

Revelation

Lesson #3

The Prologue, "What Was"

(1: 1-20)

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Review

To understand Revelation we learned in Lesson #1 that we must understand its historical and cultural context, but we also learned in Lesson #2 that Revelation did not suddenly appear at the end of the 1st century A.D. in a literary or theological vacuum; it is one of many works within the genre of apocalyptic literature, works that have their roots in the 7th century B.C.

And we learned in Lesson #2 that we must also understand the structural and the stylistic devices our author uses to bring his apocalyptic vision to life; how he creates the text's color, tone and texture.

Finally, we learned in Lesson #2 that if we are to engage Revelation as *educated readers of Scripture*, we must also understand the message our author intended to convey to his original audience. It is an urgent message: "Be watchful, for Christ is coming soon!"

John's message stresses the immediacy of the Lord's return, for John expected that he and his audience would witness personally Jesus' return in glory.

Preview

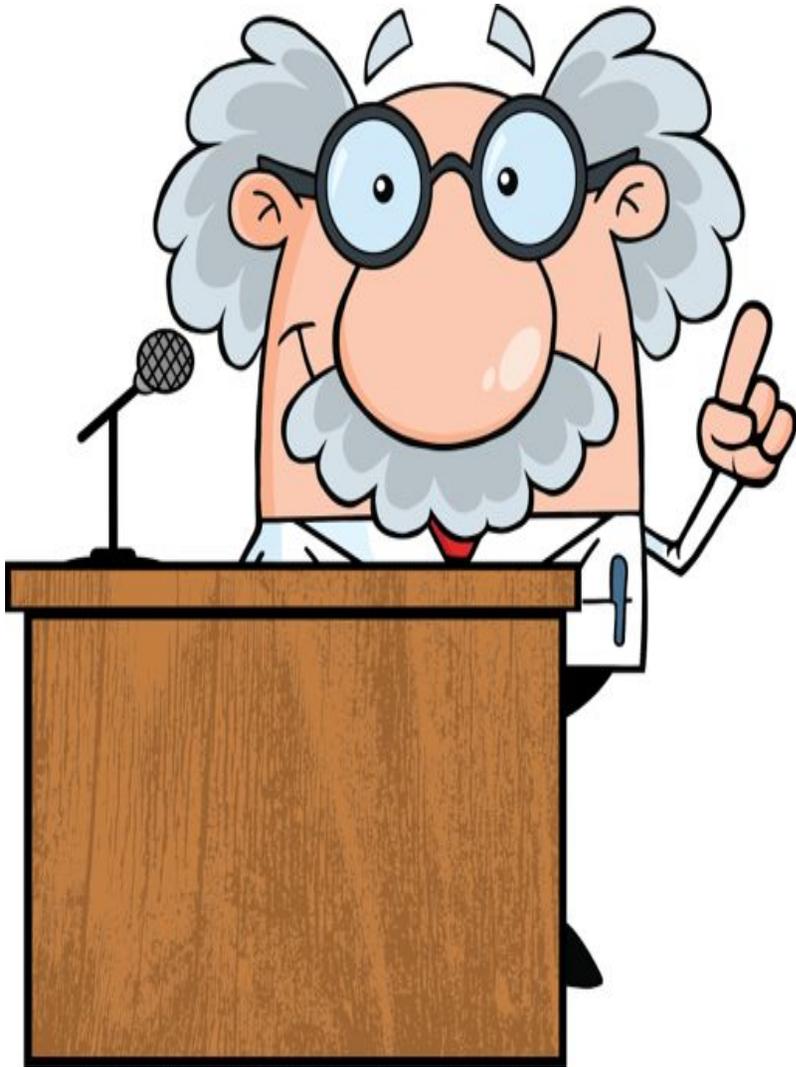
When the risen and glorified Christ says to John, “*Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards” (1: 19), he lays out the basic 3-part structure of Revelation: 1) what was (past, chapter 1); 2) what is (present, chapters 2-3); and 3) what will be (future, chapters 4-22).*

In Lesson #3 we focus on what was; that is, what prompted John to write Revelation to begin with.



Hieronymous Bosch. *St. John the Evangelist on Patmos* (oil on oak), c. 1489.
Gemäldegalerie: Berlin.

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As we enter the book of Revelation, it is the early to mid-90s, and our Apostle John has been exiled from Ephesus to the tiny island of Patmos, during the persecution under the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96).

There, John receives a vision of the risen Lord, who entrusts John with an urgent message of things that will take place soon . . .

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“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must take place soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.”

(1: 1-3)

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Wait just a minute, now. We're told in the opening lines of Revelation that the message is given by an angel to "John." But do we know for sure that this is our Apostle John?



Good question!

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That's very astute, for nowhere in Revelation does it actually say that the message is addressed to the Apostle John; it simply says "John"; nor are we given the date that "John" writes Revelation. So, here's the scoop:

- Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100-165) claims that "a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ" received the vision (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 81), and St. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130 – 202) claims it occurred "almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign" (*Against Heresies*, 5, 30, 3). Tradition builds on these two witnesses and consensus forms that the Apostle John was the author of Revelation and that he wrote his book around A.D. 95, as the persecution under Domitian reached its apex.

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- Our church historian Eusebius, however, quotes Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria (c. 233-265), who claims that “John of Patmos” could not be the Apostle John since John of Patmos mentions his own name in Revelation, but he never claims to be an apostle.
- Dionysius also observes that the rhetoric, language and style of Revelation differ markedly from John’s Gospel and the three epistles attributed to him (*History*, 7, 24.1 – 25.27).
- Many modern critics follow this line of thinking, arguing that the stylistic differences between John’s other writings and Revelation are so great that the Apostle John and Revelation’s author could not possibly be the same person.

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•Clearly, there are differences, but one could certainly argue that an author of the Apostle John’s skill—as we have observed it in his gospel and letters—can vary his style and rhetoric to accommodate conventions of the apocalyptic genre and to address his intended audience effectively.

•We see St. Paul do this dramatically in Romans (which is a formal argument, structured as a scholastic diatribe) and 1 & 2 Corinthians (which are epistles written in a very simple style and common language).

•Of course, this doesn’t *prove* that the Apostle John is our author, but for our purposes we’ll accept the traditional ascription to the Apostle, while keeping an open mind to other possibilities offered by ongoing scholarship.

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Fair enough!

Now, back to our text:

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“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must take place soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.”

(1: 1-3)

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- The opening word of our text is ἀποκάλυψις [a-po-ka'-lup-ses], literally the “unveiling” or “revealing” of a message that God gave to his Son, Jesus Christ to show us, his δούλος [do'-loss] “servants,” what must take place τάχος [ta'-khos] “soon.”

- ἀποκάλυψις is the “unveiling” of something previously unknown, and now known solely because of the “unveiling.”
- δούλος is John and his audience, Christ’s “servants.” The word is stronger than simply “servants”; “bond-servants” may be better, “slaves,” would be too strong. The word captures the sense *of total dedication*.
- τάχος is “soon,” with the emphasis on *immediacy*.

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Notice how this “unveiling” originated with God, who gave it to his Son Jesus for us, his servants, and the reason for God doing so was that we his people would be prepared for the events that would happen very soon.

The urgency in this opening verse is palpable. Like a man standing on the tracks and staring into the lights of an oncoming freight train, “what must happen” is hurtling toward us!

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must take place soon. **He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw.** Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.”

(1: 1-3)

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William Blake. *Angel of the Revelation* (watercolor, pen and black ink, over traces of graphite), c. 1803-1805. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Jesus conveyed the message to John through his ἄγγελος [an'-gel-os] “angel” or literally, “messenger.” We’ll actually see this angel face-to-face in 10: 9 and 22:1.

And John makes it clear to us that he will report accurately the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ that the angel gave to him.

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must take place soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. **Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.**”

(1: 1-3)

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- The “prophetic message” [λόγους τῆς προφητείας], or literally “words of the prophecy,” like an epistle addressed to a group of people, is meant to be *read aloud* to the audience by a lector, so John says, “*Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen,*” acknowledging the means by which the “revelation” will be delivered.

- The word μακάριος [mah-kah'-ree-os] “blessed” is the same word used by Matthew in the “beatitudes” of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5: 3-11). **This is the first of 7 “beatitudes” in Revelation** (1: 3; 14: 13; 16: 15; 19: 9; 20: 6; and 22: 7, 14).

- It is important, too, that those who read and listen also τηρέω [tay-ray'-o] “heed,” “attend to,” or “keep” what the prophecy says. Those who do will be “blessed.”

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John closes by once again emphasizing that *"the appointed time is near."* Verse 1 ended that way, and now verse 3 does, framing the 3-verse "prologue" with urgency.



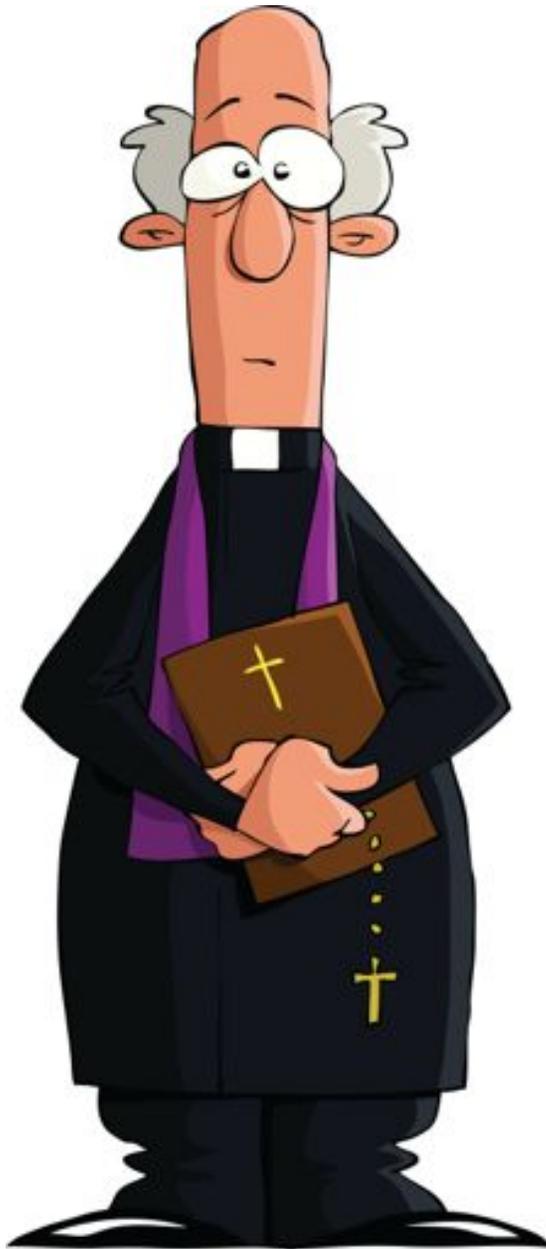
Wow! John does this so well!

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“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must take place soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.”

(1: 1-3)

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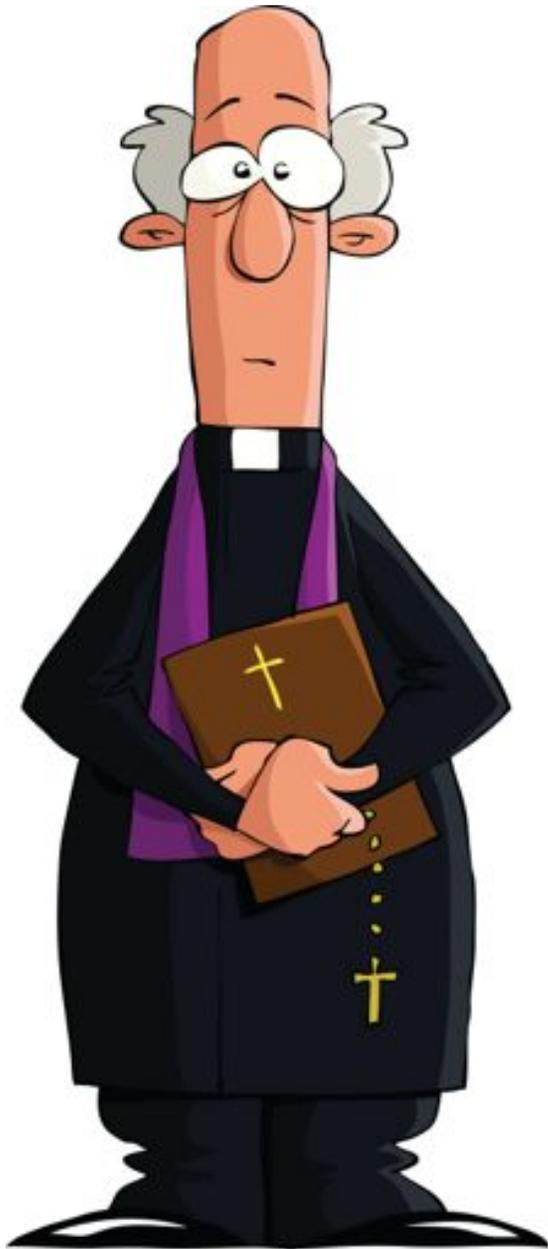
So in summary, John's opening emphasizes that the drama of redemption is about to conclude as the "end times" begin to unfold quickly.

God made this known to his Son, Jesus Christ, who dispatched an angel to tell John, who himself tells us by faithfully reporting the "unveiling" he is about to receive.

John's intention is to stir people into action with the knowledge that God's salvation and judgment is imminent.

Although John is writing for his audience at the end of the 1st century, we may well take heed also, for God's salvation and judgment may take place much sooner than we expect!

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When God tells John that our redemption will be “soon,” it is a way of bridging the gap between God’s point of view and ours.

We may think that we have a great deal of time between now and when we pass into eternity to render an account of our lives before “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5: 10); after all, as Moses says in Psalm 90, *“Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong”* (90: 10).

But we may pass into eternity before the day ends, so like Jesus’ parable of the “10 Virgins” we would do well to *“stay awake, for [we] know neither the day nor the hour”* (Matthew 25: 13).

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**Now we move on to the
2nd part of John's 3-part
prologue:**

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“John, to the seven churches in Asia: 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.

Behold, he is coming amid the clouds,
And every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.
All the peoples of the earth will lament him.
Yes. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.’”

(1: 4-8)



This is so rich! Where to begin?

First, notice how this section is built (as we might expect) on sets of 3s and 7s:

1 “John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace
I) from him **1)** who is and **2)** who was and **3)** who is to come,
and **II)** from the seven spirits before his throne, and **III)** from
Jesus Christ, **1)** the faithful witness, **2)** the firstborn of the dead
and **3)** ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who **1)** loves us
and has **2)** freed us from our sins by his blood, who has **3)**
made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him
be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.

2 Behold, **1)** he is coming amid the clouds,
And **2)** every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.
All **3)** the peoples of the earth will lament him.
Yes. Amen.

3 ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘the one
1) who is and **2)** who was and **3)** who is to come, the
almighty.’”



Very nice! This is part 2 of John's 3-part prologue. Part 1 consisted of 3 parts, framed by Christ's imminent return, expressed in "soon." Now, Part 2 consists of 3 parts, each of which has 3 sets.



And, of course, we have 7 churches and 7 spirits!

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• This section opens, much as an epistle would, with the name of the person who is writing and the person (or persons) to whom the writing is addressed:

“John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come [God the Father], and from the seven spirits before his throne [God the Holy Spirit], and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth [God the Son].”

(1: 4-5)

• The “seven spirits” are a symbol of the Holy Spirit and it is drawn from Zechariah 4, in which Zechariah has a vision of a golden lamp stand with seven lamps on it . . .

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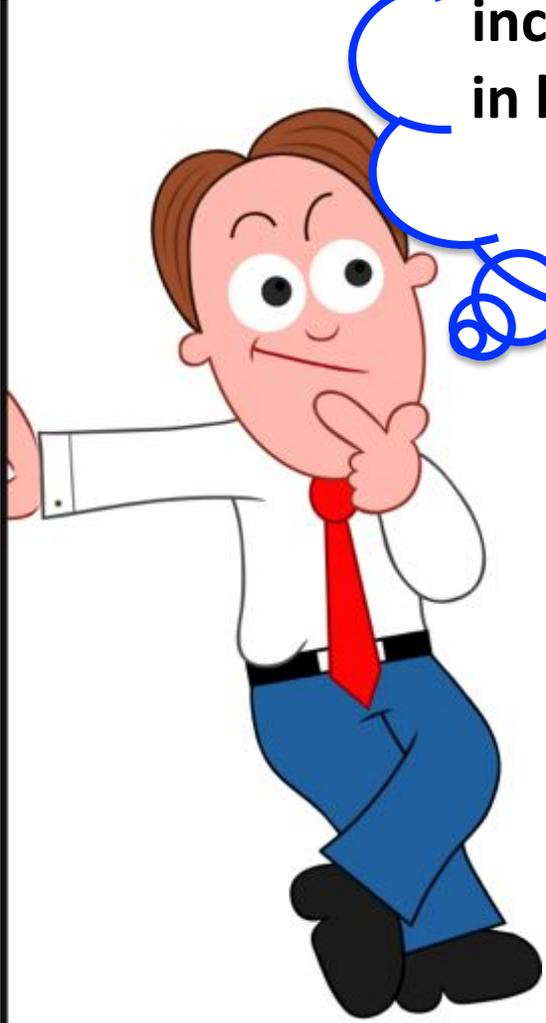


When the angel who presents the vision to Zechariah asks, *“Do you not know what these things are,”* Zechariah responds, *“No, my Lord”* (4: 5). The angel then explains, *“These seven are the eyes of the Lord that range over the whole earth.”* (4: 10); thus, John understands the “seven eyes” as representing God’s own spirit, the Holy Spirit.

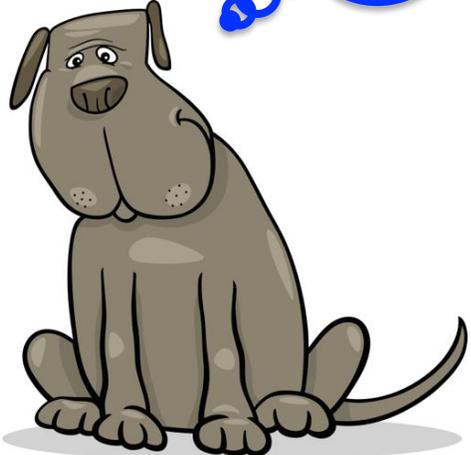
Likewise, when John sees in Revelation’s “unveiling” seven flaming torches in front of the throne of God (4: 5), he understands them as representing the Holy Spirit.

John then correlates the “seven spirits” with his vision of the slain lamb (Jesus, the lamb of God), when he sees on the lamb *“seven horns and seven eyes . . . the seven spirits of God sent out into the whole world”* (5: 6).

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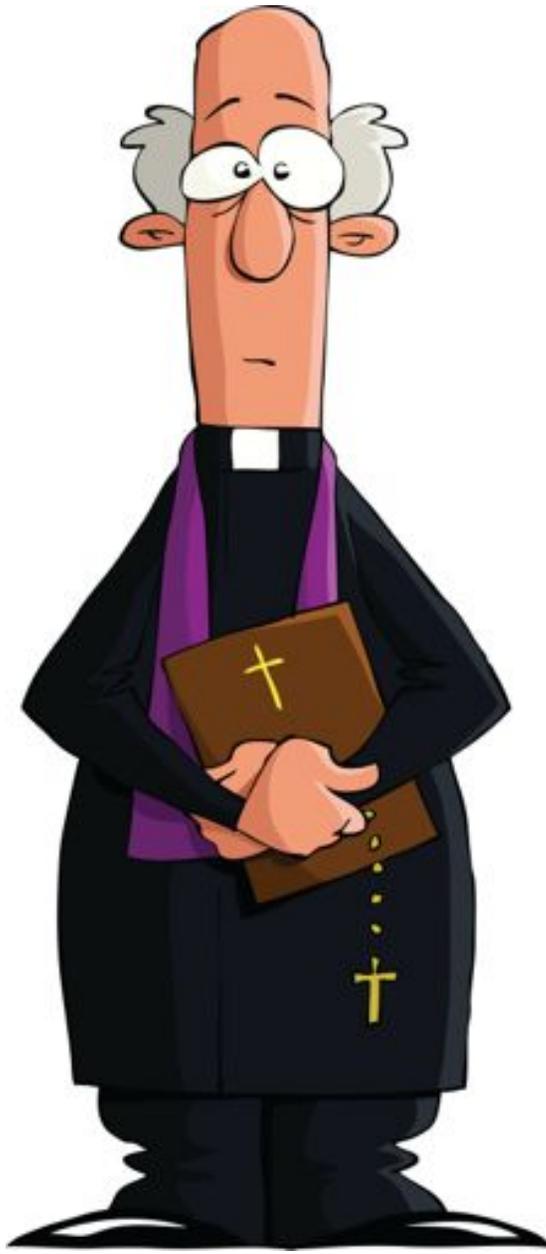


So, that explains why John includes the “seven spirits” in his Trinitarian blessing in 1: 4-5!



Slick!

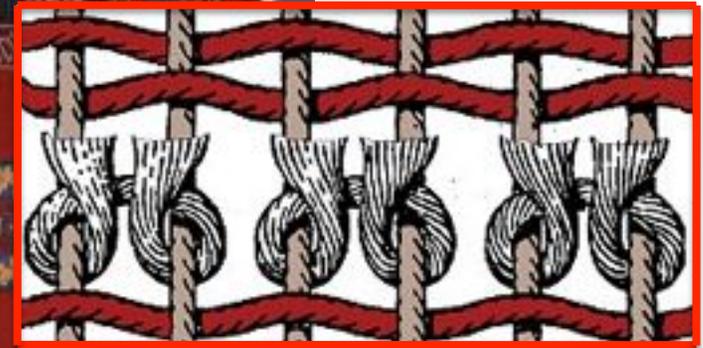
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Revelation contains more allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures than any other book in the New Testament, and to understand Revelation it is important to understand what those allusions are. We'll point out many of them as we make our way through John's visions.

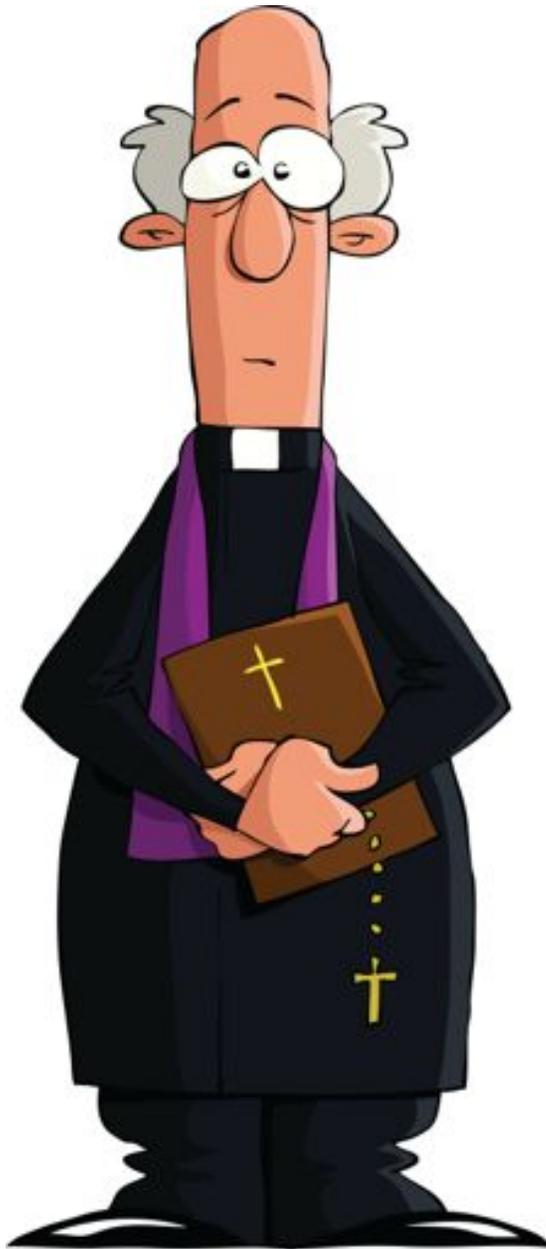
John seldom quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures; rather, he weaves allusions to them throughout his text. For John, Hebrew scriptural allusions are to Revelation what the double knots are to a hand-made, Turkish carpet; they are what hold the text tightly together.

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Turkish symmetrical double knots.

Hand-made, double-knotted Turkish Carpet (Konya Region, wool-on-wool), c. 1650-1750.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.



Here's an example of how John uses subtle allusions to deepen and tighten the fabric of his text. The "seven spirits" obviously draw upon Zechariah, as we've already seen, but they also draw more subtly upon the prophet Isaiah:

*"But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.*

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
a spirit of counsel and of strength,
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord,
and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord."*

(Isaiah 11: 1-3)

Since the 6th century A.D. the Church has traditionally viewed these seven attributes as the "gifts" of the Holy Spirit, and John subtly weaves them into his text.

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“John, to the seven churches in Asia: 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.

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All the peoples of the earth will lament him.
Yes. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.’”

(1: 4-8)



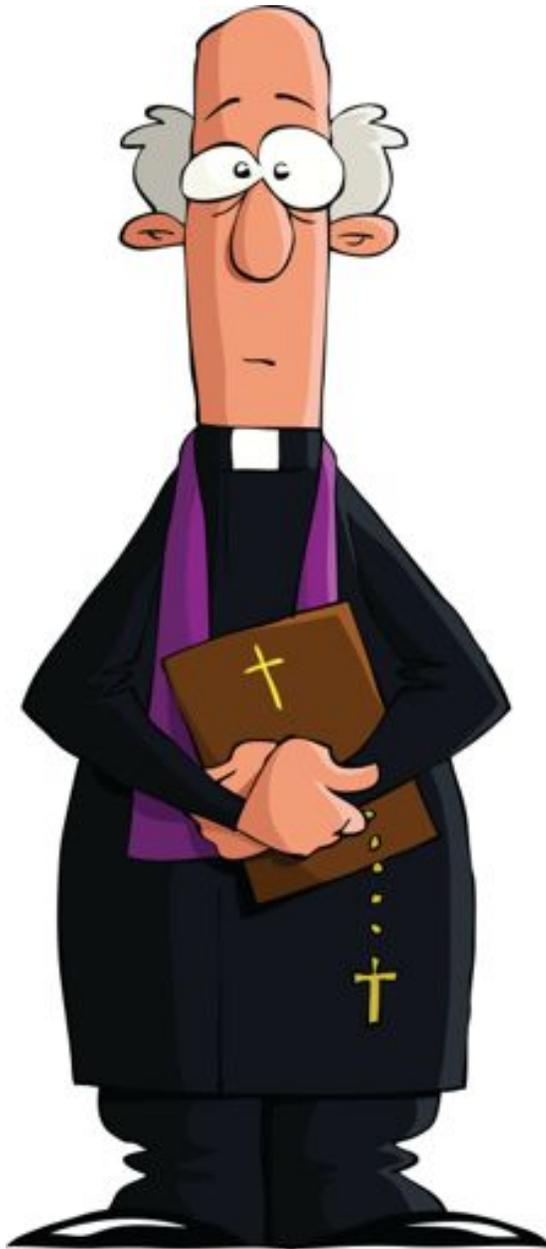
Salvadore Dali. *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (oil on canvas), 1951.
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

•As we continue, we have another quick allusion to the Hebrew scriptures, again from the prophet Zechariah, vividly linking the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures to the person and work of Christ:

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of mercy and supplication, so that when they look on him whom they have [pierced], they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and they will grieve for him as one grieves over a firstborn.”

(12: 10)

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Revelation understands the Hebrew prophets in light of what God has done in the person and work of Christ.

From John's perspective, the eschatological prophecies of judgment, salvation and a transformed world began to be fulfilled in Christ's incarnation and his crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

They will be completely fulfilled when Christ returns in glory.

“John, to the seven churches in Asia: 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, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.

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(1: 4-8)



• John ends this middle section of his prologue with Jesus saying, ***“I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.”***

• Alpha and omega (A and Ω), of course, are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the beginning and the end. Making the first and last letters of the alphabet a metaphor for Jesus also suggests that he is all the letters in between; that is, he is all that can be said.

• And notice, as the one who “is,” “was” and “is to come,” Jesus is eternal, mirroring the Trinity itself.



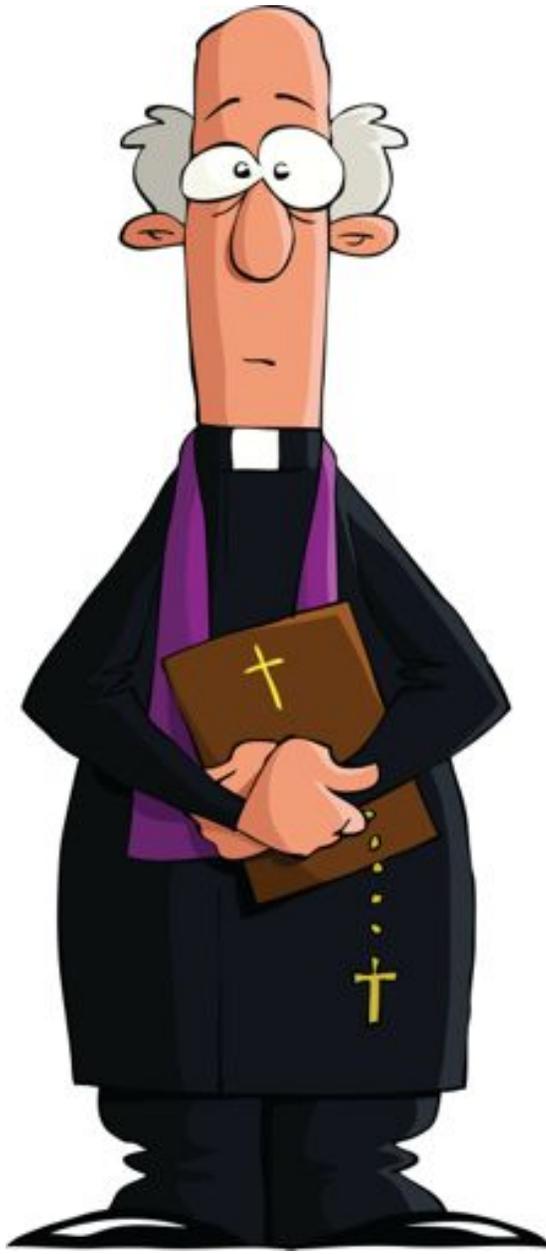
Now we move on to the final part of John's 3-part prologue:

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“I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus. I was caught up in spirit on the Lord’s day and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet, which said, ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.’”

(1: 9-11)

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Tradition holds that in the A.D. 80s and 90s the Apostle John was leader of the church in Ephesus, a church that St. Paul founded on his 3rd missionary journey, A.D. 54-57. As the last living Apostle, he was exiled during the persecutions under Domitian to the tiny island of Patmos, about 45 miles southwest of Ephesus in the Aegean Sea.

Here, in a cave, he received his revelation.

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“Cave of the Apocalypse,” Patmos, Greece.

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Mosaic above the “Cave of the Apocalypse,” Patmos, Greece.

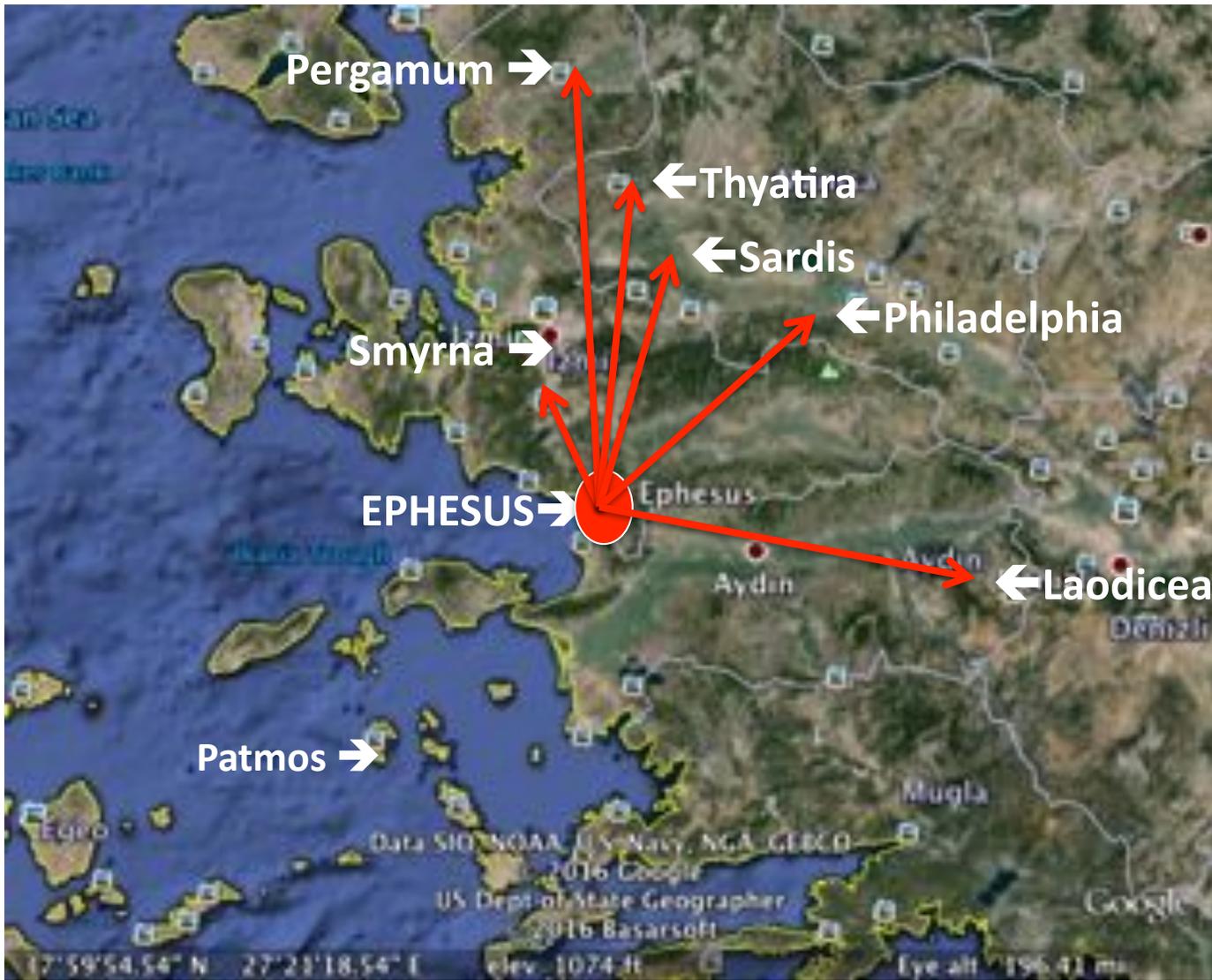
[The two figures are John and his disciple Prochoros (seated), who writes down John’s visions.]



John is to write down his visions and send them to seven churches in Asia Minor:

- 1. Ephesus**
- 2. Smyrna**
- 3. Pergamum**
- 4. Thyatira**
- 5. Sardis**
- 6. Philadelphia**
- 7. Laodicea**

We shall examine these churches in detail as the risen and glorified Christ dictates a letter to each in Revelation 2-4, with John acting as Jesus' scribe.



“Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, wearing an ankle-length robe, with a gold sash around his chest. The hair of his head was as white as wool or as snow, and his eyes were like a fiery flame. His feet were like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing water. In his right hand he held seven stars. A sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun at its brightest. When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead.”

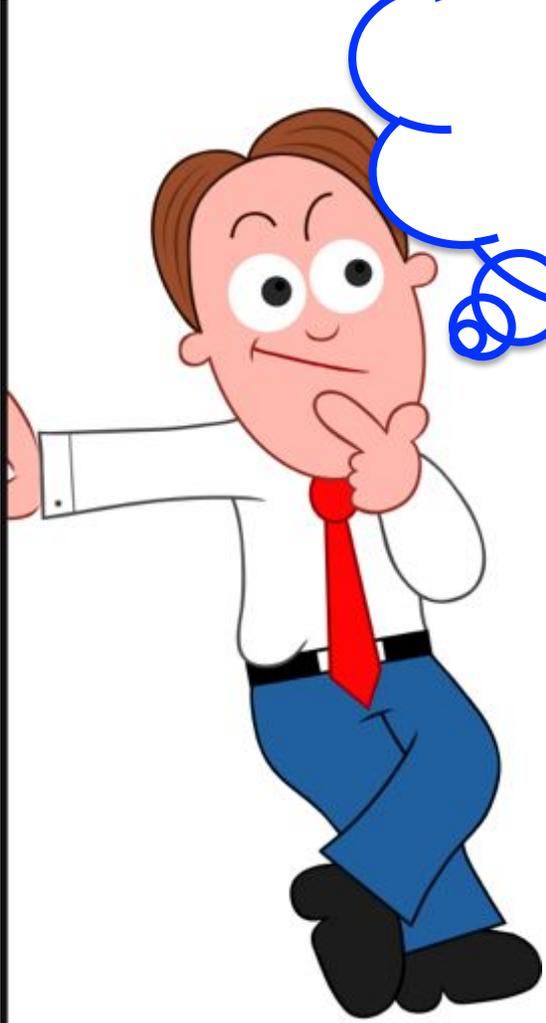
(1: 12-17a)

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**Holy cow!
Who's that?**

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I think we've seen this figure in Scripture before.



How could anyone forget him!

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**“As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming
with the clouds of heaven—**

One like a son of man.

**When he reached the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him,**

**He received dominion, splendor, and kingship;
all nations, peoples and tongues will serve him.**

**His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.”**

(Daniel 7: 13-14)



- Although the phrase “son of man” is used generically for “human being” in both Ezekiel and the Psalms, in Daniel it refers specifically to a unique figure who approaches the “Ancient of Days” (God the Father) and is given by God the Father “dominion, splendor, and kingship,” and “all nations, peoples and tongues” will serve and worship him.
- In the synoptic gospels, Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” in reference to himself, alluding directly to the figure in Daniel’s vision. For Jesus it is a self-referential term; no one else calls him “Son of Man,” only he does.
- The figure recurs in Daniel 10: 4-9—

“On the twenty-fourth day of the first month I was on the bank of the great river, the Tigris. As I looked up, I saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and the sound of his voice was like the roar of a multitude. I alone, Daniel, saw the vision; but great fear seized those who were with me; they fled and hid themselves, although they did not see the vision. So I was left alone to see this great vision. No strength remained in me; I turned the color of death and was powerless. When I heard the sound of his voice, I fell face forward unconscious.”

(Daniel 10: 4-9)

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This “Son of Man” is the exact figure we meet here in Revelation!

Daniel 10: 4-9



Revelation 1: 12-16

A man dressed in linen



a man wearing an ankle-length robe

A belt of fine gold around his waist



a gold sash around his chest

eyes were like fiery torches



eyes were like a fiery flame

arms and feet looked like burnished bronze



feet like polished brass

Voice like the roar of a multitude



voice like the sound of rushing water

Daniel “fell face forward unconscious”



John “fell down as though dead”



It's the very same person! In Daniel it is the *pre-incarnate Christ* who "unveils" the future to Daniel and then has Daniel seal up the scroll "until the time of the end" (Daniel 12: 4); in Revelation the *risen and glorified Christ* unseals the scroll to reveal to John "what must happen soon" (Revelation 1: 1).



Wow! It's the "Son of Man" throughout!

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**Yes it is. And now the
“Son of Man,” the risen
and glorified Christ gives
John his marching orders!**

“He touched me with his right hand and said, ‘Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld. Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards. This is the secret meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and of the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.’”

(1: 17b-20)

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- We learn in this final sequence of John's prologue that the figure John sees is, indeed, the "Son of Man," the risen and glorified Christ.
- We learn, too, what John is to do:

"Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards."

(1: 19)

This gives us the basic structure for Revelation:

- 1) "what you have seen" (past tense, what was, chapter 1—how John received his vision);
- 2) "what is happening" (present tense, what is, chapters 2-4—the 7 letters to the 7 churches); and
- 3) "what will happen afterwards" (future tense, what will be, chapters 5-22—the things that will happen "soon").

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- And we also learn that the 7 stars the Lord holds in his hand are the 7 “angels” of the 7 churches, while the 7 lamp stands are the 7 churches themselves.

- But what about the “sharp two-edged sword” that came out of the Lord’s mouth?

- We’ll discover that as we read each of the 7 letters to the 7 churches. Typically, each letter begins with a greeting and closes with an admonition; in between are words of commendation and words of condemnation (what the church is doing right and what it is doing wrong). Jesus’ words themselves form the “sharp two-edged sword.”

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We are on the way now!

We sure are!

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Who is the direct source of the “revelation” given to John?
2. Why would the revelation be given to the seven churches of Asia Minor?
3. Who (or what) are the “seven spirits”?
4. Who is it that speaks to John on the island of Patmos?
5. The figure who speaks to John stands amidst seven lamp stands, holds seven stars in his hand and has a 2-edged sword coming out of his mouth. What are those things?

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