

The Book of Revelation

Letters to the Seven Churches (chpts. 1-3)

Prologue:

Many people struggle with the basics of the Book of Revelation. Ironically, like most of the books of the Bible, Revelation explains how a person ought to interpret the book in its introduction: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what it written in it” (1:3). Therefore, before proceeding deeper into Revelation, let us spend some time exploring the introductory notes.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ”

These opening five words were also the original title of the Book. Like the 5 books of Law – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – many writings of the ancients contained their titles in the first words of the book. The word “revelation” is slightly misleading. Although better captured in English than its Greek equivalent “apocalypse”, it connoted an unveiling or revealing. Revelation’s main point is to reveal or unveil the mystery of Jesus the Christ. Not just an unveiling of the mystery of God but specifically the unveiling of the Risen Lord who conquered death and whose new life is beyond imagining. We must see this Book as the unveiling of the mystery of the Risen Lord since John will continue to imbue this book with the images of the Risen Lord.

John, the servant and prophet of God

The second part of the first verse and leading into the second verse explains the author of the text: John the servant and prophet of God. God gave this revelation, this text, this prophesy, to John as a way of encouraging and warning the disciples about what is going to happen, namely the revealing of God to the nations. The “sending of an angel” connotes that God is sending his messenger (Greek: angelos or angel) to both take John into the Heavenly Realm but also as the vehicle through which the message is given. From the message of this angel, John reports all that he saw and was given. This book is not John’s speculation on the mystery of God nor it is his work of literary mastery on the subject. This book contains the messages that God wants spoken to the world.

Witness:

The word “witness” will dominate the Book as the descriptor for the faithful. The word “witness” in Greek literally means martyr. Therefore those who are being martyred and also those who are standing firm and also those who are enduring are all witness to the message of Jesus, to his Resurrection, and to the new life to come. We must see all these connotations of the word “witness” come together at each moment in the Book of Revelation.

Soon:

The last major theme in the introduction is the idea of “soon”. Two phrases emphasize and clarify the importance of the immediacy of this text: “To show his servants what must happen

soon” (1:1) and “for the appointed time is near (1:3).” We cannot dismiss that John nor God intended for this message to become an afterthought or a guide to the future, compare to Daniel. The vast majority of this book has an imminent feel; all the messages contained in this book are going to happen very soon.

How should we react to this book?

I opened with the third verse of the prologue as the guide for answering this question. Yet, I want to spend a little time further addressing this point. The first command of the prologue is to “read” the messages. The NAB translation states to “read aloud.” This additional word was added to emphasize the change in culture between the 1st century and the 21st century. In the 1st century all the books of the Bible were read aloud in the presence of the community since most people could not read. We also should listen attentively when Scripture is read *aloud* during Mass so that we may “heed its message.” The second command is to listen. The process of listening and the command to listen dominates the Old Testament. The process of listening is strongly connected with obedience and, more specifically, to obedience to God. Therefore by listening to the message of this book we are practicing obedience to God. Lastly we are commanded to heed its message. Not to think of it allegorically or metaphorically but to understand in these messages a challenge and a realization of what we ought to do.

The Letters to the Seven Churches (1:4—3:22)

“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne” (1:4)

We may recognize the first half of this greeting as the same words that St. Paul uses to address the communities he writes to in his letters. The greeting of grace and peace was a common way of both starting a letter but also of greeting people in the ancient world. But the ending of this greeting is odd. John adds to the greeting the “seven spirits before his throne.” The addition of this phrase tells the listener that John is not the author of these messages but the one who is seated on the throne, Jesus. The seven spirits refer to the seven gifts of wisdom prophesized of the Messiah by Isaiah 11:2-3 and Zechariah 4 as the depiction of his power. Therefore we know that God, or Jesus, is the author of this text and not John.

The next chunk of the introduction clarifies Jesus as the author and includes additional descriptors of Jesus: “the faithful witness,” “the firstborn from the dead,” “the ruler of the kingdom of the earth.” These descriptors are commonly used through the New Testament to clarify what Jesus has done and emphasize his role and our role in salvation: He leads the way, he opened the door to heaven, he is the ruler of the earth. The final verse of this introduction continues to describe Jesus as the “alpha and the omega” and “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.” The final part has already been used and will be used multiple times. The title for Zeus, the Greek god, was the “one who is and who was and who is come,” but John adds “the almighty” to clarify that Jesus is not a Greek god but more powerful and above them all. The “alpha and the omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet symbolizing the beginning and the end.

The introductory chunk ends with a quotation from the Book of the Prophet Daniel. The Books of Daniel, Zechariah, Zephaniah, and Isaiah will dominate Revelation. What Daniel predicted to be in the distant future, John tells us is coming soon. What Daniel assumed would be after the age of the messiah, has now come to pass. John wants to ensure his readers understand that the prophecies of Old have been fulfilled.

The First Vision

This first vision of John explains the purpose in writing the text, the purpose of the next three chapters, and who is receiving this text. According to 1:9-10 John was exiled from the Roman empire for preaching the message of Jesus. While in exile on Patmos, which is 40 miles off the coast of Ephesus, he receives the following vision. Most likely John was exiled during the reign of Domitian and then released following his reign around 96 AD. Thus the message got disseminated.

The beginning of the vision

John was caught up, or taken up, in the spirit. This language is characteristic of prophetic visions. God is the source, the prophet sees, and the people receive the recount of their vision. The three main points of this introduction are the spirit, the voice, and the trumpet. The spirit is the Spirit of Jesus who is the author of these visions. The voice is the voice of God who speaks the words to John and tells him what to write and how to respond to the visions. The trumpet is the announcement of God's presence like the trumpets in the desert in Exodus or Joshua.

The image that John receives is complicated. The first part is the seven gold lampstands. The lampstands represent several ideas. The first is the seven churches who are the light to the Gentile nations. The second is the throne of God where the seven lampstands reside indicated by the temple imagery in Exodus and 2 Chronicles. The third is the nature of God who holds the fulness of the spirit and is the anointed one with the spirit. The phrase "one like the Son of Man" is used only one other time in Scripture by Daniel to describe his vision of God. God is always described as "one *like* the Son of Man." Not as human or resembling a human but something beyond human. The "ankle-length robe" was the traditional attire of the high priest. Normal people would wear knee length robes so that they were more mobile. The high priest didn't need to be mobile but sedentary therefore he wore the more extravagant lengthy robe. The gold sash represents his authority. Later in Revelation the angels will wear gold sashes. Normally only kings would wear gold or sashes thus this person is kingly. White hair represents age and wisdom as someone who has lived a long time and has accumulated great wisdom and knowledge. The fiery eyes or eyes like a furnace represents that he can see through the times and peoples and make a judgement. Feet as polished bronze represents authority and steadiness. The voice like rushing water represents power in his speech like water crashing against the rocks.

The Seven Churches

Each of the letters to the Seven churches contain the same basic structure and messages with each message written to the specific needs of each church.

Structure:

1. Greeting using a title or descriptor for Jesus, the author of the letter
2. A Chastisement or affirmation
3. The encouragement or remedy for the situation
4. The final conclusion

Each of the letters ends with the same message: “Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This conclusion is deeply prophetic in tone. All the prophets emphasized the importance of hearing God’s message and responding to it. Therefore hearing is essential, as stated in the introduction (1:3) to understanding and being faithful to God. Also, the words are not addressed to the specific church but in general reminding us that these messages are not for the specific churches but for everyone. The idea of the universality of the messages is further emphasized by the number seven, which indicates the completeness or the wholeness of the church. These messages are for everyone and we must heed the rebukes contained within them.

Repentance is the main theme of these letters. Each church will need some level of repentance or return to Jesus in order to be saved. Therefore each letter will emphasize some way in which they have fallen from the original message and need to return to it.

Ephesus

The city of Ephesus was the capital of the Asian cities. Having both wealth and prestige, it was the mid-point between Jerusalem and Antioch and Rome and the East. Therefore starting with the city of Ephesus is not a surprise. The city boasted a population of 200,000 and was considered the capital of the east.

The description of Jesus as the one holding the seven stars in his right hand and walking amidst the seven lampstands shows his power and authority. He is the ruler of all not the Roman government. He will have the last judgment not the cities of the world. Therefore, be aware! Ephesus is praised for its rejection of false teachings and for remaining faithful to Christian worship. In the pagan land of Ephesus it would be very challenging to oppose the sacrifices in the temple and thus oppose the government. Similarly, many Jews of the city are trying to seduce the people by teaching them false doctrines and keeping them from the truth of the faith, and the Ephesians have rejected them. But Ephesus struggles with one problem: they have done what is right but they don’t love God anymore. Therefore Jesus challenges the Ephesians to return to the love they once had. They need to remember Jesus’ deeds and words and return to praise him for them. Those who do get to eat from the Tree in the Garden, the Tree from Eden, the Tree of life and live forever. The Nicolaitans were a group of people that taught that eating sacrificed meat and participating in the pagan sacrifices was acceptable to Christians.

Smyrna

As we move from church to church, the route the letters take go west, north, and lastly south east making a circle around modern day Turkey. Smyrna was a wealthy trade city located on the western coast of modern Turkey. They boasted of their great wealth and long-standing ties with Rome. Rome built the first temple to the goddess Roma and began the worship of the emperor

Tiberius in this city, Thus Smyrna became the center of the imperial cult where they worshiped the emperor.

Jesus is the one who died and is now alive representing a church that was once dead and needs to come to life again. Smyrna suffers from serious tribulations and poverty caused by the “slanderers”. These “slanderers” were probably Jews who felt compelled to turn in these Christians for their disobedience to the Empire. The Romans gave the Jews the freedom to not sacrifice to idols or worship the statues of the gods and emperors. The same grace was not given to the Christians. Instead the Jews expelled them from their synagogues and reported them to the Roman authorities. This led to great hostility between Jews and Christians. The phrase “assembly of Satan” refers to the Roman gods. The Christians considered the statues and practices of the Romans to be demonic and therefore called these practiced Satanic. What’s Jesus message? Endure. The theme of endurance will run through the rest of the book and become the dominant message to all those who wish to be faithful. To the one who endures, he will not be subjected to the final death or the death at the end of the age or hell.

Pergamum

Pergamum is located north of Smyrna and 15 miles inland. This city became the capital of all pagan worship for the Roman Empire. They boasted some of the most grand temples and several cultic centers. The Christians in Pergamum are praised for the faith and steadfastness they once had, but things have changed. Part of living the life of a Roman citizen was to sacrifice to the idols or to eat the meat sacrificed to idols. In addition to the sacrifices, many of the cultic acts included sexual immorality: cultic sexual acts and homosexual acts. The Christians of Pergamum, although somewhat faithful, are engaging in the common practices of the Roman citizens. The example is the story of Balaam and Balak from Numbers. Balak encouraged Balaam to curse the Israelites so that he could be successful in invading and conquering them. It didn’t work. Balaam could only bless them on account that God protected them. The Nicolaitians were a group of Christians that taught that it was okay to engage in Roman cultic acts. The gift for faithfulness: the hidden manna, the food that fully sustains or the Eucharist, the white amulet or stone, which grants admittance to the heavenly kingdom, and the new name, the name of Jesus or the new identity as the chosen of God.

Thyatira (Thai-a-tye-ra)

Although the least significant of all the cities mentioned, Thyatira was a manufacturing hub of the Roman Empire creating metal working, clothes production, and shoes. These guilds were the main center of the city and not simply craftsmen but sources of religious worship. Each guild had its own deity and cultic practices which were necessary as part of the guild. The chief god of the city was Apollos, as opposed to the normal choice of Zeus. Thus Jesus announces himself as the Son of God, in contrast to Apollo, and describes himself like Apollo but greater, the one who rules the sun. The Christians in Thyatira are trying to follow the message of Jesus but are stuck in a system of pagan god worship. Jesus commends them for their effort but challenges them on their laxity. The example is Jezebel, the evil queen of Israel. Jezebel was a powerful woman during the reign of Ahaz. Ahaz didn’t want to be king but a book worm. Jezebel took over the

administration of Israel and signed many documents and made many pronouncements in Ahaz's name including the seizure of land, the destruction of all the worship of God and his prophets, and the introduction and solidification of Baal worship. Thus the Christians of Thyatira are becoming corrupt like Jezebel. Those who stand firm in God's teaching will be powerful and rule like him. They will overcome these pagan rulers and rule them.

Sardis

Heading southeast from Thyatira we reach the impregnable city of Sardis. For many centuries Sardis was considered impregnable due to its location atop a hill. Twice in its history it was conquered. Sardis is also one of the major trading cities of the Roman Empire. The Jewish community was strong in Sardis and boasted on their elaborate and beautiful Synagogue. The Sardonians lived a life of ease and luxury. The Christians boasted much the same luxury through their beautiful liturgies, many converts, and ease of living in the Roman Empire. This ease led to severe laxity and as Jesus calls it "you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." The wise one, the one who holds the seven spirits of wisdom, sees through to their hearts and knows their intentions. He warns them to be watchful and not lax, a pun on the city. The city is considered impregnable and the Christians think their faith cannot be shaken or breached like the city. Thus they have "soiled" their own garments with the filth of the vibe of the city. Those who wear white garments are the faithful ones. Those who heed and follow the message will be victors, will be dressed in white, will share Jesus' name, and will be acknowledged in Heaven.

Philadelphia

The Church of Philadelphia is one of two churches in this list who is given only praise, the other being Sardis. Another of the commercial hubs, the main issue in Philadelphia is the Jewish community who has excluded the Christians from their synagogue. The main core of the message to the Philadelphian church is to stay strong. Jesus is the Lord of all and the one who open and closes doors, a throw back to Isaiah 22:22 where the steward of the king is challenged on misconduct and therefore removed from his post. Jesus encourages the church to remember that the Jews don't control the kingdom, Jesus does. Images like the "key of David" and "the one who closes and opens doors" remind us of this theme. The one who stands firm against this persecution will have a pillar in the temple of God. Literally will be exalted as one who has witnessed to Jesus. Think of the hall of fame as an example.

Laodicea

The city of Laodicea is situated between two very prosperous and important cities. Hierapolis in the north is known for its healing hot springs and Colossae in the east is known for its cold crisp waters. Since Laodicea has no source of water for its own, it pipes water from Hierapolis which makes the water lukewarm. Laodicea is known for its market district made of marble columns that stretch the entire length of the city. As a prosperous merchant city, the people have no want and have begun adopting the practices of the Romans. Furthermore, not only adopting but teaching that adoption, tolerance of the Roman practices, and laxity of the faith is acceptable. Jesus warns them that he will vomit them out for their laxity. If they do not change their ways, he will remove them from the Temple and prevent them from the heavenly kingdom.