

# **The All-Important Introduction To Revelation**

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How many times have we opened a book and read every single word from cover to cover? Introductions, prefaces, forwards, acknowledgements, notes from the author, dedications, and copyright pages are sadly neglected, opening sections of most books. Most readers consider them to be extraneous, pointless, time- and paper-wasting additions to otherwise interesting volumes. This seems to be especially true of nonfiction books and certainly of more technical works.

However, bibliophiles will scream that ignoring these vital early sections is tantamount to sacrilege! Think, they would say, about all the necessary information that is being passed over! Sure, the innards of the book are where all the really fascinating material is, but the introductory material sets the tone for the "good stuff."

For instance, say a young person was interested in a career working in the area of human genetics, a relatively new and rapidly expanding science, and one afternoon, he found a book on the subject at the local bookstore. He would be well-advised to scan the copyright page for the date of publication, since any work more than just a few years old would likely contain out-of-date information. It would also behoove him to check the credentials of the author, as well as those who worked with him in researching, composing, and checking the text. The introduction, perhaps by a different author, might give him a needed perspective on the author and his aims, the scope of the work, and the relevance of the material to the young person's area of interest. What he finds in these opening sections of the book could spell the difference between a satisfied customer and a career boost or a disappointed youngster and poorer to boot!

The introductory material of some of the books of the Bible is just as important—and this is doubly true of the book of Revelation. As students of God's Word, especially when we are delving into prophecy, we are often impatient to get to the "good stuff" a few chapters into the book. However, if we skip the material that lays the vital groundwork for what comes later, our understanding, accuracy, and application will probably suffer for it. We would do well to remember that not one of God's words is irrelevant!

Many of us skip the first chapter of Revelation to get to the tantalizing and meaty Letters to the Seven Churches in chapters 2 and 3, but this is a mistake. Revelation 1 contains all the setup information a reader needs to begin to understand those letters and everything beyond—the description of God's throne, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the 144,000, etc. A little time sacrificed to mine the riches of chapter one will pay nice dividends.

## **The Introduction**

A good place to start is at the beginning. Verse 1 opens the book with the words, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." This is the book's real title, not what the Greeks titled it, *Apokalypsis Ioannou*—"The Revelation of John." In a sense, the apostle John is merely a witness or observer of the visions and sayings that we find within these twenty-two chapters, one who faithfully wrote them down for the instruction, preparation, and edification of the church (verse 2).

*Apokalypsis* means "unveiling," "disclosure," or "revelation," which is just the opposite of what most people suppose it means. The book is not intended to be a collection of arcane prophecies, mysteries, symbols, and warnings, but an uncovering of knowledge about "things which must shortly take place." As verse 1 maintains, the Father gave the contents of Revelation to Jesus Christ, who as Head of the church passed them on to His disciples through John, so that they would have all the facts that God allowed about the immanent future. God does not desire the book of Revelation to be a frustrating, impenetrable enigma, but as a gift of His grace, a sharing of privileged information.

Adding to this, verse 3 pronounces a blessing on those "who [read] and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it." This verse is similar in form to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11, and in fact, it is the first of seven beatitudes in the book (see also Revelation 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). This blessing falls not on those who only read or hear what is written in the book, but on those who also "keep" or heed it. Revelation is full of exhortations to belief and action—God wants His unveiling to spur us to obedience and to a closer relationship with Him. The thrust of Revelation is not necessarily on knowing what is coming but on being prepared for it when it comes, which is accomplished by conforming to God's instructions.

The final words of the benediction convey the motivation for responding to Revelation's warning: ". . . for the time is near." In just the first three verses, then, the idea of imminence has already appeared twice (see also "shortly take place" in verse 1). Our Savior wants the reader to catch a sense of urgency immediately. Elsewhere, biblical authors use similar wording—"soon," "quickly," "at hand," "the time is short"—to give the suggestion of proximity without being precise. Evidently, God feels that the best Christians are fashioned in an atmosphere of expectancy. This is reminiscent of Jesus' almost paradoxical remark in Matthew 24:44: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect Him."

The five subsequent verses comprise an extended greeting to the seven churches in Asia (later specifically named in verse 11, as well as in chapters 2 and 3). As the human author of the book, John includes himself as a sender of the greeting, but the bulk of it reemphasizes the *real* authors: God the Father, shown as eternal and sovereign, and Jesus Christ, extolled as "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth" (verse 5).

John ensures that we understand that Jesus is the same One who exhibited His love for us by sacrificing Himself for the forgiveness of our sins and made possible our future glorification (verses 5-6). In verse 8, he carries the identification even farther by quoting Jesus' own words: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,' says the Lord, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" Lest we misunderstand, John makes certain that there is no doubt that Jesus is the Lord<sup>1</sup> of the Old Testament, the first and the last (Isaiah 44:6; 41:4), the Almighty<sup>2</sup> God, who "declar[es] the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure'" (Isaiah 46:10). This extensive greeting certifies, not only that the prophecy has its source in God, but also that it *will* come to pass.

The greeting also includes "from the seven Spirits who [or *which*] are before [the Father's] throne" (verse 4), a quite controversial phrase. Commentators are divided among four interpretations, which can be summarized as angelic, symbolic, mystical, and Trinitarian. Understandably, the Trinitarian view—that "the seven Spirits" identifies a so-called Third Person of the Trinity—has the support of most Catholics and Protestants. Their primary reason centers on the fact that this phrase appears between greetings from God the Father and God the Son. They contend that this phrase refers to the sevenfold<sup>3</sup> description of the Spirit of the Lord in Isaiah 11:2.

The book of Revelation itself identifies the seven Spirits as equivalent to the Lamb's "seven eyes, which are . . . sent out into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6). These "seven eyes" probably allude to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:10, where they are shown to be "upon the stone," a symbol of the Branch or Messiah, and directly described as "the eyes<sup>4</sup> of the Lord which scan [or *rove*<sup>5</sup>] to and fro throughout the whole earth." In addition, Revelation 3:1 states Christ "has [or *possesses*] the seven Spirits of God," and Revelation 4:5 calls them "seven lamps of fire . . . burning before the throne."

This may indeed be a description of the Holy Spirit, not as a "Person" somehow divided into seven parts, but as a seven-branched conduit of God's communication to the seven churches mentioned earlier in the verse. Thus, John includes "the seven Spirits" as a source of the prophecy to specify how it was imparted to the seven churches. The apostle Paul pens a similar greeting in II Corinthians 13:14, in which he writes of "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit," meaning that God's Spirit is the means by which Christians can have a relationship with God.

## The Setting

The apostle John identifies himself as the human author and witness of the Revelation three times in the first nine verses (verses 1-2, 4, 9). He humbly calls himself God's "servant" (*doulos*, "bond-slave"), not even titling himself an apostle. In verse 9, he adds that he is "both your brother and companion in tribulation and the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." He claims no special prominence or distinction; in his own mind, he is just a "regular guy" enduring the same trials in his walk to God's Kingdom as any other Christian. These few details are surprisingly more information than John normally includes about himself in either his gospel or his three epistles.

Traditionally, the book of Revelation has been ascribed to the apostle John, son of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:20; 13:23; 20:2), and no creditable argument has been put forward to dispute his authorship. When it was written about AD 95, he would certainly have been a very old man, but by all accounts, the apostle John lived to be nearly 100 years old, dying a peaceful death in the area of Ephesus sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (ad 98-117).

John informs us that he "was on the island that is called Patmos" (Revelation 1:9), a small, rocky Aegean island just west of due south from Ephesus, employed as a prison or place of exile by the Roman emperors. Most prisoners were required to work the quarries and mines on the island, but John's advanced age may have allowed him to avoid such backbreaking labor.

He writes that he was exiled there "for [because of] the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ," an indication that his preaching had come to the attention of the Roman authorities, and judgment had gone against him. It is likely that John had spoken against the emperor cult (the worship of the current Roman emperor as a god, a practice that reached its height under Domitian, AD 81-96), and his exile rather than execution can only be attributed to Jesus' prophecy of John not facing martyrdom (John 21:22). The apostle perhaps remained on Patmos for less than two years, as such exiles were routinely released upon the death of the emperor who had exiled them.

Some protestants and Catholics contend that John saw these visions on a Sunday because John writes that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10). This is merely an unfortunate misunderstanding due to the prevalence of unscriptural Sunday worship throughout Christendom. In Greek, this phrase reads *en teé Kuriakeé heeméra*, literally "on the belonging-to-the-Lord day."

Although it is different in construction to other instances of "the day of the Lord" in the New Testament, the meaning is the same. John is speaking not of the first day of the week,<sup>6</sup> but of the time of God's judgment known throughout the Old Testament as "the day of the Lord."

The apostle is giving the reader vital information about the time setting of his vision and thus the true application of the book of Revelation. Through the agency of God's Spirit, John received a vision of end-time events and related material that reveal to the church a unique understanding of the day of the Lord. Though couched in late first-century terms and allusions, Revelation is first and predominantly about the time of the end, when God through Christ will intervene in world affairs and establish His Kingdom on the earth. Most of its prophecies are only now beginning to be fulfilled or are still awaiting fulfillment in years just ahead. In a sense, the book of Revelation is as current as today's newspaper—even better, because we have it in advance!

### **The Revelator**

By far, the most important feature of Revelation 1 is its long description of the Revelator Himself, Jesus Christ. John wants to be sure that his readers—the members of God's church—realize, not only *who* is revealing the future to the church, but also just *how special* and *important* He is to us now. In a way, the apostle is adding a final chapter to his gospel, showing us the awesome glory, power, and eternal nature of our Savior in His present role as High Priest and Head of the church.

When John turns "to see the voice" (verse 12), he beholds "One like the Son of Man" (verse 13) standing amidst seven golden lampstands, later explicitly identified as the seven churches (verse 20). John sees a glorious Being who resembles his dear friend and Master, Jesus of Nazareth, but this Person is far beyond human. He is God, in many respects just as the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel describe Him from their visions (Daniel 10:5-6; Ezekiel 1:26-27). John sees Christ

. . . clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.  
(Revelation 1:13-16)

John had seen something like this in the past, and he recognized who it was immediately: "[Jesus] was transfigured before them, His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as the light" (Matthew 17:2). If anything, this vision had an even greater impact on John than the transfiguration did, causing him to fall "at His feet as dead" (Revelation 1:17), again as both Ezekiel and Daniel did (Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 10:8-9).

Laying His right hand on John (Revelation 1:17), perhaps in healing or in blessing, Jesus tells the aged apostle not to be afraid because "I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (verses 17-18). In less symbolic language, He says, "Relax, I am indeed the Eternal God, but I am also Jesus, your friend, whom you saw die and then rise from the dead. Look! This is what it is like to have eternal life! I now have all power over life and death." Though he remained astonished, what a comfort that must have been to John!

And he passes it on to us so that we, too, might have both comfort and faith in what Jesus commands him to write, the book of Revelation (verse 19). This final book of the canon is not the delusion of a senile old man on a sun-drenched Mediterranean isle, nor the deceptions of another, more sinister spirit whose aim is to distract and corrupt God's people. No, the book of Revelation is a direct communication from our Lord Himself, given in love for His sheep, especially for those whom He calls to face the turmoil and terror of that great day of God.

We have this confidence: that Jesus Christ has ascended to the Father, having fulfilled His every assignment and received all things; that He is "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth" (verse 5) and more besides; and that He will soon return to earth to set things straight (verse 7). In writing the introduction to his book this way, John has endowed us with the background information and the attitude we need to understand the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it (verse 3).

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## Endnotes

1 This is a direct allusion to the YHWH of Exodus 3:14. The Majority Text reads "Lord God," making the identification of Jesus with the God of the Old Testament even more certain. "Lord God" is used frequently in the prophetic books, especially Ezekiel.

2 This title is in Greek *ho pantokratôr*. In the Septuagint, it often translates the Hebrew title "Lord of Hosts" (II Samuel 5:10; Amos 3:13, etc.). It appears nine times in Revelation (Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22), and in each case, it highlights God's absolute control and authority.

3 However, there are only six descriptors in Isaiah 11:2, unless one counts "of the Lord" as the seventh.

4 The Hebrew word for "eyes" is *'ayin*. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* comments on this word: "The eye is used to *express* knowledge, character, attitude, inclination, opinion, passion, and response. The eye is a good barometer of the inner thoughts of man" (emphasis added). This word can also mean "spring" or "fountain," which are outflows of water. Thus, in Hebrew, the eyes are not receptive, as in English, but communicative or expressive, which argues for "the eyes of the Lord" and "the seven Spirits of God" being means of communication rather than gatherers of information.

5 According to *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, this Hebrew word, ???, has an interesting alternative meaning: "to deliver a message throughout the land (2 Sam 24:2,8)."

6 Sunday, the first day of the week, was never known in the true church as "the Lord's Day," for Jesus Himself says He is "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28), which is the seventh day.