

GETTING SIGHT OF JESUS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Many of us avoid the book of Revelation because it seems weird. Few biblical books contain visions like this one. None have been given such a wide variety of interpretations. So we tend to stay away, but we do so at our own loss.

The book's original audience was a ring of local churches in seven cities in the First Century Roman province of Asia, what today we call Turkey. These churches were all under pressure—some the pressure of persecution, some the pressure of prosperity. All of them were tempted to compromise their faith. Sound familiar?

God gave John this “revelation,” this *uncovering* or *revealing* series of visions, to help the churches see what was really going on as they faced these many threats to their spiritual existence. The book is about their present and future, just as it is about our present and future.

The Glorious Vision of Revelation 1

We get lost in the book because we think it drops us in a maze that requires that we grope our way through to discover the events of the future. That's not what this book is about. The future may be the book's setting, but it is

not its theme or its main character. The book is about Jesus Christ. That's how it opens: "The revelation of *Jesus Christ*" (Rev. 1:1). And that's how it ends: "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12-13).

Revelation is about what Jesus reveals, and what he reveals is himself at work in our world.

Following his introduction, John tells of his vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:11-18. This vision dominates the entire book. What John saw and heard in his vision of Jesus fit all that he knew about the transcendent God of the Bible who sent his Son as his Christ, his King—the Savior of the world and the establisher of justice. The eight descriptors John gives us in this passage arise out of the world of the Bible and must be understood in light of the imagery of the Old Testament. One commentator says that John's aim," writes "is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing."¹ But today, we don't carry those associations in our memory, so we must work harder to see Jesus as he reveals himself in the book.

Revelation as a whole, and this opening vision, in particular, provides a vision of Christ designed to guard us and sustain us as we journey in a world opposed to God. I'd encourage you to open a Bible and read Revelation 1:9-20 before you read what follows here.

The Risen Christ Among the Lampstands

John introduces his vision of Jesus by telling us that he was on an island called Patmos, a rocky volcanic island in the Aegean Sea not far from the mainland where the seven churches made their homes. The Romans used it as a place of exile for political troublemakers. John explains that he was there "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." He was there to be silenced. And in his lonely exile, he meets the risen Christ. In God's marvelous irony, he allows John to be taken from the churches he knows and loves so he can receive and write down a vision that will speak to each of them in their particular condition and resound to all churches down to our very day.

1. G.B. CAIRD, *A COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE* (HNTC; NEW YORK, NY: HARPER & ROW, 1966), 25.

A trumpet-like voice calls John to write down what he sees in a book. When he turns to see who is speaking, he sees Jesus walking among the seven churches—the churches who are to receive his book and read it. These churches are represented by lampstands, each lit by the flame of the Spirit of God. In verses 13-16, John describes what he sees.

“One like a son of man.” In the Old Testament, “son of man” usually designates a human being. For example, God repeatedly calls Ezekiel “son of man.” But when Jesus refers to himself as “the son of man” in the gospels, there is deeper significance. Jesus’ choice of this title made the Jews of his day think twice. Was he saying that he was simply a human being, which he most certainly was, or was he referring to a completely unique “son of man” found in Daniel 7:13-14?

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

As John’s vision unfolds in Revelation, it’s clear that he’s encountering this particular “son of man.” This is God’s designated ruler of all the earth.

“...clothed with a robe and with a golden sash around his neck.” In the ancient world, a person dressed according to his station in life. In Exodus, God instructs Moses to dress the high priest with an elaborate array of garments, including a robe bound by a “sash of fine twined linen and of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, embroidered with needlework” (Ex. 39:29, also 28:4, 39, 40; 29:9). But the son of man has a golden sash, which would echo in John’s mind as depicting both royalty and the gold reserved for the Most Holy Place in the Temple. This is God’s priest-king.

“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.” Again, John hears Daniel’s vision in chapter 7:9

“As I looked, thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair on his head like pure wool. ...”

The Ancient of days carries deep wisdom. Unlike our day, the ancient world valued the wisdom of experience represented by the grey hairs of the aged. The wisdom of the son of man goes deeper still. It finds its source in eternity; it is not grey but the whitest of white—not only ancient but pure.

“His eyes were like a flame of fire...” Here, as in Daniel 10:6, his eyes see through everything, and they bring the flame of God’s judgment. His justice is based on a perfect understanding of the facts and his eternal wisdom; his judgments are sure and right.

“His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace...” His feet depict the direction of his work. His ways are pure, refined in a furnace. His feet clad in the armor of a warrior. In purity and strength, he goes where he wants to go.

“And his voice was like the roar of many waters.” When the throne of Ezekiel’s vision of God moved under the power of the living creatures’ massive wings, it sounded “like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult, like the sound of an army” (Ez. 1:24).

We live in an age of so many voices clamoring for our attention. When Jesus speaks, and we have ears to hear, his voice overwhelms them all. He speaks with power and strength.

“In his right hand he held seven stars...” In verse 20, we learn that these stars represent the angels assigned to each of the seven churches. This son of man rules not only earth and all who live on the earth, but he rules the heavenly beings as well.

“from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword...” This sword was

the weapon of choice for the Roman infantry soldier. But it echoes with words of the messianic judge of Isaiah 11:4:

“He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”

And Isaiah 49:2 concerning the Servant of the Lord:

“[The LORD] made my mouth like a sharp sword.”

New Testament scholar Greg Beale writes of the sword wielded by the son of man in Revelation 1:16, “Jesus will do battle in this manner not only against the evil nations (19:15), but also against all those among the churches who compromise their faith (2:16).”² In Revelation 2:12, the angel represents Jesus to the church in Pergamum as, “The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.” We can take comfort in the promised judgments of God on the nations, but we fall under the same scrutiny, and given the grace bestowed upon us, we have even greater reason to hear and respond.

“and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.” This calls to mind Moses’ shining face when he came down from the mountain after meeting with God (Ex. 34:29). When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain, he was “transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun...” The ultimate depiction of any human encounter with God is to encounter light. In John’s first letter, he tells us, “God is light” (1:5). There on the barren island called Patmos, John encounters the one who answers the prayer of Psalm 4:6—“There are many who say, ‘Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!’”

When you put the shining face of the son of man together with the rest of this passage, you are looking at a man of purity and power, a man of wisdom and righteousness, a man strong in his exercise of justice who evaluates and then sets what is wrong to right. You are looking at God incarnate—the one sent as the Lord’s servant to destroy the works of evil and the evil one while at the same time protecting, vindicating, and restoring his people.

2. G.K. BEALE, *THE BOOK OF REVELATION* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: EERDMANS, 1999), 212.

Falling at the Feet of Jesus

This vision of Jesus overwhelmed John. He collapsed. “I fell at his feet as though dead” (1:17). Just as Isaiah covered his mouth and pronounced curses on himself when he encountered a vision of the living God (Is. 6), so John fears judgment. What human being could stand on his own two feet before such a person? The One who sees all must see John’s sins. Surely the hammer of his justice is about to fall on him.

But Jesus reaches down. He touches John with his right hand, his hand of strength and justice, and reassures him: “Fear not.” As the book unfolds, we learn that if you are faithful to him and live out of the gift of his death for your sins, you have no need to fear him as judge. Jesus underlines this by telling John, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I live forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Death is the final reality that no god of this earth has defeated. And deep in every human consciousness is the awareness that after death, there comes an accounting. Jesus has not only conquered death by his own death and resurrection, but he has the keys of judgment. He will not assign his faithful people to Hades. Their task is to endure by rejecting the seductions of this world and not bending when persecuted.

God gave this book to his church as an invitation to come to him. He calls us to himself. To see him. As I’ve pored over this passage in recent months, it creates in me a longing to see Jesus. I can’t get close to John’s response. I’ve yet to get a sight that makes me drop to the floor as though dead. But there is grace in longing. The more I look, the more I long to see. I want to see Jesus before I see all the problems in my church. I want to see Jesus before I consider all the corruption and temptations from this world.

In seeing Jesus, we are strengthened. His beauty protects us from the beguiling temptations of the world. His authority and power help us see the world for what it really is and bolster us to stand firm against the onslaughts of the enemy.

In the sight of him, everything else falls into place—including the book of Revelation.

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