Dr. Dave Mathewson, Revelation, Session 4
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Revelation 1

Introduction

Now that we have provided the historical, framework and literary framework for reading and interpreting Revelation, what I want to do now is begin to work through the book itself, starting at the first chapter. The way we are going to look at it and the method that we’ll follow is twofold. Number one, I want to begin each section by giving you a sense of the overall function and its context and overall meaning of the vision or the section that we are dealing with. Then, the second is, in light of that we will examine some, not all of the details, the language, visions or symbols, looking at the background on the meaning and how they function as well. Again, I do not want to look at every single detail; I do not want to repeat what you can find in other commentaries. But, I do want to spend some time at exploring, examining some of the more significant details in each of the section.

Revelation 1

So we will start with chapter one. Chapter one actually can be divided into two separate sections. Chapter one and the first eight verses, which we have already seen, starting with verse 4 through verse 8 is sort of the epistolary introduction to the book as a letter and as an epistle, though it expands and contains a lot more than you are used to seeing in one of Paul’s letters, for example, in his introductions. Chapter 1 verses 8 through 20 functions as the inaugural vision of Jesus Christ.

So verses 1 through 8, functions as introduction to the nature and character of the book. It almost tells us how it’s meant to be read and how we are to approach it. It also seems to introduce us the major ideas and some of the major themes that will get picked up and developed in the rest of the book. Then as we said, 1:9 through the rest of chapter one is an inaugural vision of Christ, who comes to now to commission John to bring a message to the seven churches which will get further developed in chapters 2 and 3.
The other thing is verses 9 through 20 in the second section also function to provide legitimacy or authenticity to the Revelation that John and the messages that he is going to bring to churches in chapter 3. I am not sure whether it is quite a prophetic calling. We will see in chapter 1, a lot of evidence exactly like the prophetic call narratives that you will find in some of the prophetic literature in the Old Testament. But it is clearly commissioning; John is now being commissioned to address seven churches and also it functions to provide authentication, legitimation for the rest of the book of the Revelation as well in chapters 4 through 20. It does so by grounding John’s vision in no one less than the exalted, resurrected Christ, who now reveals himself to John, and commissions him to bring the authoritative messages to seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.

In chapter 1, we will actually find, and we won’t look at all of these, but we will try to highlight the most important ones. In chapter 1, we find John gathering language and images, especially from the Old Testament, and especially the Old Testament prophets such as Daniel. Daniel chapter 7, where Daniel has the vision of the Son of Man plays a very crucial role in John’s vision of Christ in this inaugural vision in chapter 1; and again we will look at some of these.

Rev 1:1-2 Revelation of Jesus Christ

So, let’s look at those two sections in little bit more detail. Chapter 1, verses 1 through 8 introduces character of the book, what kind of book it is and how it is to be read. It introduces some of the major themes that will get developed in the rest of the book and provides the framework for reading the rest of the book of Revelation. As we have already said, Revelation begins by identifying itself, or John begins the work by identifying it as a revelation or apocalypse of Jesus Christ. We have already said, so I do not want to spend a lot more time on it; that, at this point, the title “apocalypse,” most of your English translations will translate rather “revelation.” But in the title, the word “apocalypse” was not yet a title for a type of literature or literary genre. However, by labeling his work as “revelation,” John does expect us to read this book within the context of other texts that provided divine revelation. His will be, especially, in the form
of a vision. So we should expect to find, in the book of Revelation, an unveiling, disclosing and uncovering of God’s will and God’s intention and God’s word for his people, revealing, unveiling of the true nature of the situation in which the readers find themselves. It is interesting that we find this title, this term, “revelations,” as the title of this book: the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Most English translations translated it as the “Revelation of Jesus Christ,” which is rather ambiguous. Most commentaries debate over what is this revelation is about. Is Jesus Christ is content of what is revealed, or Jesus Christ is the one who is doing revealing? It can go either way. Some who don’t want to decide opt for both. Both are revelation about Jesus. Jesus is the content of the revelation, he is also the one who is subject of the revelation; and he is the one who is doing revealing.

However, in my opinion, as you read the text carefully, again, look at verses 1 and 2, “the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.” Notice this, sort of, chain of revelation or chain of communication begins with God, then Jesus Christ, and then to the angels, then his servant John. In light of that, I think we should take this as Jesus Christ is the one who is doing the revealing. He is the subject, not the content, although I want to say that is not true, especially in chapter 1. Jesus, indeed, is the one who reveals. But, if you read the whole book of Revelation, it reveals more than just the person of Christ. There are images of judgment, there are images of salvation; Revelation reveals true nature of the Roman Empire. So the focus is not so much on Jesus as the content of the revelation and what is revealed, although that is true. But in 1:1 in this revelation of Jesus Christ, I think it should be understood as the revelation of Jesus Christ as it is the revelation that Jesus Christ himself gives. Jesus is the agent of this revelation that is now given to John.

The second feature of this introduction, chapter 1, verses 1 through 8, notice the phrase the “testimony” or “the witness of Jesus Christ.” So John says, this is the revelation of Jesus Christ, “he has made it known by saying to his angel to his servant, John, who testifies everything that he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of
Jesus Christ.” Here I think, the emphasis is on Jesus himself as the one who testifies to the content of the book. Jesus, again, is providing authenticity to the authority to the book. Jesus Christ is the one who witnesses to the content in the information that is now revealed to John. In fact, this phrase introduces a very important concept for the rest of the book of Revelation. That is, the terms, “witness,” or “testimony.” It is important to understand, at this point, first of all, it is tempting to read these terms “witness,” or “testimony,” which is what you find in most English translations. But this Greek word that was translated “witness,” or “testimony,” is the word for which we get our English word, “martyr.” So it is tempting to read this as; when we find the word “testimony,” or “witness,” throughout the book of Revelation in terms of “martyr.” That is, most of the time we use the word, “martyr,” at least in Christian circles, in terms of someone who has died for their faith; someone who has been put to death for their faith in Jesus Christ. At this point in church history, and at this point of writing of the New Testament, the word does not quite mean that yet. The word simply means “to witness” or “to testify” to something. But Revelation does make it clear already that witnessing and testifying to something often results in a death of the one witnessing. Later on, it did come to mean “one who dies,” because of the faith of that witness. But at this point, the words, “witness,” or “testimony,” do not quite mean what we mean by “martyr.” Although again, I do want to make it clear, John is convinced that the witness or testimony that Jesus gives, that John gives, to what he saw and which Christians are supposed to give throughout the Revelation, that witness or testifying to the person of Jesus Christ does often, and can be expected often to result in the suffering and death of the one who witnesses. We saw that John was aware of one person who had already died; he witnessed the faith of faithful witness Antipas, who clearly died for his testimony or his witness.

So the book of Revelation is a testimony or witness of Jesus; Jesus is testifying and witnessing to what now John writes. John writes himself and, especially the other Christians are also called upon to be a witness or to testify to the truth and reality of Jesus Christ through the book, which often results in their deaths.
Rev 1:1-8 Prophecy

The third thing to say about this introductory section in chapter 1:1-8, as we have already seen, this is where John also clearly identifies as the work as prophecy. In verse 3, this is where we find John saying, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.” It is interesting that John distinguishes between the one who reads and one who hears it. This probably simply reflects the way the revelation would have been communicated in the churches. Someone would have read it and the rest would have heard it read, most likely in one setting perhaps.

But, what is interesting here is the blessing is pronounced on the one who hears it and who keeps or takes to heart what is read or what they hear. That is Revelation as prophecy is clearly meant to be taken seriously and therefore to obeyed. So again, Revelation is not primarily a book about predicting the future, but already John is telling us there is blessing for the one who hears it and who actually responds in obedience to what John is going to say. Again, that situation is the first century readers, who were tempted to compromise with the pagan Roman rule, and perhaps to compromise their faithfulness and exclusive allegiance to Christ for allegiance to the emperor, maybe some of them are trying to avoid persecution by thinking they can combine emperor worship and worship of Jesus Christ. Revelation as the book is meant to be kept and observed and obeyed; not just for information that tells us about the future.

Rev 1:4-8 Epistle/Letter

Fourth, Revelation also, as we have already seen, is clearly a letter. In chapter 1 verses 4 through 8, John addresses his work in epistolary form using the format of a typical first century letter. Although he is unique in how he expands the introduction, John uses this to address seven specific churches. So, in other words, Revelation is meant to communicate and to address this specific situation of seven historical churches in Asia Minor, or Western Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. Seven churches that John names and can be identified as churches existing in the center of the imperial Roman rule.
What is unique about this introduction is, interestingly, John also tells us that he wants us to read the rest of the book in trinitarian fashion. Notice the references to, first of all, in this greeting this epistolary reading he begins, “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” We will talk about that in a little bit. There is clear reference to the sovereign God; God the Father is over all thing and then from the seven spirits. Probably the number seven here should not be taken literally for seven separate spirits, but, seven as the symbol of fullness and perfection and completion. This is seen as the fullness of God’s spirit. So, I do not think it is referencing seven separate spirits. But it is a reference to the Holy Spirit, himself, who was before the throne. Then verse 5, “And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness.” There is the term “witness” again. “The faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, and the rule of the kings of the earth.” So at the beginning, John tells us he wants us to read the book in trinitarian fashion that God the father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit all will be involved in this book and the process of revelation and the outworking of God’s purposes and intensions for humanity and for the world.

A second feature of this letter introduction in verses 4 through 8 is the dimension of throne in verse 4. Notice God is described as the one who is and is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne. This term “throne,” already introduces an important theme or concept that not only gets developed throughout the rest of the Revelation, but is crucial for understanding the beginning of it. That is, Revelation deals with the issue with the question of who is truly in control. Who is truly sovereign over the universe? Who is truly in control over destiny of humanity? Who is truly the sovereign ruler over all the affairs of the world and of universe? This dimension of the book brings Revelation already in direct conflict with claims of the Roman Empire. It was Caesar who was on the throne; and according to the Roman way of viewing things, Caesar was on his throne; Caesar was the sovereign ruler of the world; Caesar was the one in charge of the destiny of humanity; Caesar was the one who claimed sovereignty and claimed to be divine; and now by using the word “throne,” I am convinced that John intended this probably, but any first century reader reading this would have understood that this was direct
counterclaim to Caesar. No one else’s throne was important but Jesus Christ.

I am also convinced too. Maybe we will mention this elsewhere, I oppose one of the common understandings that one of the reasons why John wrote the way he did with the symbols and images was, to hide the information from getting into the wrong hands. If Caesar would have seen this, or someone such as one of the local authorities in town would have read this, they would have been confused by the symbolism and images. So, it was, meant to hide its message from unbelieving world should they have received it. However, I am convinced that was not the case. John was not trying to write them, neither he was trying to hide anything. I cannot imagine that anybody outside of the church in one of the cities, not to mention Rome, would have picked this up and read that there is a throne. The immediate question would have been raised in their minds that, “There is another throne but Caesar’s?” So I understand this, in a sense, John is being very culturally counter imperial. He is laying claim to sovereignty and the throne and the ruler-ship that was not of this world that does not belong to Caesar, but belongs solely to God and to the Holy Spirit and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Also, notice the fact that Jesus himself was called “the ruler of kings of the earth.” Again, this would be something that most people would have associated with Caesar. But now, John is claiming this for Jesus Christ. Do you already see what John is doing? He is introducing the way his book to be read. It is addressing specific situation to his readers, but already, John is being counter imperial. He is already introducing the only one who has the right to the throne; the only one who has the right to the claim of authority; the only one who has the right to the true worship of the people of God and that is only God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Rev 1:5-8--Who is the True Sovereign?

In verse 5 through 8, we find more specifically what Christ, God and Holy Spirit have done for the people. Verse 4 and verse 5 have introduced exactly who it is providing the revelation for John. Who it is truly sovereign? Now versed 5 through 8 go on to describe exactly what the sovereign God has done for his people, exactly what the Holy Spirit and exactly what Jesus Christ has done for the seven churches. Notice halfway
through verse 5, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priest to serve his God and Father--to him the glory and power for ever and ever, Amen.”

So, first of all, in these two verses, verses 5 and 6, what Jesus has done is describe in language full of Exodus imagery. Notice this language of redeeming us by his blood. That recalls what God did for his people redeeming them and freeing them from bondage in Egypt. Now, as John wants to say, a new Exodus has now been achieved by God, through the person of Jesus Christ who is now redeeming his people for himself.

Exodus Imagery

We talked about five principles of interpreting revelation. Perhaps, we can add another one. I did not want to add another one because I do not want to have six. Another principle that can be added falls under the principle of symbolism but that would be to read the New Testament in connection with and with light and constant interaction with the Old Testament. In my opinion, we hinted at this already. But I do not think you can fully understand Revelation apart from understanding its constant relationship to and constant interaction with the Old Testament text. Here is one of them. This is full of Old Testament Exodus language. But notice too, it is almost as if John is assuming a narrative, not only was Israel redeemed and freed from Egypt, but God redeemed and freed them according to the book of Exodus. So, in chapter 19 verse 6 of Exodus, it says they would be “a kingdom of priests” for God which is exactly what you find here. John reiterates the language of Exodus and says, God has freed us in a new Exodus. God has freed and redeemed his people in a new exodus out of Rome. Now they are to function like the old Israelites, they were to function as God’s kingdom and priest to serve God the Father “to him the glory and power for ever and ever, Amen.” In other words, God’s intention for Israel is fulfilled in a new community that is the church which is made up of Jews and Gentiles. Go back and read Ephesians 2 sometime, especially verse 22 to see Paul’s understanding of the basis for this. So now, God’s intention for Israel to redeem them and to create a kingdom of priests now has been achieved by God redeeming his people from every tribe and every nation, out from the oppression of Roman Empire. Now to be a
kingdom and priests for God, a community is now all centered around the person of Jesus Christ. So it is interesting already John conceives in first chapter of a community that will already represent the person of Jesus Christ, that will represent God and his kingdom as a kingdom of priests. John already recognizes that Christ is creating a community of people that will represent his rule over all the earth, incidentally what Adam and Eve were supposed to do in the Garden, and Israel was supposed to do but God’s Messiah was supposed to do, and what God’s king was supposed to do in the Old Testament. Now, through Jesus Christ, humanity finally achieves by a new community that Christ creates that represents his rule and kingdom as an anticipation in the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22. Already, God is creating that community to be his faithful witness to function as his kingdom and priests.

The rest of Revelation will be how this works out and how the church was to do this. They will be his kingdom and priests though. It is interesting that Revelation is going to make it clear and you already find this in chapter 1. They will do this through suffering; and almost ironically they will be a kingdom and priests, they will represent God’s rule, but they will do so through suffering and conflict and for some of them, ultimately their death. But, these words already provide comfort in the midst all of this. Christ is already creating his people. Christ already has a kingdom of priests who will function as God’s representatives of his rule and of his presence in the world. Revelation 21 and 22 is the climax of that. Already God’s intention for humanity form a community of a kingdom and priests who will be his faithful witnesses even in the midst of suffering and conflict. God has already established that through creating a people.

Now I cannot help think that John may have intended this and his readers would have seen this as anti-Roman rhetoric. That is, God’s people already represent a kingdom and priesthood. There is already a kingdom that challenges the kingdom and rule of Rome, consisting of God’s people themselves. Now to move this story, first God has redeemed and released people through the blood of Jesus Christ and he has done that in order to create a community, a kingdom and priests, in fulfillment of the Old Testament. God’s intentions in the Exodus are now achieved through new people made of Jews and
Gentiles. The church was to be his kingdom of priests. Chapter 1:7, then, anticipates the future. Using language from Daniel chapter 7 and Zechariah 12, John says, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” So God’s kings and priests live in anticipation, live out their lives and they maintain their faithful witness, in anticipation of the day when Christ will come and consummate history when he will bring judgment and salvation. So, the point of verse 7 is Christ coming as imminent. Christ is coming to bring history to its conclusion as promised in the Old Testament prophets is imminent. Therefore, this kingdom and priesthood should live in light of this. The coming of Christ should motive and sustain this new people, his kingdom of priests to carry out their mission of being faithful witnesses found in verses 5 and 6.

**Rev 1:8 Titles of God**

All of this then is grounded in verse 8 in two titles, particularly used to refer God. Those verse 8, after this, verse 7, which demonstrates and already anticipates the future in light of which God’s kingdom and priests should live. Verse 8 grounds all of this in the character of God himself in two titles. Number one, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Actually, there are three. The last one is the title, “Almighty.” But I want to focus on the first two. The first one is “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” The second is, “I am,” God is described as the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” The first one, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” being first and last letters of the alphabet. Even today if you think about it and you can deduce why exactly John chose the “Alpha and the Omega,” or A and the Z to use the American alphabet. The “Alpha and the Omega,” probably here is interpreting a saying that one finds or a title applied to God from the Old Testament in the book of Isaiah, that is the title, “First and the Last.” If you go back to Isaiah chapter 41:4, interestingly too, much of Isaiah 40, especially 40 through 66, describes God’s future salvation of his people Israel, in terms of a new Exodus. We have already seen John applying Exodus language to the people of God. He is redeeming them by the by the Lamb and making them a kingdom of priests, what God intended for Israel, now is for his
new people of the church. But now notice in Isaiah chapter 41 in verse 4, “Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord--with the first of them and with the last--I am he.” Also, let me skip ahead to 44 and 43:10. Also 44:6: “This is what the Lord says--Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.” The “Alpha and the Omega,” we will see later on in Revelation John will use “Alpha and the Omega,” again with the terms “First and Last.” “Alpha and the Omega,” then, I think is meant to recall Isaiah 41:4 and Isaiah 44:6 – the title applied to God in the Old Testament as “First and the Last.”

Obviously, if one thinks of about it, this probably refers to God as standing at the beginning and at the end of history, and everywhere in between. This is the title that demonstrates God is the sovereign ruler of all of history. But there is something else significant about it. In the context of Isaiah 41 and 43 and 44, where it occurs, it occurs in the context of God being the exclusive God over against other idols. So by claiming God as the “Alpha and the Omega,” that is the “First and the Last,” from Isaiah 41:4 and 44:6, for example, John is claiming in the context of the Roman Empire where there were other gods and you have Caesar clamoring for attention and full authority and exclusive worship and allegiance that belongs to God. Now by using this title, John is taking a text from the Old Testament from the context where God’s absolute authority and sovereignty, his absolute uniqueness is over against every other god. His exclusive right to worship and sovereignty in the face of other gods and idols, now John uses that to demonstrate once again the exclusive sovereignty of God and the exclusive worship that belongs to God over all over Rome’s idols.

The second title is God is described as the “one who is, and the one who was, and the one who is coming.” As most of us realize this probably also expands on and draws on an Old Testament text – God’s words in Exodus 3:14, when God tells Moses that he is the “I am.” But the “who was and who is coming,” are the ones that are absent in that formula. When you add all of these up, when John describes God as the one who was and the who is and the one who is coming, this probably is a formula that expresses God’s
eternity, who stands at the beginning of history and he is the one who stands at the end of
the history and beyond. He is everywhere in between as well.

Therefore, God not only stands at the beginning of the history as the creator and
the originator as we will see in chapter 4 of the Revelation, he also stands in the midst of
history, he is with his people and he is present with his people. So it is not just a title of
God’s exalted status, far beyond his creation. It is also indicating not only God’s
eternity as the one who stands before creation, but as the one who is in creation, who is
present with his people. But he is also the one who is to come; that is, God is the one who
will consummate history. The coming of God is one of the main themes of Revelation. It
anticipates God’s coming through his son Jesus Christ to bring history to a close.

So already these titles anticipate important themes and perspectives for reading
Revelation. God is the one who sits at the beginning and at the end, the Alpha and Omega,
he is the one who was and the one who is and the one who is to come. He is sovereign
over history, he is present with his people; he will bring in the consummation. In the
meantime, to worship anything or anyone else is simply a idolatry. One should not fail to
recognize the Alpha and Omega, the sovereign God who is the exclusive the Lord of the
universe and the only one worthy of our worship.

So already the seven churches are meant to take comfort in this. God stands at the
beginning of history, he is now present with seven churches; and he assures them of
future that he will bring things, the history, to its consummation. So what have they to
fear from the hostile world? What have they to fear from the Roman Empire? Why would
they want to give their allegiance to anyone or anything else? And as kings and priests
then, they have no other option, but every motivation and reason to maintain their faithful
witness in the hostile Roman world in which they would find themselves.

So, already chapter 1:1-8 provides an important perspective for reading the rest of
the book of Revelation. It introduces us to the important themes, the way that God is to
be understood; and the role that God and Jesus Christ and the Spirit play throughout the
rest of Revelation. It is a reminder of the exclusive allegiance that was owed to God and
to Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ and God are the ones who will bring history to their consummation.

Rev 1:9-20 Inaugural Vision

Verses 9-20, then, move on then to the inauguration, or inaugural vision that John has of Jesus Christ to come to commission him to address the seven churches of the Revelation in chapters 2 and 3. As we have said, these verses serve to authenticate John’s vision to make it in a sense, more likely that readers respond and even accept what it is he says in the rest of the book; and to respond in the way that John calls for. It also demonstrates, as we will see, chapter 1 cannot really be separated from chapters 2 and 3. Let me say at this point to another excursus, and we will see and draw attention to this elsewhere. This is the kind of thing that makes it very difficult to outline Revelation and divide it. So many parts of it mesh together; we will see some sections actually function as conclusions to something before it, and at the same time, function as introduction to what comes after. So often, you find sections with revealing sections. Revelation is very difficult to come up with a precise outline. So I am not going to assume any specific outline, but at this point to recognize chapter 1 clearly provides an introduction to and is clearly related chapters 2 and 3, where John then tells he words of the risen Christ, which does address to seven churches, that are introduced in chapter 1.

Again, I want to say a handful of few things about this chapter. First of all, in this section, John already reminds us that he writes not as one who stands over his readers, but one who actually identifies with their plight. Notice, also the paradoxical phrase in verse 9, this is where we find, “I, John, your brother and companion.” John writes as the one who actually identifies with the plight of his readers. It is interesting some have suggested, I am not certain about this, that John, just the fact that he was in exile on Patmos rather than executed shows something about his status; that he may have been more elite and wealthy in society. Now he chooses to stoop and identify with his suffering companions in their faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever the case though, John does write not as the one who stands over his readers, but one who identifies with them. Note the paradoxical phrase when he says; he identifies in their suffering and kingdom. That is
not the kind of combination that you would expect. That a kingdom or rule will bring about suffering. That is the exact type of kingdom that John would portray that Christians belong to. The fact that they belong to God’s rule and his kingdom brings them into conflict with the evil empire of the day: the Roman Empire. It inevitably means suffering. In fact, John is also convinced that it is exactly the way that Jesus Christ went. Jesus Christ comes as the King, but he came and suffered and died. Now his followers follow suit as they represent and are part of God’s kingdom and rule in the present and that still entails suffering and endurance on the part of God’s kingdom.

Vision of Christ

The next thing that I want to draw your attention to, then, is the vision that John has of the exalted Christ. Finally, John has a vision of the exalted Christ appearing to John to commission him, basically with his authority to address the seven churches. Once more, we find that in John’s inaugural vision of Jesus Christ, it is the Old Testament text that dominates. The almost every description given especially in verses 12 and following, almost every description or descriptive phrase or word were given from Jesus Christ, describing John’s vision of Christ, comes right out of the Old Testament. Again, what I think is probably going on is, yes, John actually has this vision. He is describing what he saw; but John draws on the Old Testament to make clear exactly what it was he saw and to help his readers understand the meaning of exactly what it was that John experienced. So John draws on all kinds of Old Testament texts. For example, he begins by describing the seven golden lampstands, which clearly describe the lampstand example in the holy place of the tabernacle in Exodus chapter 25 and the temple in 1 Kings chapter 7. And then interestingly, in Zechariah chapter 4, one of the prophets in Zechariah’s has a vision like John’s, Zechariah’s vision of heavenly temple where we find the lampstands. So already, John is not only drawing on the Old Testament, but already in chapter 1, he is creating a scene, a picture of a heavenly temple. He is understanding heaven and he understands Jesus Christ in very priestly terms as now dwelling and residing in the heavenly temple. Part of that is communicated through using Old Testament temple language such as lampstands, which later on John interprets for us.
It is also intriguing that John tells us that Christ is in the midst of these lampstands. Later on in verse 20, we have already seen talking about the imagery and symbolism of Revelation, John is going to describe, identify the lampstands as the seven churches. Already he describes Christ in the midst of these lampstands. That is, Christ is already portrayed as present with his people. So later on in the seven messages to the churches in the chapters 2 and 3, he can tell them things like “I know what you go through; I know what you experienced; I know where your short comings are; I know your faults are,” because Christ is already portrayed not as some distant deity far above his people with no concern of what is going on. But the one who actually is in the midst of and walks in the presence of his church; and therefore, knows intimately what they are going through and what they are lacking or what they are suffering.

So this, in a sense is setting us up for chapters 2 and 3, where Jesus will begin to diagnose the seven churches and the issue that they face and provide both comfort and warning. So, what that means interestingly, is that Jesus' presence among the lampstands, the churches will mean different things for the churches. For those that are suffering, Jesus’ presence means comfort and encouragement. For those that are compromising or becoming complacent, Jesus’ presence means something else. It means he comes as a judge. Remember that Jesus is portrayed as having a sword coming out of his mouth, another Old Testament image. So for those who are compromising or becoming complacent, Jesus comes to them as a judge the one who has a sword that comes out of his mouth.

Son of Man

Jesus is further described as one like Son of Man. This is language taken right out from Daniel chapter 7, following four beastly type kingdoms. Daniel saw Son of Man contrasted to the beast. Now you have Son of Man, a humanlike figure who is vindicated and receives a kingdom. Now John sees Jesus as that exalted Son of Man from Daniel chapter 7 and already Jesus has received his kingdom. Already, Jesus has inaugurated his rule through his death and through his resurrection and exaltation the Son of Man has
already been vindicated and entered into his kingly rule. Now he will inspect his churches in chapters 2 and 3.

One intriguing feature of this description of the Son of Man though, is in verse 14, where he describes the Son of Man as having head and white hair, which was white like wool and white as snow. If you go back to Daniel chapter 7, there are actually two figures. One of them is the Son of Man and the other is God Himself as the Ancient of Days seated on throne. What is interesting in Daniel 7 it, is the Ancient of Days on throne who is described with white hair, as white as wool and as white as snow. Now that language gets applied to Jesus as the Son of Man. We are going to see this all throughout Revelation where you find the language in the Old Testament that was applied to God, now applies to Jesus Christ. Because, already, John is saying exalted Son of Man is none other than God himself.

This is this one of the strongest statements the deity of Christ is found in the whole Bible, especially in the New Testament where you have Jesus described in language that is reserved for God himself. Especially when you add part of what Revelation is doing is asking who is truly in control. It is idolatry to worship and give allegiance, or to have any other form that only belongs to God himself. Remember he is the Alpha and Omega. There can be no other god before him. Revelation is the book of about exclusive worship that belongs only to God. How then can you have John applying Old Testament texts celebrating the uniqueness over against every other God, which is idolatry and now applying that to the person Jesus Christ.

John seems to suggest that the Son of Man is a unique figure. He is none other than God himself. Further, if you go on and read verse 17: “When I saw him,” when John sees the Son of Man, he falls at his feet. This is a typical reaction found in apocalyptic language, when a seer sees a vision, he becomes weak or falls down at their feet. John falls at this feet and Son of Man who places his right hand on John and said, “Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last.” That is language resembling Alpha and Omega, from chapter 1 verse 8. Now we find that language of God in chapter 1 verse 8, now applied to Jesus Christ.
Moreover, we have already seen the context of this language as Isaiah chapter 41, 43, and 44. “First and Last” was language referring to the eternal God, though it did, that he was at the beginning and end of the history as sovereign over all of creation and all of history. But it was also used to refer to God as the exclusive God over against all other gods, which were idols. Now that language gets applied to Jesus Christ. To apply this language to anyone else would be outright idolatry. Yet, John applies it to Jesus Christ, suggesting that Jesus Christ stands with God on the God’s side of God’s creation divide. The God who stands at the beginning and end of history is also the same as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the sovereign Lord over history.

Because of his resurrection now, he holds the keys of death. So in the rest of Revelation when we find God’s people suffering or wondering if they should suffer, when we read chapters 2 and 3, and the messages of the seven churches, we find that two are suffering persecution because they are faithful witnesses. But the others think it is okay to compromise. Already, Revelation chapter 1 provides the message: the Son of Man is the sovereign Lord of the universe who stands over all creation and furthermore, because of his resurrection, he has now conquered death. He now holds the keys of death. So what did the readers have to fear? Those who were suffering persecution, what did they have to fear at the hands of Rome or anyone else? Those who were compromising have every means and every reason to take a stance for Jesus Christ, no matter what the consequences because Jesus has already won the victory over death. So if their faithful witness should result in persecution, even to the point of death, as it almost did for one person, what have they to fear?

In fact, his resurrection means not only he has overcome the death, but he is the one who gives life. So later on in chapter 20, and chapter 21 and chapter 22 of Revelation, we find the book resulting in a new creation where God now finally vindicates his people by giving them life. So what have they to fear if the faithful witnesses should lose their lives? God’s presence with the church then will either provide a message of comfort or a message of warning to the people of God who are depending on their spiritual conditions.
But now, Jesus is prepared to address through John and evaluate the situation of the seven churches existing in Asia Minor.

Rev 1:19 as an Outline of the Book?

Before we do that, there are two other points that I want to draw your attention to in this section, or two additional features. One of them is found in verse 19, where Jesus is speaking to John and commands him to write. It is interesting, several times throughout the Revelation, John is commanded to write what he saw. Right there, chapter 1, verse 19, “Write, therefore what you have seen [or what you saw], what is now and what will take place later.” It has been very popular to interpret this threefold phrase: “What you have seen, what is, and what is about to happen” (or “what is to come,” depending on your translation). This has commonly been seen as a rough outline of the entire book of the Revelation, where each of these: “What you have seen, what is, and what is to come,” corresponds to certain sections of Revelation. The most common one is chapter 1, refers to what John has seen. Chapters 2 and 3 refer to “what is,” as in the present day of John and his readers. Then chapters 4-22 is “what is to come.” This is all future that is yet to take place, and often this is associated with certain ways of reading the book of Revelation. So chapter 1 verse 19 is often taken as the rough temporal outline for when the different events of Revelation occur.

The only difficulty is that, first of all, to summarize it does not work. It does not fit what one actually finds in the text of Revelation. For example, in chapters 2 and 3, especially, starting with chapter 1, in chapter 1:7, John already moves to the future; he already anticipates the future. Furthermore, chapters 2 and 3, the seven messages of the church are about seven churches in the first century in the John’s present day. He is addressing them in their situations and trying to make sense of their present situations. But interestingly, when we look at seven churches, they all end with future promise. They all end with a promise to the church of what will happen if it endures, overcomes, conquers and retains its faithful witness. All are the messages of the promise of future. Then chapter 4-22, we have already seen that chapter 12 refers to the past event, that is death of Jesus Christ. I am going to argue again that chapter 4-22 cycles through
references to present events going on in the readers’ days, as well as the future. So, it
seems to me that it is too limited to use this as an outline associated with strict sections of
Revelation.

Instead, another possibility is that the word when John was told, “Write what you
have seen,” I think that actually can be translated, “write what you see,” as a reference to
the whole book. The whole book is what he sees. Then the next two elements were what
is and what is to come; simply describe in more detail of what it is to see within the
content of the book – and that certainly makes sense. Write what you see, and that is the
entire book. And the entire book contains both “What is,” making sense of their present
situation and also “What is to come.” Another way of looking at it too is: “Write what
you have seen and what is and what is to come,” simply reflects title used to God, “The
one who is the one who was and the one who is to come,” or “The one who was the one
who is and the one who is to come.” That is the whole book contains making sense of the
past, present and future. The point of either is that Revelation will include references to
the past, present, and future; especially present and future throughout the entire book. We
cannot limit this phrase to specific discreet sections of Revelation. But the, whole, entire
phrase, however we take it, probably describes the character of the entire book.

Rev 1:20

The second thing that I want to mention briefly is, in verse 20, we will go over this
very briefly because we have gone over this already. Verse 20 provides, in a sense a
model for interpreting the rest of the book of Revelation. And we see this is actually the
only one of two places where John actually has something interpreted for him. The other
is in chapter 17. Here, risen Christ speaking to John and addressing John tells him that
angels and seven stars represents the angels of the seven churches and the seven
lampstands actually represent or symbolize the seven churches of Revelation in chapter 2
and chapter 3. We will talk about the significance of that. In other words, in true
apocalyptic fashion, we find symbols referring to actual persons and events. But those
persons and events are described not literally but metaphorically. This is how we should
interpret the rest of the book of Revelation.
Now, in the section, we will begin now that the John has been commission by the risen Christ, now that he has told us little bit about the character of his book and how it is to be read. Now we will begin and prepare to examine how Christ addresses and how he evaluates the seven churches in Asia Minor and how the churches were to respond and to read the rest of the book of Revelation.

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