

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

1:1a

Although the prologue runs from verse 1 to v. 8, we will look at only the first 3 verses in this lesson, and then the next five after that. The first 8 verses contain a preview of the book's title, the content of the book, other things (vv. 1-3), a doxology & the book's theme – vv. 7-8.

The very first words recorded by John give us an overview of the entire book in a nutshell – it is “the revelation of Jesus Christ”. Now does this mean that it's the revelation given by Jesus Christ, which is one way to interpret the “of” or is it the revelation “of” meaning the manifestation of Jesus Christ. IOW - Is Jesus the giver of the revelation or it's object?

The Greek word for “revelation” is apocalypsis”, and this word implies that what is being revealed has hitherto been hidden. If the revelation has Christ as its' object, then it is the unveiling of One who has been hidden from sight on earth since His ascension. If what is being revealed is the data that will be given to John during the visions he will see, then it is Jesus who is doing the revealing. Which one is the intended meaning of John?

There is internal evidence that points to both positions. Favorable to the view that Jesus is the One being revealed is:

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- The mention of the angel as revealer in v. 1b, yet later in Rev. 17:1; 21:9, Jesus reveals things through angels.
- Even though the visions & prophecies make up the bulk of the text, apocalypse may refer to the entire series of events & the time when Jesus returns personally.
- Rev. 1:2 – the testimony about Jesus Christ.

The position that Jesus is the One doing the revealing:

- The words in v. 1, “the things that must soon take place” seem to indicate that the visions being given take precedence over a person being revealed.
- The series of visions & prophecies in the book cover a lot of time before Christ is revealed in chapter 19 as coming to earth.
- Christ functions in the role of the revealer throughout the whole book – He addresses the 7 churches / He opens the scroll / He discloses the contents
- 1:1 is a very plain statement – “which God gave Him to show His servants the things...”

It seems that the most likely consensus is that it is not Jesus being revealed, but it is Jesus doing the revealing of the events that are given to Christ by the Father in order that they may be revealed to & recorded by John. It is the knowledge of these events that God gives to Jesus to reveal. It is a possibility

that this clarifies a statement made by Jesus while on earth in **Matt. 24:36**. What could the Father give to the Son that he did not already possess as God? Is this the thing that God gives to Jesus here in v. 1 – the things which must soon take place?

He gives this information to Jesus so that He would show it to His slaves. His slaves, in this context – Christians – hence the letters to the 7 churches in chapter 2-3, are the ones shown these things secondary to His slave John seeing them.

Now that is not to say that Jesus Christ is not being revealed in this book. In revelation, we see Him for the first time as He is in His glorified state, as a Lamb upon the throne of God; as Sovereign Lord; as righteous, victorious warrior; as King of Kings & Lord of Lords; as Alpha & Omega; and as just judge. These are all things He was never depicted as in the 4 Gospels. What we are saying is that this is not what Rev. 1:1 is telling us.

Notice that the things to be revealed are designated as “the things that must soon (ESV) take place”. This is a concept found throughout the NT, that certain events must take place, which points to a decretive will of God which does not allow for any chance that these things will not take place. Here are some examples: JN 4:4 – “He must pass through Samaria”; MT 24:6, “this must take place” (the rumors of war); Dan. 2:28 – “He has made known to Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days”. There are others, such as Rev. 4:1.ⁱ

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God, throughout all of history, from creation to the present and on into the future has not simply allowed history to unfold of its' own accord. He has directed it in infinitesimal detail. He did not just foresee the future, He foreknew it & foreordained it – directing not just nations but groups and individuals also. Although there are numerous examples of this throughout Scripture, 2 of the most well known are associated with Jesus' crucifixion – Acts 2:23-24 & Acts 4:27-28. Others exist as well.ⁱⁱ

In order to determine what things will take place, we must know look the word, “quickly” or “soon” to see what that means. This is an important word because it is this word which has led to variable interpretations of Revelation. Some believe that “soon” must mean very soon in time after John wrote and sent out this book. These people believe that this must mean that the book had to be written before AD 70, because the only major event they can see historically in Israel took place in AD 70 – the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem by the Romans. If it was written in about AD 95, there is no significant event from then to now which could fit into the details of the book of Revelation, so how could something at least 2,000 years in the future be called “soon”? The problem is that the events of AD 70 do not fit into the events described in Revelation. Jesus has not yet returned; the world has not been destroyed, and many of the things described in Revelation as part of the plagues or judgments do not compare at all to the worst things that may have happened in AD 70 or since then. There is no

record of cosmic or galactic events accompanying the Roman attack against Jerusalem then, etc. Does “quickly” or “soon” have to be interpreted this way only?

Another way to interpret “quickly” here is to see the events occurring, as they begin to occur, in rapid fire, staccato fashion. This is the way the same Greek word – “*en tachei*” is translated in LK. 18:8; Acts 12:7; 22:18; 25:4 & Rom. 16:20.

The most likely way to see “quickly” here is in fact a series of events which are near in time or imminent. This would bring the most comfort to the initial readers, God’s people & that would certainly be a big part of this prophetic book – to reveal God’s purposes to them. Note also Rev. 1:3; 22:6.

However, since 1900 + years have now passed since John recorded these words, this interpretation is not without some difficulties. We have to realize that God & His word often present a different standard from ours with regard to time. Cf. **I JN 2:18**, and notice too that God is not limited by time the way that we are – **II Pet. 3:8**. What Daniel referred to as “the latter days”, John, by virtue of his closer historical proximity to the end of history can legitimately refer to that end of history as coming “quickly”, in a sense that Daniel & other OT prophets could not. In fact, Daniel is told to “shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end” (Dan. 12:14), whereas John, closer to the action in AD 95 is told to “write down what he sees.” (Rev. 1:10)

Therefore, we do not have to assume that “quickly” or “soon” has to mean within a few human years. God gives this vision to Jesus and Jesus sends it and signifies it through His angel to John, His slave. Through John, the church receives it, and it would have taken some time for these letters to be copied and passed along to other churches & into the rest of the world. ③

God’s Slave, John

Rev. 1:1b - 2

The Apostle John was the last survivor of the 12. All the others had met fates of martyrdom between the time of Jesus’ ascension and well before AD 95. Even Paul, an apostle who was not part of the original 12 was martyred in about AD 65 by Nero at Rome. Peter was crucified upside down alongside his wife; Andrew was crucified in Achaia (near Athens) on an X shaped cross; James – the only one whose death is recorded in Scripture (except for Judas) – was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I not long after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension (Acts 12:1-3); Philip died by stoning in Heliopolis in Asia Minor 8 years after Jesus’ death; Nathaniel or Bartholomew died as a martyr after ministering in Armenia, Persia & India , but records of his death differ; Matthew is said to have been burned at the stake; Thomas was martyred in India by having a spear thrust through him; accounts of James the Less vary, but he definitely died before John; Simon the Zealot was martyred but there is no clear record of how; Judas not Iscariot was clubbed to death, in what is now Turkey; but John survived them all, and apart from incarceration and being boiled alive in oil (& surviving that), he apparently died of old age.ⁱⁱⁱ

John is reported to have died at the turn of the century, but before that, he was exiled to hard labour at Patmos for 18 months as a result of his preaching of the gospel – cf. Rev. 1:9 in about AD 95-96. It is fitting that this beloved apostle of Jesus had been kept alive by God to author this very important book.

Throughout the book, he mentions a number of times – “I, John saw these things”, and we almost get the sense that he is flabbergasted to be the one to whom these things are being exposed. It is not an expression of arrogance on his part, but great humility. This is the same man who did not even mention his own name in the Gospel he wrote so that Christ would have the pre-eminence.

Even here in this prologue where he says his name by taking on the title, “His slave John”, he makes sure the reader realizes that this was a great privilege and not some advantage given to him because of his greatness. Most versions say here “servant” rather than “slave” but the Greek word, “*doulos*” is used which can only mean “slave”. Elsewhere it is translated “bond-servant”, in an attempt to soften the harshness of the term in a world where slavery is well known and abhorred. Being a slave to Christ however, has no cultural downside but is a glorious role of distinction, grace and mercy, because we all were once slaves of sin and Satan. John uses his name in this book, because, unlike the Gospel of John where he recorded what he had seen happen, here he is taking on a role similar to the OT prophets, and must validate that he has apostolic authority to present something futuristic as a message from God.

This vision comes to John via “God’s angel” or messenger, but in light of this supernatural manifestation of things John would see, there is no reason to depart from a literal interpretation of what John has recorded. Throughout the book, Jesus reveals things to John (Rev. 6:9-17 for example) and at times, angels do (Rev. 17:1; 21:9), but in any case, this book is unique in that we are given a glimpse into how its’ truth is transmitted from God and then to us. Remember that Daniel, being given a vision of some of the same things, was told to seal up his vision; and Paul was given visions of heaven – cf. II Cor. 12:1ff and he says it is not lawful for him to share what he saw; but John is told to write it down, with only 1 exception – the 7 Thunders (cf. Rev. 10:4).

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John adds his own testimony in v. 2 – that he has faithfully discharged his commission by recording all he was shown in the visions – the word of God & the testimony about Jesus Christ. He is not referring to his other writings here, as some surmise, but of this book only. The fact that he says it in past tense refers not to when he wrote these things, but from the perspective of those who would read what he had written.

The Purpose of the Revelation

It is a unique feature of this book that it pronounces a blessing on those who read it or hear it (as most in that day would have) – it would be read aloud in a church because copies, which had to be made by hand, were time consuming and

costly. A keen memory and an attentive mind would be extremely valuable in those days.

A 2nd step in this process was found beyond the hearing of the word, by “keeping it”, or being obedient to what it said. We have a similar exhortation in James 1:22, telling us that God’s word is to be received, then acted upon, not just heard, ignored and dismissed.

John calls this book “the words of this prophecy” and in so doing, he is establishing for us the primary nature of this book. John is given the gift of prophecy, and as a result, becomes God’s spokesman here, enabling him to bring us inspired communication from God which we will see, including not only messages for churches then extant, but for future events and future generations & their churches to receive the blessing associated with reading & hearing the book of Revelation.

“Because the time is near” – because draws us back to what was just said, that “blessed are those who hear and keep the words...because the time is near.” The time of what is near? This is a way of saying that final judgment is imminent, it is coming. Since no one knows the exact time of Jesus’ return to earth, and the events that John records precede that and includes that, we need to hear & obey! Note **II Pet. 3:10-11**.

Now, in 2009, we know that this idea of “the time is near” has gone beyond months, years or decades and is being measured in centuries or millennia, so we must recognize that John’s thrust to us is that these events will unfold as part of ^⑤ the natural flow of upcoming history without warning, as a “thief in the night”. The events of Rev. 4ff are next on God’s revealed prophetic timetable, because there is no other event or series of events depicted in Scripture which must precede what John has shown us here, with the exception of the Rapture, for which we are anticipating no signs or events to signal it’s arrival.

Next lesson – Rev. 1:4-8 – The Alpha and Omega

ⁱ Other verses referring to “must” – Matt. 16:21; 18:7; 26:54; LK 9:22; 17:25; 19:5; 24:7, 44; JN 3:14; 10:16; Acts 9:16.

ⁱⁱ God’s foreordination of events – I Pet. 3:20; 1:2; Isa. 14:27, 24; 19:17; 40:23; 43:13; 44:28; 45:1; II Chron. 36:22; Jer. 49:20; Esther 4:14; Col. 1:17; Rom. 11:36; Heb. 1:3; etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur; “Twelve Ordinary Men”; Word Publishing; 2002.