 2005, 14-15). It likely refers to the radiance of Christ and to his strength and stability (Mounce 1998, 59).

The next part of the description returns to an auditory rather than visionary experience as John hears a voice . . . like the sound of rushing waters. In Ezek 43:2, the **sound** signaled the arrival of the glory of God while in Dan 10:6 the voice of the Ancient of Days was like the **voice** of a multitude. If John was literally on the shore of the Aegean Sea, then mixing a “trumpet” sound (Rev 1:10) with crashing waves makes sense. The water simile occurs two more times in Revelation with escalating intensity. In 14:2, it is combined with “thunder” to describe a voice from heaven and in 19:6 John heard what sounded like “thunder,” “a great multitude,” and “rushing waters” sing a hymn of praise.

■ 16 **In his right hand**, the hand of favor, power, and blessing, **he held seven** [see sidebar: “Seven,” 1:1-20] **stars**. It is not likely that they refer to the seven planets, the mythological shapers of destiny, or Ursa Major, the astrological ruler of the world (Foerster 1964, 504). The context here is the menorah, the church. The mystery is solved in v 20, where the stars are enigmatically identified (see comments there).

The next description of a **sharp double-edged sword** coming out of his **mouth** (see Isa 11:4 and 49:2) paints a bizarre picture. The **sword** is part of Christ’s description three more times in Revelation, where its function is explained. With the **sword**, Christ will fight against those in Sardis who do not re-

pent (2:16), he will “strike down the nations” (19:15), and he will kill the kings and their armies (19:21). The **sword** is a metaphor for his tongue or speech (see also Pss 52:2; 57:4; Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). The **sword** (*rhomphaia*) probably refers to a large type used for cutting and piercing carried by Roman legionaries rather than a shorter dagger (*machaira*). Its size and sharpness suggest the power and effectiveness of the words that pronounce and execute justice.

The final element of the description alludes to Dan 10:6 where the heavenly being’s face is compared to lightning. John’s vision of Christ’s **face . . . like the sun shining in all its brilliance** echoes Matthew’s (17:2) description of the transfigured Christ. The metaphor suggests beauty, sanctity, transcendence, strength, and divinity.

■ **17-18** John’s response to this overwhelming experience is typical of recipients of visions who respond with fear and reverential awe (Bauckham 1980-81, 323-24). He **fell at his [Christ’s] feet as though dead**. The encounter follows the four-part pattern of Dan 8 and 10 where the prophet has a vision of a heavenly being, prostrates himself in fear, is strengthened by that being, and then receives further revelation (Beale 1999, 213). The reference to death is also typical of revelatory experiences (see Exod 20:19; Deut 5:22-27). The theme of death and life is the essence of the reassurance John receives.

John does not record his response when the Son of Man places **his right hand on him**, but he must have been reassured and comforted, for with it came the words, **Do not be afraid**. Again it is important to recognize the symbolism; a literal touch by the hand that held the seven stars would seem strange. It may represent Christ’s care for both John and the churches (Swete 1906, 19). Because it was the right hand, it may signify a commissioning (Aune 1997, 100).

The command is followed by a reason for confidence. Christ identifies himself with the emphatic **I am** (*egō eimi*) formula that is so important in the Gospel of John (see Brown 1966, 1:533-38). This divine self-summary (see Exod 3:14 and its echo in, e.g., John 6:35) is found five times in Revelation, twice by God (1:8; 21:6) and two more times by Christ (2:23; 22:16). Each expands the portrait of the speaker.

John is not to fear because Christ is **the First and the Last** (see also 2:8 and 22:13). This depiction of Jesus is probably derived from the description of God in Isaiah (41:4; 44:6; 48:12) where Israel is being comforted. The association of the phrase with Jesus emphasizes his deity as do his next words, **I am the Living One**. The phrase “living God” appears frequently in both the OT and NT. The declaration here establishes his deity and contrasts sharply with the reality of his death in the triumph of his resurrection. He declares, **I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!** The juxtaposition of life, death, and life highlights Christ’s eternal nature as well as his incarnation. These short phrases assume a strong understanding of the gospel story since nowhere in Revelation is Jesus’ life on earth directly mentioned. It is the exalted Christ who appears, speaks to the churches, and triumphs over all the rulers of the

earth. Living forever is another allusion to his divinity because, in the OT, the Father is also said to live forever (Deut 32:40; Dan 4:34; 12:7). **Behold** (*idou*) emphasizes and affirms the truth of the statement (see comments on 1:7).

Christ's self-description turns again to death: **I hold the keys of death and Hades**. *Hades* (lit., "unseen") is the Greek mythological god that personified the underworld (Homer, *Iliad* 15:188). Here **Hades** is roughly equivalent to the Hebrew *Sheol* that in the OT was understood to be the dark dwelling place of all departed spirits (see Job 10:21; Ps 89:48).

**Keys** represent power and the genitive construction (*tou thanatou kai tou hadou*) can mean either the keys **to death and Hades** or the keys *belonging* to them so that personification and spatial connotations intermingle (see also Rev 6:8; 20:13, 14). The image of a godly key bearer who controlled the realm of **death and Hades** was evident in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. For example, the goddess Hekate who possessed the keys to **Hades** was a mythological figure with three forms who ruled over heaven and earth, as well as **Hades** (Aune 1997, 104). In contrast to this false god, Jesus is the Living One who conquered death and is alive forever. Another affirmation of his deity is his possession of the keys because according to rabbinic teaching only God had supremacy over **death and Hades**.

■ **19** After reassuring John and giving him confidence, Jesus Christ gives him a command that is closely linked with the preceding phrase by the particle *oun* (**therefore**). Based on who he is and what he has done, the risen Christ repeats the command that inaugurated the vision (v 11): **write**. There the command was to write what he would see; here the command is to record **what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later**.

The threefold clause is difficult and has had many interpretations. A popular but inadequate view holds that it provides an outline of the book: the vision he has just received (1:9-20); the present (chs 2–3); and the future (chs 4–22; Swete 1906, 21; Charles 1920, 1:33). This is an oversimplification because past events appear in section 3 (e.g., ch 12); chs 2 and 3 contain some references to the future; and the bulk of the book has no specific time-oriented structure (Caird 1966, 26).

More helpful is an understanding that takes into consideration Revelation's visionary nature, historic context, and enduring message. John's task is to relate God's redemptive activity through Christ that takes place in the church and in the world. This salvation history continues to be relevant for all time (Smalley 2005, 57; see also Aune 1997, 105-6). In this view, the "and" (*kai*) is expegetic (explanatory) so that the second and third clauses describe the first. The threefold form may be an adaptation of a Hellenistic prophecy formula (Aune 1997, 105) but it also balances the past, present, and future of Christ's self-description in v 18 and elsewhere. The present and future reality of Christ's reign is predicated on his past action as well as his preexistence.

The future of the church depends on its present response to God's ongoing saving activity.

The verb **seen** (*eides*) may be an epistolary aorist; all that John records is in the past from the reader's perspective. It may refer to the immediate visionary experience, but it may also refer to all that he will see throughout the book (as in v 11). The second phrase **what is now** relates to the seven historical churches of Asia Minor, but the special word of Christ to them has meaning for the universal church beyond their specific time and place (see comments on v 4).

**What will take place later** is shown through glimpses of an eschatological future that includes the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9) as well as trans-temporal realities as the following examples illustrate. The court in heaven in chs 4—5 is an eternal reality. The death of the “great prostitute” that is the destruction of Babylon (chs 17—18) refers to historical entities but also symbolizes the victory of Christ in the continuing conflict between the world and the church. The promise of eternal life (chs 21—22) is a present as well as a future reality (Smalley 2005, 57). The multivalent language of visionary experience coupled with the indescribability of eternal truths requires an open and humble listening to “this prophecy” (v 3), all that John saw, “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (v 2).

■ **20** Christ's speech turns from the enigmatic command of v 19 to an allegorical explanation of **the mystery of the seven** [see sidebar: “Seven,” 1:1-20] **stars** in Christ's right hand. **Mystery** (*mystērion*) is found four times in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7) and was common in early Jewish prophetic (Dan 2:29) and apocalyptic texts (Rom 11:25-26; 1 Cor 15:51-52). The Greek syntax here is awkward and may be best translated “as for the **mystery**” (RSV, NASB). The definition of **mystery** as “a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand” (Merriam-Webster) is apt.

Jesus explains that the **seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches**. The **lampstands** appeared in vv 12-13 and the symbolism is mentioned again in 2:5 where Christ warns the Ephesians that he will remove their lampstand if they do not repent. The identification of the **stars** is more problematic. They are **the angels of the . . . churches** but what does that signify? The Greek *angelos* means “messenger” and may refer to a supernatural being or a human being.

**The angels of the . . . churches** have been understood as heavenly beings who represent or guard the **churches** (Johnson 1981, 430); human leaders of or messengers to the **churches**; guardian angels for the **churches** (Oecumenius in Weinrich 2005, 19); Christian prophets connected to the **churches** (Hill 1979, 30); spiritual counterparts of the human **churches** (Beasley-Murray 1974, 69; Beale 1999, 217); personifications of the character of the **churches** (Beckwith 1978, 445-46; Wink 1986, 70-78); and the **seven stars** of Ursa Minor or the Pleiades (Bousset 1906, 196) that may have reminded these churches of their



place among all other churches. The letters are addressed to the **angels of the . . . churches**, but they are obviously meant for the whole church. Whatever the exact relationship, the **churches** are reminded through their **angels** that they already exist in a spiritual dimension and that they are not alone in their struggle against the pagan world they inhabit (Beale 1999, 218).

## FROM THE TEXT

Themes introduced in the prologue are worked out in the rest of Revelation. The interweaving of God's purposes and human response begins with an identification of the source of revelation, blessings, and salvation.

The triune God, whose being has been pondered for centuries, is encountered rather than discussed. With mysterious symbolism typical of the apocalyptic genre, multiple oral and visual depictions and responses of praise express in partial and inadequate ways the inexpressible. "The Alpha and the Omega" (1:8; 21:6; 22:13) who is the source of blessing authenticates the revelation and evokes awe. The realization of God's eternal and active presence gave courage to churches in the first century facing injustice and danger as well as the allure of riches and power. We too need confidence in the grace of almighty God who is also conquering Savior.

Father and Son are distinguished in Revelation, but the divine perichoresis (interrelationship) is also intimated because Christ is also identified as "the Alpha and the Omega" (22:13). The Holy Spirit appears in the prologue as "the seven spirits" (1:4). This difficult designation occurs again in the throne scene (4:5) but nowhere else in the NT.

More familiar is the statement that John is "in the Spirit" (1:10), referring to John's heightened inspiration as he receives the visions. Elsewhere he refers to being transported "in the spirit" to "a desert" (17:3) and "to a mountain" (21:10), but the context is always communication. God speaks to John (14:13) and to the churches (in chs 2—3) through the Spirit. While the experiences of John are unique, every Christian can know God's presence and voice through the Spirit.

Service to God in the kingdom is also anticipated in the prologue. Christ's work is summarized in one short phrase (1:5), and the kingdom announced (v 6). Those who have been set free from sin are servants of God (vv 1, 6) and priests (v 6; see also 5:10; 20:6). All believers, as Martin Luther insisted, have direct access to God and the responsibility to sacrifice and intercede for others to the glory of God (1:6).

The suffering mentioned in v 9 is undoubtedly connected to citizenship in the kingdom. Just as Jesus suffered in order to establish his rule so must believers. Those who put themselves under the lordship of Christ open themselves to tribulation in this in-between-time before Christ's return and the final consummation and destruction of evil.

Throughout Revelation the eschatological climax is already begun and continually imminent. The Parousia (second coming) of Christ announced in v 7 is the focal point of the book. "The time is near" (v 3) has a striking connection with Mark 1:15, which announces the fulfillment of OT prophecy and the inauguration of the kingdom in the presence of Jesus (see also Dan 7:22*b*). The exalted Christ is already present among his churches and the mystery (Rev 1:20) of the stars and lampstands includes the connotation of unexpected eschatological fulfillment.