

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

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SECTION ONE - INTRODUCTORY LETTERS

CHAPTER 1: CHRIST'S ANGEL

The first chapter of Revelation can be divided into three sections. Verses 1-3 were John's title for the vision. Verses 4-8 were John's greeting to the churches. Verses 9-20 were John's commission from Christ.

Verses 1-3

John's title made three points. First, the vision was the Revelation of Jesus Christ. John's vision was a "Revelation." John intended to reveal "the things which must shortly take place." John's topic was history. Revelation must speak about history because it was the climax of Scriptural prophecy. Everywhere in the Old and New Testaments, prophets talked about history. From Genesis to Revelation, God revealed everything that He was about to do (Amos 3:7). God revealed history to make men repent (Zechariah 1:6), to strengthen His people (Daniel 9:2), and to make men understand that He had accomplished His own will (Jeremiah 44:28).

John's vision was also the revelation of Jesus Christ. Throughout Revelation, Jesus was speaking to His church. Christ appeared as the Angel of the Lord. He reigned on His throne. Christ's words were heard, and He appeared in a succession of symbols. Christ's constant presence was appropriate because the Father had given this vision to Christ for His church.

The title's second point was that Christ communicated the Revelation to John. Then John bore witness to all that he had seen. The Revelation was a record of John's experiences. The vision was written from John's perspective. It listed his encounters with angels. It described John's fear, his awe, and his confusion. John did not always understand what he saw. The apostle was only Christ's messenger passing on to the church what Christ had shown him. However, John was not a secretary writing down God's words. One model for understanding Revelation is to suggest that the symbols in Revelation were drawn from Scripture verses in John's memory. If so John may have been actively involved in forming this vision as the Holy Spirit molded and colored his dreams.

The title concluded, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." The Revelation is not a Chinese puzzle intended to satisfy some scholar's curiosity. The Revelation demanded a response from those who heard it. Men would be blessed by God if they heard the vision and responded accordingly. Those who ignored God's warning would stand under his curse. A proper response was particularly important because "the time is near."

Verse 4

With verse 4, John began his salutation. John's greeting followed a common New Testament pattern. Most of the New Testament was a collection of letters. With the exception of Hebrews and I John, every letter opened with a set type of salutation. First, the author identified himself. Second, he stated to whom he was writing. Then New Testament authors almost always said something like "grace, mercy, and peace from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Authors often included in this blessing a brief description of the saints, of God, or of His salvation.

John used a similar pattern. The apostle wrote, "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne." John was blessing the church in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Then in verse 5, John blessed the church in the name of Jesus Christ. As was common in salutations, John included a brief description of Christ.

Verse 5a

Verse 5 described Christ in three ways. First, He was the faithful Witness. This name grew from a common Scriptural theme. Old Testament saints asked God to be a faithful Witness against anyone who would break an oath (Genesis 31:50; Judges 11:10; Jeremiah 42:5). God was called a Witness because He saw lies and would judge them. Malachi expanded the idea of oath breaking to cover covenant relationships like marriage. In Malachi 2:14, the prophet said that God was a Witness between the Jews and their divorced wives. Later, Malachi expanded this idea even further. In Malachi 3:5, the prophet said that God would draw near Israel in judgment. Then the Lord would be a swift witness against all of Israel's sins. The broadest application of the witness motif can probably be seen in Micah 1:2. Micah declared "Let all people hear. Let the earth and all that fills it listen. Let the Lord Yahweh testify against you, the Lord from His holy temple." Micah said that God would be a witness against the sins of the whole earth. When John called Christ "the faithful witness," he was talking about judgment. God saw the sins of every man. When Christ would return in judgment, He would testify against all rebels and condemn them.

John also called Christ "the firstborn of the dead." Paul described Christ the same way in Colossians 1:15-18. Paul wrote that Christ was the firstborn of the dead in order that He might come to have first place in everything. The idea of being firstborn was associated with preeminence and inheritance. In Israel, the firstborn son was given the birthright. This birthright provided a double portion of the inheritance and gave leadership in the family or tribe. Psalm 89:26-27 used the symbol of the firstborn son to describe David and Christ. The psalmist wrote, "He will call to Me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.'" Since Christ is the firstborn Son, He would be "the ruler of the earth's kings." The wonder of the gospel was that this mighty King loved His people enough to die for them.

Christ was indeed the "ruler of the earth's kings." Scripture always claimed that God was the King of the earth. Moses called Him the God of gods and the Lord of lords (Deuteronomy 10:16-17). David said that God sat as King at the flood, and would sit as King forever (Psalm 29:10-11). Psalm 47:8 added that God reigned over the nations. Jeremiah called God the everlasting King (Jeremiah 10:10). Isaiah wrote that God reduced rulers to nothing, and blew them away (Isaiah 40:34-37). Even Nebuchadnezzar was forced to recognize God's sovereignty over all men (Daniel 4:34-37). These three descriptions of Christ all had eschatological overtones. Christ would witness against men at the final judgment. As the firstborn of the dead, Christ waited for His inheritance when the rest of the dead would be raised. Christ would become the earth's ruler when He returned to reign (Isaiah 60:11). So Revelation 1:5 pointed forward to the kingdom. It also reflected Christ's three roles of prophet, priest, and king. Prophets usually testified against sin. The firstborn symbol came from the ceremonial law administered by the priests. Christ would rule because He was the King.

Verses 5b-6

John had described Christ in three ways. Now John praised Christ for having done three things. John glorified Christ because He loved us, because He released us from our sins, and because He made us into a kingdom of priests. These descriptions grew from Scripture. God spoke of His love and His redemption in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 7:8; Jeremiah 31:3). God also described the Old Testament community as a kingdom of priests. In Exodus 19:6, God told Israel, "You shall be a kingdom of priests to Me and a holy nation." God intended His people to be priests to the world. Through sin, God's people usually forfeit the role that God has given to them. When Christ would return, their sin would be removed. Then God's people would be priests. Isaiah promised Israel this, saying, "You will be called the priests of Yahweh. You will be called ministers of our God. You will eat the riches of nations and boast in their riches" (Isaiah 61:6).

The New Testament church shared this promise. Peter said that God's people were a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation (I Peter 2:9). Paul spoke of Christ's love and deliverance in Galatians 2:20. Paul testified, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who love me, and gave Himself up for me." Paul referred to Christ's kingdom in Hebrews 12:28. Paul promised that God would shake the earth so that His kingdom would remain alone.

Verse 7

After praising Christ for three things He had done, John mentioned three things that Christ would do. Jesus would return on the clouds of heaven. Every eye would see Him, and all the earth would mourn over Him. The Scriptures constantly testified that Christ would return on the clouds. In its earliest forms, this prophecy associated clouds with God's presence. The wilderness tabernacle was occasionally filled with the cloud of God's glory. God was present in this cloud. Christ appeared in the cloud over the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:2). The cloud of God's presence also filled Solomon's temple when it was dedicated (II Chronicles 5:13-14).

Several times in the Old Testament, Christ actually appeared to the prophets. Christ's coming was associated with clouds. Mount Sinai was covered with a cloud when Christ descended on it. Exodus 34:5 said that the Lord had descended in the cloud and had stood with Moses. Christ's descent on Sinai was in part a symbol for His future return. Christ's return was also associated with clouds in other Old Testament passages. When Ezekiel first saw Christ's throne, he saw the vision in a storm cloud (Ezekiel 1:4). Christ came down to earth while seated on His throne in the clouds. He would return in a similar way. Daniel saw a vision of Christ which pointed to His return. Daniel wrote, "I kept watching the night visions. Behold, One like a Son of Man came with the clouds. He approached to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him." So Moses, Ezekiel and Daniel saw Christ coming on the clouds. The gospel prophecies grew from all of these Old Testament theophanies (Matthew 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27). So John also wrote in Revelation that Christ would return on the clouds.

John made two other promises. John promised that every eye would see Christ, even those who had pierced Him. John also promised that all of the earth's tribes would mourn over Him. The clearest Old Testament parallel to these promises can be found in Zechariah 12:10, "... they will look at Me, the One who they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as someone mourns for an only son, and they will be grieved for Him, like the weeping for a first-born." Matthew 24:30 expanded this mourning to all the tribes of the earth.

John concluded the salutation with the words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord, 'who is, and was, and is to come, the Almighty.'" This declaration grew from the Old Testament. God often made similar statements through the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 41:4, Yahweh declared, "I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last. I am He." Isaiah 48:12 echoed, "Listen to me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last." The heart of this declaration can be seen in Isaiah 44:6, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.'" God declared Himself to be eternal in order to show that only He was God.

Isaiah repeatedly stressed to Israel that there was only one God. In Isaiah 43:10-13, the prophet declared, "You are My witnesses," declares the Lord. 'You are My servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me...Even from eternity I am He; and there is none who can deliver out of My hand.'" Isaiah 45:5 and 45:21 stressed the same thought. The Lord alone was God. This eternal God revealed Himself to His people by the covenant name of "I Am" (Exodus 3:14; 6:3). All of this provided one reason why Revelation 1:8 declared God to be the Alpha and Omega. Only the Lord was God, and after the judgment, He would reign alone. All of God's enemies would be crushed, and would disappear from the earth forever.

In the gospel of John, Christ repeatedly declared Himself to be God. Jesus continued Isaiah's theme, grounding His divinity in His eternity. The Lord was accused of blasphemy when He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am." In John 6:62, Jesus said that He had been with God in heaven before He was born. Then in John 17:5, He prayed, "And now, glorify Me together with Yourself, Father, with the glory which I ever had with You before the world began." The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit could all claim to be the Almighty God, who was, and is, and is to come.

The phrase Alpha and Omega in Revelation 1:8 implied much more than Satan's defeat. God's eternal existence pointed to the way that Christ would fill all things when He would return. Then He would be all and in all. Colossians 1:18 read much like Revelation 1:5. Paul said that Christ was the beginning. He was the Firstborn of the Dead so that He might come to have first place in everything. Then Colossians 1:19 read, "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." Christ was the faithful witness against sin. He was the heir of all power. He would be the sovereign ruler over all. Then all fullness would dwell in Him. Christ was the Alpha and Omega because He would sum up everything in Himself.

Paul constantly talked about Christ's fullness. In Romans 11:36, Paul said that from Him, through Him, and to Him were all things. Christ created the universe. He sustained it with His word, and all things would be summed up in Him. In Ephesians 4:10, Paul said that Christ descended to earth, and He ascended far above the heavens, so that He might fill all things. Jesus Himself taught the answer. In John 17:20-21, Jesus prayed, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You sent Me." The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separate Persons. Yet somehow, they are also One. Believers are not God, nor can they become God. Yet somehow in Christ, believers are one with God. This doctrine has been called the mystic union of Christ and His church. Believers become in a sense one with God as the Spirit of Jesus enters their hearts, creating a new man within them. So John said of Jesus that, "of His fullness we have all received" (John 1:16).

In this age, being filled with the Spirit is somehow a comparative thing. Sanctification is growing into Christ's fullness. So Paul wished that the church would "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19). As Christ's Spirit filled His children, they became "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). After the final judgment, God's Spirit would be poured out completely in the hearts of His people. Then "the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9). In judgment, Christ would have subjected all things to Himself. Finally, "when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the one who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all" (I Corinthians 15:28). The Almighty God would fill all things forever. Then God would indeed be the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.

Jesus appeared to John in a form that resembled closely the Old Testament theophanies. One of the closest Old Testament parallels to this passage can be found in Daniel 10:5-6. This passage recorded that Daniel, "lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult." Daniel saw the same person that John saw. Although the men with Daniel did not see Christ, they knew that someone was actually there. They ran and hid. So Christ was actually present teaching Daniel and describing His conflicts with the world empires. Christ's encounter with Daniel may have been an Old Testament parallel for Revelation 1:17. In Daniel 10:9-14, Daniel fell to the ground in fear. Christ placed His hand on Daniel, telling him not to be afraid. Virtually the same thing happened to John.

Verses 19-20

John saw Christ walking among seven golden candlesticks. Jesus told John that these candlesticks were seven of the churches in Asia Minor. The candlestick symbol came from the Old Testament. In Exodus 25:31-40, Moses was commanded to make a golden candlestick with seven lamps. This candlestick became a symbol for Israel. The candlestick's lamps may have represented the Word of God preached to the world by Israel. As long as Israel's tabernacle stood, this candlestick was to remain lit before the veiled ark of the testimony (Exodus 27:20-21). The ark contained God's Word. The lamp stand lit the earth with the light of this Word. So the golden lamp stand may have represented Israel's proclamation of God's Word. This symbol was carried over almost unchanged into Zechariah 4:2-3. Zechariah's lamp stand proclaimed God's Word into all the world. Zechariah was convicting the earth of sin. So in Zechariah 5, God's curse went forth from Israel to the whole earth. This symbol was repeated in Revelation 11:4. This time, two golden candlesticks proclaimed God's Word against the world. These two candlesticks may have represented the Law and the Prophets. Through these two, Israel proclaimed God's Word against man's empires. So the seven golden candlesticks in Revelation 1 may have been a continuation of this Scriptural theme. Israel's lamp stand was made from one piece of gold because Israel was one nation and one kingdom. John's lamp stand was broken into seven pieces. The candlestick was now dispersed among the nations, just as James 1:1 wrote to the 12 tribes who were dispersed abroad. The New Testament dispersion was paralleled in the Old Testament by the Babylonian captivity. Jeremiah 52:19 noted that Nebuchadnezzar broke up everything of value in the temple and carried it to Babylon. When Israel was carried away into exile, the golden candlestick was broken in pieces and was carried to the nations. In 70 AD, Rome also destroyed Jerusalem. The Jews were once more scattered and the temple's objects were carried to the nations. When John wrote the Revelation, the Jews were once more exiles scattered through the world. Jesus' church was made up both of believing Jews and gentiles who were also aliens and strangers in the world. The New Testament church was always an exiled church cut off from God's Promised Land until the end of history. That is one reason Peter and James addressed their letters to the church in exile (James 1:1; I Peter 1:1). There were seven lamp stands in Rev 1:20 because the true Israel of God had been broken up and scattered (John 8:37-59; Romans 9:6-8). Christ wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor because He was writing to the believing, exiled community. This exiled church was composed of both Jews and gentiles. The church's home would always be Jerusalem. As long as the Promised Land lay desolate, the exiled church would wait for her chance to return home.

Christ wrote to the cities because Asia Minor because Asia Minor was a very important center for both the early Christian church and the Jewish Diaspora. In Acts, these cities served as a springboard for Paul's evangelism. Jews in the Diaspora were exiles even before Jerusalem fell to Rome in 70 AD. Peter wrote to the churches of Asia Minor, addressing them as "those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia (I Peter 1:1).

In Revelation 4:5, the seven lamps are called the seven Spirits of God. The same symbol was used in Revelation 1:4 and 3:1. The seven spirits may be explained in Revelation 5:6. Here Christ is symbolized by a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. John calls the seven eyes the seven spirits of God who were sent out into all of the earth. The seven lamps represented the Holy Spirit present in the exiled church. Through the exiled community, the Holy Spirit went out to the whole world. Christ told each church about the Spirit's presence among them. As Jesus dictated each letter, He commanded those with open ears to hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches.

Christ told John to write "the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things." Revelation dealt with the past, the present, and the future. John would discuss Israel's conflict with the world empires. The first world empire to destroy Israel was Mesopotamia. So Revelation would begin its discussion of history with the captivity. Then John would mention Persia, Greece and Rome. However, John would be mainly concerned with the church in the New Testament age. So Christ began his Revelation by writing letters to the seven exiled churches. These

letters are intended to strengthen the churches for their suffering during the exile. Almost every letter began by pointing to some element of Christ's appearance in chapter one. Consistently, the letters were from the One who walked among His churches while blessing and chastening His people. Israel may have been in exile, but her Lord was still present and in control.