



The Book of Revelation

Revelation 1-3: The Vision of the Son of Man and His Messages to the Churches of Asia

The Book of Revelation begins with a foreword (1:1-3) and then a general message to seven communities of followers of Jesus in the Roman province of Asia (1:4-20). That message focuses on the author's vision of a heavenly figure, the Son of Man enthroned in heaven. There follow seven messages to individual communities: Ephesus (2:1-7), Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamon (2:12-17), Thyatira (2:18-29), Sardis (3:1-6), Philadelphia (3:7-13), and Laodicea (3:14-22). The whole section is an intricately interwoven composition that foreshadows the concluding declarations of the book. The beginning of each individual message repeats an element of the vision of the Son of Man and the final remark in each message consists of a promise by the Son of Man to give a prize to "the one who conquers" in each community. Each of the prizes anticipates an element in the final visions of the book in chapters 19-21.

The foreword has several elements that help to define what kind of work the book is. The very first word, "*apocalypsis*" or "revelation" has, of course, become the book's title, although it in fact describes its content. It is useful to keep in mind that the word is singular. The book is *not* entitled the Book of Revelations, as it is often called. Although its imagery is complex, it finally consists of a disclosure of a single important truth. To anticipate the results of our study we might define that revealed truth as the declaration that the Lamb has already been victorious over the powers of evil that seem to rule the world. Yet the book also offers a vision of what "must soon take place" in order to make the Lamb's victory manifest. As v 3 indicates, the book is a work of "prophecy." The prophecy involves an account of the "time" or better, the "appointed time" that is "near."

The two terms, "apocalypse" and "prophecy" point to the literary precursors of the book, the prophetic literature of ancient Israel and the literature describing visionary experiences ("apocalyptic") that became widespread in Jewish circles of the period. The visionary author, who reveals his name as "John" in v 1 and again in v 4,

will constantly use material from these literary antecedents and it will be important to trace them and think about how he deploys what he borrows.

The Letter to the Churches

Greeting

The message to the communities of believers begins (v 4) as a standard letter, with the name of the sender, “John” and the recipients, “the seven churches.” Then, where an ordinary letter writer would put in a word of greeting (see, e.g., James 1:1), our author says that “grace” is sent to the recipients from three entities, the “One who is, who was, and is to come,” the “seven spirits who are before his throne,” repeated in v 12, and finally, to Jesus Christ, the “faithful witness.” Each of these elements resonates with portions of scripture. The first, referring to Israel’s God as known in the Biblical tradition, probably alludes to Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 41:4. The second recalls the presence of angelic spirits before the throne of God in prophetic visions such as Isaiah 6:2-3, although the number seven is probably an allusion to Zechariah 4:2, which will be repeated in v 12. The reference to Christ as the “faithful witness” may recall other early Christian portraits of Jesus.

That Jesus came as a “witness” (v 5) is strongly affirmed in the Gospel of John (John 18:37), that he is the “faithful one” is a key point of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hebrews 3:2; 12:2). That Jesus is the “firstborn of the dead” expresses the general Christian belief in his resurrection. The final description of Jesus as “King of the kings of the earth” introduces a distinctive political note that will run through the whole book. Jesus kingship, ironically affirmed in the Johannine trial scene before Pilate where his role as “witness” is also central (John 18:39) sets him in opposition to the “kings of the earth,” particularly the emperor of Rome.

Doxology

Following the greeting in an ordinary letter, there would often be a prayer of thanks, as often in Pauline letters (see Romans 1:8-15 or 1 Corinthians 1:4-9). John instead (vv 5-6) presents a doxology, offering honor to Jesus as the one who has “saved us from sin by his blood.” That Christ’s death offered atonement for sin is a common early Christian affirmation (e.g., Romans 3:25-27; Hebrews 9:23-28). To this our author adds another affirmation, that Christ has made his followers a “kingdom, priests serving his God and father.” This claim echoes an affirmation found in 1 Peter 2:5 and 9, which may be understood as fulfillment of a prophecy of Isaiah 61:6. Like so many other elements in the opening chapter, this affirmation will return as a central claim of the book. See 5:10; 12:10; 20:6.

Following the doxology, the visionary cites scripture (v 7). This is not a simple citation, but an amalgamation of Daniel 7:13, the Son of Man “coming with the clouds,” Zechariah 12:10, the vision of those who pierced him, a verse cited at John 19:37 about the crucified Christ, and Genesis 12:3 and 28:14, that the reference to “all the tribes of the earth.” The ultimate source of the message is made clear in the declaration of the “Lord God” in v 8, which picks up the description of God in v 4.

A Vision of the Son of Man

The author’s voice resumes and he gives a brief description (vv 9-11) of the circumstances of his composition. He was on the island of Patmos (v 9), a small island off the coast of Asia Minor, to which he has probably been exiled by local authorities on the mainland. On the Lord’s Day (v 10), presumably Sunday, he had a vision, “in the spirit,” heard the sound of a trumpet and a command to send messages to the seven churches.

That our author had some sort of visionary experience is entirely likely. In this regard he would not be different from other early Christians, such as Paul, who spoke about his own visions, while criticizing those who relied on them (2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Translating that experience into the written word of this text no doubt involved more than ecstatic rapture. As we shall continue to see, there is considerable artistry in the author’s weaving of allusions to various scriptural traditions throughout the book.

The heart of the general message to the Churches is a description of the author’s vision of the Son of Man (vv 12–16). The richly symbolic image of the Son of Man considerably embellishes the simple image of the classical text depicting the Son of Man, Daniel 7:13. That passage, which will be enormously significant for the whole of Revelation, described a dream vision in which the seer saw four world empires that had oppressed Israel, each represented by a beast. After the beasts were eliminated, one like a “human being” (i.e., an “offspring of man” rather than an “offspring of a beast”) was enthroned before the “Ancient of Days,” clearly an image for God. The visionary in Daniel soon provided an interpretation of the vision, which referred to the “people of the holy ones of the most high” (Daniel 7:27), i.e., the people of Israel, who would be liberated from the oppressive rule of the Seleucid (Greek) kings of Syria. The Danielic text came to be understood as a Messianic prophecy, by some Jews and certainly by early Christians. Jesus himself may well have stimulated that interpretation by his use of the language of “Son of Man” to refer to himself. In any case, in his prophetic comments about coming woes (Mark 13:26; Matt 24:30; Luke 21:27) and in the account of his trial before the Sanhedrin

(Mark 14:62; Matt 26:64) the gospels report that he used the term, and obvious imagery from Daniel to refer to his future coming in power.

John's embellishment of the image of the Son of Man involves elements from other prophetic sources, such as Zechariah 4:2, which already appeared in v 4. The most striking adaptation, however, involves elements from Daniel itself. The description of the Son of Man's white hair and clothing (v 14) evokes Daniel again, but not Daniel's description of his Son of Man. Rather, the imagery is that of the "Ancient of Days," Daniel's symbol of God. John has, in effect closely identified Father and Son in this vision; in a way that recalls the strong affirmation of the divinity of Christ in the Gospel of John (John 1:1-2).

A further important embellishment appears in v 16, where a "sharp, two-edged sword" emerges from the Son of Man's mouth. This is probably an allusion to Isaiah 49:2, where the prophet described his prophetic vocation: "The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword." This rather surreal image serves an important function in Revelation's portrait of Christ. The sword coming from the mouth refers physically to the prophet's tongue, but metaphorically to the sharp and pointed words that he has to say. In other words, the sword that the Son of Man wields on his heavenly throne is connected with the role of Jesus as the "faithful witness" (1:5). The same "swift sword" is the weapon that the triumphant warrior Messiah will wield in his final appearance at 19:15.

The visionary falls in awe of the sight of the Son of Man (v 17), who proceeds to tell him, in the words Yahweh spoke to Israel (Isaiah 44:2; Zechariah 9:9), "Do not be afraid." The Son of Man then describes what he has and does. These descriptions will reappear in the detailed messages.

Messages to Individual Churches

The pattern in each of the messages is the same. The message is addressed to the "angel" of each church, presumably its guardian spirit. The source of the message is identified using an element of the description of the Son of Man and then something is said about the characteristics of the church. Each message concludes with a summons to hear the prophetic word and a promise to "the victor."

Some messages highlight local landmarks, such as the reference to "Satan's throne" in Pergamum, probably a reference to the altar of Zeus set high on the acropolis of that important city. The heart of each message is the reference to the behavior of

the church. Often there is a balance of positive and negative judgments, as in the case of Ephesus, congratulated for its “patient endurance” (2:2), but chided for falling away from “the love you had at first” (2:4). Most interesting perhaps for assessing the situation of the visionary John are references in these messages to other people or communities in the environment of the churches. These are usually veiled and therefore often more tantalizing than informative. Such for instance is the reference to the “Nicolaitans” in Ephesus (2:6) and Pergamum (2:15), probably another group of followers of Jesus who have a different approach to some matter of belief or practice.

Somewhat more definite are the references to Jews, such as the “synagogue of Satan” in Smyrna (2:9) and in Sardis (3:9). The visionary claims that these “say that they are Jews and are not.” Some readers have taken this jibe at face value and identify the opponents as Gentiles, who have embraced Jesus and who claim to be Jews, but do not practice circumcision or keep kashrut. Others understand these opponents to be traditional Jews, but who in the author’s estimation are not “real” Jews because they do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. Either scenario is possible.

Yet another group is symbolically labeled “those who hold to the teaching of Balaam,” referring to the opponent of the Israelites (Numbers 31:16) or a prophetess, “Jezebel” in Thyateira (2:20). The visionary’s contemporaries taught that it is permissible to “eat food sacrificed to idols” and to “practice fornication” (2:14; 2:20). These issues echo the problems that Paul had with his Corinthian congregation, who apparently thought that followers of Jesus enjoyed considerable sexual freedom (1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:15-20), and thought that eating meat sacrificed to idols was a matter of indifference (1 Corinthians 8:1-6). The object of John’s ire may well have been people in the Pauline tradition.

Perhaps a more pervasive problem is represented by the church of Laodicea, a community that is “neither cold nor hot” (3:15), a church that perhaps lacks the ardor of its first enthusiasm for the vision of a Messianic kingdom. A similar problem seems to affect the community at Sardis which has “a name of being alive, but you are dead” (3:1).

However the details of the visionaries criticized are interpreted, the messages to the seven churches tell of a situation of religious competition, disputes about claims to be the authentic heirs of Israel’s prophetic tradition, and a flagging enthusiasm for this brand of Messianism. This is the situation that Revelation attempts to address,

all the while trying to reassure those who remain faithful, those who “conquer,” that their hopes are not in vain.

Focus Text: Rev 1:9-20; 2:1-11

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org