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The Revelation of John

A Message of Encouragement for a Persecuted Church

An Exegetical and Theological Exposition
by John W. (Jack) Carter

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Prolegomena: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Apocalyptic Literature.

It was visitation night for our little Baptist church. As the conversation with this "prospect" continued, it took what for me was a very strange turn. "I am here to tell you, sir, that the earth is *not* round, regardless of what you and your scientists say!"¹ As a member of the scientific community and well grounded in the natural sciences, I was astounded at this earnest and sincere statement from a very committed Pentecostal-leaning Christian. Certainly, the images from direct observation of the earth came immediately to mind. I shared my viewpoint that the earth is not only a sphere, but also an incredibly small one when one considers how quickly we can circumnavigate around it. He told me, "No, the earth's not round, and I can prove it." Finding this individual to seem somewhat intelligent, my curiosity was long past the point of piqued and I was at the point of trying to figure out the riddle he was posing to me. He then shared his reason for his adamant position: "The Bible says, 'I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth.' Since the Bible is true, the earth is not round. It is a square." I quickly realized that this conversation had little potential of coming to closure. His quote was accurate, taken from the Revelation of John:

Revelation 7:1. *And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree.*

What was the error in this man's thinking? Certainly, there was nothing wrong with the faith of this man. In fact, the innocent blindness of his faith in scriptural authority seemed superior to mine. His error was in his interpretation of the apocalyptic literature style utilized in the biblical text. Reading symbolic imagery as literal and historical, he came away only with an incorrect description of the physical earth and the location of four angels, substituting a literal and physical image for the deep theological message that the author intended on conveying.

The misunderstanding of the context and form of apocalyptic literature has led to much misinterpretation and doctrinal conflict over the years. "In modern times, apocalyptic studies have fared rather badly. This has been due, in the first place, to the distorted interpretation of books like Daniel and Revelation which is prevalent among certain extreme prophetic groups."² Some groups, by their rabid stance, have given the Bible an authority greater than God.³ "The investigation of apocalyptic literature seems to be governed by rival 'schools' more than most areas of NT interpretation. Revelation, in particular, has been besieged in a long hermeneutical war by armies whose battle lines are clearly drawn. Often one may not even

¹ This event took place over twenty years ago. Quotes are estimates from vague recollection.

² Charles T. Fritsch. "The Message of Apocalypse for Today." *Theology Today*, 10. (October 1953): 59.

³ Ronald J. Allen. *Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984: 120.

approach the siege site unless one claims allegiance to one of these armies."⁴ Some groups have made the literal/historical interpretation of biblical apocalyptic a litmus test of faith, utilizing its literally-applied eschatology to provide answers for questions concerning the end of the age. Because of this, "In recent years, it has become tainted by its status as the darling of wild-eyed apocalyptics."⁵ Fringe apocalyptic groups have proved exceedingly radical and even dangerous. High-profile examples include *The People's Temple* under James Warren Jones who led 914 of its members to mass murder/suicide in 1978 and the *Branch Davidians* under David Koresh who led 74 of its members to their murder/suicide in 1993.

The Revelation of John has not always been embraced with the fervor of other books of the canon. For example, four centuries ago, Martin Luther "made comments about Revelation as pejorative as anything he said about the Epistle of James, considering Revelation "neither apostolic nor prophetic"⁶

Most Christians experience a more common response to apocalyptic literature, and that is to give it little attention. Pastors who are not confident with the genre may fail to teach or preach on apocalyptic passages. Christians, in their own study time, may prefer to simply pass over those pages and spend time on texts that do not require as much exegesis. However, apocalyptic literature is an integral part of scripture; hence, it is an integral part of the gospel message. To rule it out of consideration altogether is to distort the biblical message of hope by omitting in advance what is obviously a part, if not the whole, of the biblical perspective.⁷ The message of the text is not "hidden." Apocalyptic literature is a mystery only to those who approach the genre with an inappropriate and/or incomplete interpretation strategy.

People may tend to be less than comfortable when reading the Apocalypse, but there is no shortage of interest in the subject of eschatology. Recent best-seller sales of the "Left Behind"⁸ apocalyptic novel series highlight the intense curiosity people have in the subject. These novels are a loose, literal interpretation of biblical apocalyptic passages, most taken from the Revelation of John.⁹ The success of these novels has sparked other television and movie entries into this genre. "Whatever we may think of the 'pop-apocalypism' of ones like LaHaye and Lindsay¹⁰ it is clearly impacting the faith of our church members"¹¹ and raising

⁴ David Arthur DeSilva. "The 'image of the beast' and the Christians in Asia Minor: escalation of sectarian tension in Revelation 13." *Trinity Journal*, 12(2), (Fall 1991): 185.

⁵ Michael Lindvall. "Revelation 4:1-11." *Interpretation*, 53(2), (April 1999): 173.

⁶ W.G. Kümmel. *Introduction to the New Testament*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975): 471.

⁷ Charles T. Fritsch. "The Message of Apocalypse for Today." *Theology Today*, 10. (October 1953): 357.

⁸ Novel series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

⁹ "The view that millions of believers will suddenly vanish to meet the Lord in the air, prior to a seven-year period of hell on earth, has emerged as the pervasive conceptual framework in American eschatology. Commonly referred to as "pretribulationism," this view has become increasingly mainstream and no longer occupies the fringe territory of theology." Jeff Scott Kennedy. "An ecclesiology of escapism: an examination of the rapture in the book of Revelation." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 10(50), (February 2009): 1.

¹⁰ Hal Lindsay and Carol E. Carson. *The Late, Great, Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970.

¹¹ Allen C. McSween, Jr. "When our myths are shattered: a constructive critique of apocalyptic theology." *Journal for Preachers* 24(4), (2001): 41.

curiosity and interest among those who are not active in a Christian church fellowship. The time is ripe for Christians to become more capable of dealing with this very important genre of biblical text.

The Bible contains several important segments of apocalyptic literature that include Isaiah, chapters 56-66; Ezekiel, chapters 37-48 (both referred to as "proto apocalyptic"); Daniel, chapters 7-12;¹² and Revelation, chapters 4-22. Any attempt at a correct understanding of these important passages necessitates an understanding of the literary nature of apocalyptic literature, and how it and how its use of imagery should be interpreted.¹³ In addition to these Old Testament sources, John draws from no less than 500 verses in the Old Testament, either in direct use, or in allusion, or in context,¹⁴ utilizing almost the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, drawing from the Law, the Poetry, and the Prophets.¹⁵ Arguably, the primary source of apocalyptic symbolism and eschatological theology come from the book of Daniel.¹⁶ An effort has been made in the following pages to illustrate many of these references, and these are also provided in the scriptural index at the end of the text. John uses many sources in his selection of symbols and metaphors in his presentation, including many well-understood mythological systems. "Any interpretation of the visions ... must take account of the broader context of apocalyptic genre, and that the mythological imagery characteristic of that genre must be recognized as an integral factor in the message of the book, not mere embellishment."¹⁷

¹² "Daniel and John fall on opposite sides of this great divide: Daniel delights in historical review, presenting history in the guise of various animals as well as more explicit historical references. After a few stories of how heroes of the exile avoided compromise, Daniel consists entirely of a recitation of his dreams, followed by an angelic interpretation. There is no otherworldly journey. Revelation, on the other hand, is dominated by John's ascent to heaven (see 4:1) and lacks entirely any historical review." David L. Barr. "John is not Daniel: the ahistorical apocalypticism of the Apocalypse." *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 40(1), (Spring 2013): 54.

¹³ "The inspired imagery of the Bible may surely be reckoned as one of the main sources of its spiritual power. The biblical images astonish our expectations, grip our attention, challenge our receptivity, haunt our memory, stir our affections, and transform our attitudes. While the Bible is not lacking in doctrine, its language suggests far more about God and His ways with man than it conveys by express concepts. From the crude anthropomorphisms of Genesis to the luxuriant visions of the Apocalypse, the Bible proves itself a treasure house of vivid and majestic symbolism." Avery Robert Dulles. "Symbol, myth, and the biblical revelation." *Theological Studies*, 27(1), (March 1966): 1-26

¹⁴ Arthur G. Fruchtenbaum. "The use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation." *Proceedings*, The Pre-Trib Research Center, Ariel Ministries. (2013): 1.

¹⁵ Not all scholars are impressed with John's utilization of the Old Testament: "The Apocalypse of John stands apart from all other early Christian and Second Temple Jewish literature in its (mis)use of the Jewish scriptures." Robert M. Royalty, "Don't touch this book!: Revelation 22:18-19 and the rhetoric of reading (in) the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Interpretation*, 12(3), (2004): 282.

¹⁶ Gregory K. Beale. "The influence of Daniel upon the structure and theology of John's Apocalypse." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27(4), (December 1984): 413-423.

¹⁷ John Joseph Collins. "Apocalyptic genre and mythic allusions in Daniel." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 21, (October 1981): 94.

Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalyptic literature "is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a Revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world."¹⁸

More study has taken place in the subject of apocalyptic literature in the past forty years than has taken place in the last three hundred.¹⁹ This is particularly true as applied to biblical prophecy and apocalyptic genre. "Prophecy was written to people in need of repentance. Apocalyptic literature was written to people in need of reassurance"²⁰ and hope.²¹ Apocalyptic literature is a style, or genre, of writing that was common from about 400 B.C. through 200 A.D.²² It was a form usually utilized to communicate the content of a prophetic vision or dream. "In form, an apocalypse is an autobiographical prose narrative reporting revelatory visions experienced by the author and structured to emphasize the central revelatory message."²³ Derived from the Greek word *apokalupsis*,²⁴ meaning to "reveal" or "uncover" something that has been hidden, *apocalypse* has come to refer to prophecies of the end times, whether biblical, apocryphal, or secular. The genre seems to have grown out of a culture of religious desperation, seeking to bring assurance and comfort to those who were experiencing chronic doubts or persecution. George Eldon Ladd notes three cultural factors that promoted the form. First, the text would come from a "religious remnant" that considered themselves to be a righteous minority immersed in an unrighteous world. Second, the genre usually addresses issues of good and evil, assuring the remnant of their righteous status as the text

¹⁸ John Joseph Collins, ed. "Apocalyptic: the morphology of a genre." *Semeia*, 14, (1979): 9.

¹⁹ Arnold Jacob Wolf. "Apocalyptic for the millennium." *Judaism* 48(1), (Winter 1999): 102.

²⁰ Kevin Hall. "Apocalyptic literature." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(4). (Summer, 2005): 7.

²¹ "Apocalyptic literature played a crucial role in the life of the early Church. It gave hope to those in the midst of trial. It gave strength to those weighed down by discouragement and fatigue. It provided security when it seemed as though the world was about to end. The careful symbolism that depicted the rise and fall of nations and kings pointed to the power of a provident God who controlled the course of history. Of course, deciphering these symbols has given commentators difficulty for centuries. The visions of Daniel and John still divide Biblical scholars worldwide. The debates rage as modern-day prophets attempt to read the signs of the times and predict the end of the world." Gale Heide. "What is new about the New Heaven and the New Earth?: a theology of creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40(1), (March 1997): 37

²² "Revelation was the first book to be called an "apocalypse," being so labeled on the basis of the first word in its Greek text (Rev 1:1). Since 1822 the term has become widely used to describe a distinctive literary genre of works that resemble the Apocalypse of John in both form and content. Since John's Apocalypse is the source of the terminology, one might be inclined to call it apocalyptic rather than prophecy. This is not accurate, however. This work differs from the usual apocalyptic pattern in a number of important respects, such as its lack of pseudonymity. This and other differences bolster the book's claim that it is a prophecy (1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and it must be accepted as such even though it has a number of features in common with apocalyptic." Robert L. Thomas. "The spiritual gift of prophecy in Revelation 22:18." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 32(2), (June 1989): 206.

²³ David E. Aune, "Revelation 1-5." In: *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 52A*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997: 65.

²⁴ Revelation 1:1.

describes the doom of evil. Third, the remnant experienced a "cessation of prophecy," a period when the people are longing to hear from God.²⁵

Though some argue that John utilized a "code" in order to throw off the attention of Romans who would consider his writing to be sedition against the emperor,²⁶ quite the opposite is true. John used this form simply because it was an appropriate way to present prophesy, and the Gentiles were very familiar with apocalyptic literature. John was hiding nothing from the Romans.

"When Israel accepted the belief that prophetic oracles had ceased after the tier of Ezra,²⁷ apocalyptic visions of the future, typically written in the name of a famous figure of the past, met a need for the people's continued communication with their God."²⁸ Overwhelmed by the destruction of their kingdoms and their domination by foreign nations (Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and then Rome), the Jews were searching for an end to the conflict.

"Apocalyptic thought flourished during a time of intense suffering, the historical climax of which came during the reign of the half-mad Seleucid ruler, self-styled as "The Splendid," Antiochus Epiphanes. With his insane zeal for furthering Hellenism, he dedicated himself to the total extinction of Judaism. He butchered pigs on Solomon's altar. He proscribed the reading of the Law. If a Jewish male infant was circumcised, the entire family and the officiating priest were slaughtered. It was in this atmosphere of persecution that apocalyptic was born."²⁹

Consequently, the conflict theme is common to the Jewish apocalyptic literature of the inter-testamental period. Conflict appears as "rebellion against God or warfare between the forces loyal to God and opposing forces led by a fallen angel, evil spirit, or wicked emperor."³⁰

Some of the characteristics that are common in apocalyptic literature include:

- The writer tends to choose some great man of the past (i.e. Enoch or Moses) and make him the hero of the book.

²⁵ George Eldon Ladd. "Apocalyptic." In: *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. E. F. Harrison, Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 1960.

²⁶ "He knows that he cannot write in a straight forward manner. The government will not allow a pamphlet to be released that calls for sedition or disobedience. Hence, John writes in an apocalyptic mode that he hopes will instruct the Christians while confusing the Romans. The apocalyptic genre is often used for a double purpose—political instruction and spiritual advice. In some ways, John adopts a kind of code language to speak to the believers." Keith A. Russell. "A call to sanctified resistance: Revelation 21:1-6." *Review & Expositor*, 109(3), (Summer 2012): 459.

²⁷ Circa 400 B.C.

²⁸ Stephen L. Harris. *Understanding the Bible: a Reader's Introduction*, 2ed. Mountainview, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985: 179.

²⁹ James Callis. "The Apocalypse: an apocalyptic book?" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 86, (March 1967): 69.

³⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins. "Apocalyptic themes in biblical literature." *Interpretation* 53(2), (April 1999): 123.

- The hero often takes a journey, accompanied by a celestial guide who shows him interesting sights and comments on them.
- Information is often communicated through visions.
- The visions often make use of strange, even enigmatic, symbolism.
- The visions often are pessimistic with regard to the possibility that human intervention will ameliorate the present situation.
- The visions usually end with God's bringing the present state of affairs to a cataclysmic end and establishing a better situation.
- The apocalyptic writer often uses a pseudonym, claiming to write in the name of his chosen hero.
- The writer often takes past history and rewrites it as if it were prophecy.
- The focus of apocalyptic is on comforting and sustaining the "righteous remnant."³¹

Methods of Interpretation

"Methods of interpretation tend to reflect the presuppositions and questions of the interpreters. That principle partly explains the variety of approaches used by students of the book of Revelation over the centuries."³² Consequently, with the multitude of presuppositions and deterministic agenda, "the interpretation of Revelation has been a dividing line between the "fringes" of the church and the "mainstream" throughout Christian history—though the positions themselves have changed over time. Today we must continue to read Revelation in biblical and historical context to avoid the dangers of apocalyptic rhetoric."³³

Apocalyptic literature has been studied and interpreted for centuries, and many of those who utilize a systematic method of interpretation fall into one or more of several dominant groups:

Preterist method. This method presupposes that all of the events that are recorded in the text took place within the period of time that is contemporary to the writer. The preterist method of interpreting the Revelation of John places all of the events in the first century as it symbolically chronicles the conflict between the church and Rome. Preterists deny any content of prophecy in the text, assuming that any eschatology it contains has already been realized.

Futurist method. This method presupposes that all of the recorded events in the text have yet to take place. The symbolism and imagery that is used may be interpreted as literal or symbolic, or a combination of both. Futurists may also argue that the symbolism is an attempt by the author to describe images and events that cannot be described in his contemporary vocabulary since the objects have yet to be seen and named.

³¹ Leon Morris. Quoted in Virkler, Henry A. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 1981: 192.

³² Adela Yarbro Collins. "Dating the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Research*, 26, (1981): 33.

³³ Robert M. Royalty. "The dangers of the Apocalypse." *Word & World*, 25(3), (Summer 2005): 283

Historicist method. Historicists hold that the events described in the text are directly related to world events that can range from the time of the writer to the end of the age. Those who hold to the historicist method must work to equate the images and symbols in apocalyptic literature to specific world events.

Idealist method. The idealist does not tie the events of apocalyptic literature to either historical or future events, but rather to spiritual truths. The text is not about swords and dragons, but about God's Word and Satan, it is not about rainbows and green fields, but about God's promises and His mercy. The idealist searches for the spiritual and/or theological meaning that the author intends upon conveying in the symbolism he uses.

Perspective method. This system is a mixture of futurism and preterism, holding that John was writing strictly to his contemporary church as the last generation before the second coming of Christ. As generations continue, each present generation is the last generation and the message should be considered relevant to their preparation for the second coming. The struggle between first-century Christianity is simply an archetype of the continued struggle between the contemporary church and the systems of evil within which it finds itself immersed.

Genre apocalypse. This method seeks to determine the literal meaning of the images in apocalyptic literature through the comparison of a text with all other texts of the Genre. Such a method ignores the historical, futurist, and idealist methodologies, and becomes bogged down in the determination of what literature to include in the comparison.³⁴

The Rapture. Some of the more significant conflicts arise between those who hold firmly to their beliefs concerning the literal application and sequence of the events that are depicted in the revelation. The following are some of these conflicting views:

- Israel will enjoy restoration during the Tribulation and the Millennium (dispensationalism.)
- The church will stay on earth throughout the Tribulation (posttribulationism).
- The church will be evacuated from the earth by a preliminary coming of Christ before the Tribulation (pretribulationism).
- The church will be evacuated from the earth sometime during the Great Tribulation (midtribulationism).
- Only the godly part of the church will be evacuated from the earth by a preliminary coming of Christ before the Tribulation (partial rapturism).³⁵

Most students of the Bible would probably agree that correct biblical interpretation is attainable when one is able to ascertain the content of the message intended by the authors. When we look at the above methods of interpretation, we find their theses to be somewhat

³⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins. "Reading the book of Revelation in the 20th century." *Interpretation*, 40(3), (July 1986): 235.

³⁵ Robert H. Gundry. *A Survey of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994: 461.

mutually exclusive. Each process will come to a set of conclusions that is dramatically different from the others, and may not be even close to the author's original intent. Seeking the true meaning of the scripture may require that one draw from the advantages of each interpretation methodology, depending upon the context of the text for process selection. Ladd states, "The easiest approach to the Revelation is to follow one's own particular tradition as the true view and ignore all others; but intelligent interpreters must familiarize themselves with the various methods of interpretation that they may criticize and purify their own views."³⁶

Interpretation guidelines.

As an example of interpretation methodology, let us examine some passages from the Revelation of John. While reading John's Apocalypse we should keep in mind that,

- it was written to Christians who had been undergoing long-term persecution (at least two-generations) with no hope for change;
- it was written to give the author's readers encouragement and purpose during this difficult time;³⁷
- it uses images and symbolism (containing a lot of common idioms and metaphors) to describe the attributes of the person/place/thing being described rather than simply naming the person/place/thing.

This latter point becomes important as we look at the text. As one encounters images, think about what the symbolism might mean as applied to attributes of that which is being described. "The force of symbolic language lies in its ability to supersede human categories. No Biblical writer exceeds the imagination and compelling imagery of the author of the NT Apocalypse. The theology of John is visual theology; seeing is understanding. The audience will experience earthquakes, storms, fire, pain, joy, worship, agony and delirium, all of which serve to mediate the tension between contemporary powers that be and Christian faith, thereby affirming the might and sovereign reign of Almighty God. It is within John's view, using graphic symbolism, to encourage Christians to an active, not passive, participation in history."³⁸

As John presents his prophecy he uses symbolism in the same manner that an artist uses a paintbrush to illustrate his message. "The reason that John uses symbols for the faithful is so that we should actually see and perceive spiritual reality and not merely listen to abstractions about it, and, accordingly, be shocked concerning those sins about which we have become anesthetized."³⁹ "The power of symbols in the development of the human consciousness is undeniable. No matter what the cultural milieu or religious tradition, the

³⁶ George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974: 670.

³⁷ David L. Barr. "The Apocalypse as a symbolic transformation of the world: a literary analysis." *Interpretation* 38(1), (January 1984): 39

³⁸ J. Daryl Charles. "An apocalyptic tribute to the Lamb (Rev 5:1-14)." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 34(4), (December 1991): 461.

³⁹ Gregory K. Beale. "The purpose of symbolism in the book of Revelation." *Calvin Theological Journal*, 41(1), (April 2006): 65.

visual and verbal symbols of the spiritual have entered at the most fundamental levels into human experience."⁴⁰ The symbols, derived from the world of sense experience, are used to communicate that which transcends the world in order that the transcendent might be experienced.⁴¹ Try to avoid attaching the symbols directly to the description. This is what makes the Revelation more of a challenge to read. We are not that familiar with how ancient Christians understood many of these images and symbols, though many are obvious. We are often left with the context of symbolic usage to formulate an explanation.

However, not all symbolism is lost to us. For example, the symbolic interpretation of numbers is used extensively in the Revelation to describe the attributes of the noun or pronoun it is describing. This practice, referred to as Jewish Gematria took many forms which include:

- The transliteration of Hebrew letters into numbers, using the sum of those figures to reach a conclusion.
- The attribution of symbolic significance to certain numbers.⁴²

John makes extensive use of this second application of Gematria, so when we approach the text, we should take care to study the context in order to choose whether John is referring to a literal or a symbolic value. When numbers are encountered in the text, try to ascertain the symbolism that was used for these numbers in the contemporary culture of the writer. We should also be reminded that scripture never contradicts scripture. When we see what appears to be a contradiction we are not applying the message of the scripture accurately. For example, Revelation 21:22 reveals that there is no temple in heaven, yet there are numerous references to the temple throughout the book.⁴³

Finally, we may be reminded that John was given an opportunity to look into an environment that no words in his language could fully describe. If someone from the future brought us an object that nobody had ever seen before, we would have to describe it based upon our current words that are not sufficient to describe it accurately. We would tend to refer to its attributes when we cannot refer to it by its name. Consequently, we are pushed back into

⁴⁰ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. "Dreams and visions : religious symbols and contemporary culture." *Religion and Intellectual Life*, 1(3), (Spring 1984):

⁴¹ John Painter. "Johannine symbols : a case study in epistemology." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. 27, (June, 1979): 49.

⁴² Glenn McCoy. "Jewish gematria and Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, (Summer 2000): 12.

⁴³ "Two aspects of John's interpretation of his symbols strike me as noteworthy. First is the rather pedestrian nature of the prosaic reality to which they refer. We are not talking about stars but about churches (1:20). We are not really eating books; we are prophesying (10:9-11). It would never have occurred to me to picture a prayer meeting as an angel with a golden censer before the throne of God suddenly throwing it on the earth with thunder, lightning, and earthquake ensuing (8:3-5); but perhaps John's prayer meetings were more lively than those I have seen. There is something maliciously appropriate in symbolizing the grandeur of Rome as a gaudy prostitute riding on a scarlet beast, at least from the provincial perspective of John (17:3-14). But it is late first century Roman culture that is being discussed, not gaudy prostitutes. The first point, then, is to keep our heads in the midst of all this exotic symbolism and remember we are hearing about quite common, everyday realities." David L. Barr. "The Apocalypse as a symbolic transformation of the world: a literary analysis." *Interpretation* 38(1), (January 1984): 40

the necessity of using symbols and metaphors to describe the attributes of these heretofore-unseen things.

"There exists a consensus among scholars that one of the interpretive keys to understand the Apocalypse lies in giving an adequate rationale for the pervasive use of the Old Testament in this book."⁴⁴ Though John makes no direct quotes from the Old Testament, it The Apocalypse contains well over 500 references to it,⁴⁵ coming largely from the Books of Moses, and the prophesies of Daniel and Ezekiel. We find allusions to the Old Testament in, virtually, every passage. "While many of them are merely faint echoes, we nevertheless gain the overwhelming impression that the whole of the OT, not only its symbols and predictions, receives life and meaning from the events surrounding the Revelation of Jesus Christ."⁴⁶ Entire Old Testament passages lay the framework for much of John's presentation. Any study of the Revelation would not be complete without an effort to understand John's use of the Old Testament material that is used in a range of allusion from direct use, including the intent and context of the material, to what may be referred to simply as "echoes" that may have no intent of conveying the original meaning. To this end, an effort will be made to illustrate many of the applications that John makes of Old Testament scripture in his presentation.

Interpretation example.

Revelation 4:2. *And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.*

Though there are apocalyptic overtones in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, John introduces us to the genre gently, and does not fully embrace the literary form until Chapter 4. It is here that John lays the foundation upon which the remainder of the book stands, and he does so with the imagery of a throne that is set in heaven. Visions of God and His throne are not new. "Of the sixty-two times the word "throne" appears in the New Testament, forty-seven are in the New Testament."⁴⁷ We find common references to the throne in Jewish tradition;⁴⁸ and most important to this study are those found in Isaiah 6:1-13; Ezekiel 1:1-28;10:1-22; and Daniel 7:9-10. Note that it was the act of usurping the authority of God's throne by transferring their allegiance to human kings that precipitated the demise of Israel as a nation. The Jews were very familiar with the throne motif, and consequently the first-century Christian community shared that familiarity.

A throne is a position of authority. John looked into heaven, and he first saw the authority that was there. This may be contrasted with the authorities of this world that are listed in Ephesians 6:12. Worldly men exercise the authority of this world. We are immersed

⁴⁴ David Matthewson. "Assessing Old Testament allusions in the book of Revelation." *The Evangelical Quarterly*. 75:4. (2003): 311.

⁴⁵ Arthur G. Fruchtenbaum. "The use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation." *Proceedings*, The Pre-Trib Research Center, Ariel Ministries. (2013).

⁴⁶ Thomas E. McComiskey. "Alteration of OT imagery in the book of Revelation : its hermeneutical and theological significance." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36(3), (Summer 1993): 308.

⁴⁷ David J. MacLeod. "The adoration of God the creator: an exposition of Revelation 4." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164(654), (April 2007): 213.

⁴⁸ Exodus 24:9-18; 1 Kings 22:19-22; Jeremiah 23:16-22, e.g.

in a world that is saturated with evil, requiring faith in God for any semblance of purity or truth. That is God's purpose for allowing sin in the world. Without sin, there is no need for faith. Without the impact of sin in our lives, we will never see a need for God. It is God's purpose that we learn who He is and respond to Him by faith. So, when John looked into heaven, rather than a place where sin was the authority, he saw a place where Jesus was the authority (verses 5, 8, and 11 identify Jesus as sitting on the throne.) It is easy to understand how a Christian, particularly one going through a conflict with this evil world, would find these words comforting. This throne motif is a central theme that continues through the remainder of the Revelation.⁴⁹

Revelation 4:3. *And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.*

The writer's description of God's throne is very similar to descriptions of it in Jewish apocalyptic literature, except for the anthropomorphic imagery.⁵⁰ Biblical apocalyptic literature is unique in that its "eschatology is marked off by all other eschatological thought precisely by its Christocentric emphasis."⁵¹ The biblical texts all agree that it is Jesus who sits on the throne. Here we find Jesus described with the appearance of jasper. We do not typically use the word *jasper* to describe the gem that many American engaged or married women wear on the ring finger of their left hand. We refer to this stone as a diamond. When you think of a diamond, even with all of the other materials that have been discovered or made in the last 2000 years, what do you think of? Purity? Clarity? Permanence? Immutability? The natural diamond is still considered one of the most amazing materials in all of creation, and thanks to strict market controls, it is also considered one of the most valuable.

Carnelian (note its similarity to the word, carnal) was a stone that was plentiful of the region around Sardis. This stone was blood-red in color, and would quickly inspire the thought of blood to one who found it. Again, the use of symbolism is obvious, since something cannot be crystal clear and blood-red at the same time. The color red, or crimson, represents the atoning blood of Christ in Christian apocalyptic literature. We may then find in the diamond and carnelian both the purity, permanence and atoning purpose of Christ, a character that is quite alien to the worldly authority that John's readers find themselves subjugated. "It should also be noted that the *sardius* was the first of the stones on the high priest's breastplate, and the jasper was the last in the Greek rendering of Exodus 28:17-18."⁵²

John also saw a rainbow surrounding the throne, an allusion to the throne vision in Ezekiel 1:27-28. If the throne is the authority that rules heaven, what is the significance of a

⁴⁹ M. Eugene Boring. "The theology of Revelation : the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns." *Interpretation*, 40(3), (July 1986): 259.

⁵⁰ Larry W. Hurtado. "Revelation 4-5 in the light of Jewish apocalyptic analogies." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 25, October 1985: 111.

⁵¹ George R. Beasley-Murray. "New Testament apocalyptic: a christological eschatology." *Review and Expositor*, 72, (Summer 1975): 317.

⁵² David J. MacLeod. "The adoration of God the creator: an exposition of Revelation 4." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164(654), (April 2007): 204.

rainbow surrounding it? The rainbow is a symbol of God's covenant with man,⁵³ literally presented by Him following the ancient flood.⁵⁴ The basis for the God's authority in heaven is His covenant with man and God has not forgotten his promises. Usually we think of a rainbow as a spectrum of all colors, but the rainbow in John's tapestry resembles the green of an emerald. Green symbolizes God's mercy and His purpose of hope. Consider the green of the spring season. The color Green reminds one of the renewing of life, empowered by God's mercy, and serves as an indicator of hope of better days to come. This covenant is one that is a product of God's mercy and brings hope to all who will receive Him. This is a very encouraging message to the persecuted saints, whether they are ancient or modern.

According to these three verses, a better place awaits those who are under the authority of the throne. They will be taken to a place where sin will no longer have any power, authority, or dominion over them. Instead of being subjected to the evil authorities of this world, this will be a place where all recognized authority will be that of Jesus Christ. This authority was given to Him by virtue of the price that He paid on the cross to atone for our sins, and in response to the covenant that God made with man, a covenant that God will be faithful to fulfill, one that is product of His mercy, one that brings us hope. Evil may reign now in the dark recesses of this pagan, secular, and apostate world, but it will not last forever.

Note that this interpretation example does not fit into any of the five methods listed above, but draws from some of the best features of several. From the preterist model, we recognize the plight of first-century Christians and how their circumstances provide the context for the passage. Israel has not been self-governing since the nation was overrun by Babylon, and no hope for independence exists. Christians suffer the additional indignity of rejection by both the Jews and many Gentiles. John's readers perceive the authority in the world as resting fully in the hands of the Romans. John's message of Jesus' authority is encouraging.

From the futurist viewpoint, we note that the throne is in heaven. The authority of Jesus Christ is in complete power in the kingdom of God. Many will interpret heaven to be a future place, assuring the reader that the authorities of this evil world will not last forever. From the idealist method, we observe that John is speaking about Jesus and His authority, realized in the surety of God's promises because of His mercy and grace.

We must keep John's purpose in mind as we determine the context and intent of his words. The "Revelation both gives advice and presents models of behavior. That is, it pursues both deliberative goals (seeking to shape the ongoing behavior of the hearers in specific ways in regard to specific circumstances or settings) and epideictic goals (seeking to praise and censure particular figures, whether historical or fictive, with the aim of reinforcing or shaping the values of the Christian groups John addresses)."⁵⁵

When we approach the interpretation of apocalyptic literature in this manner, we come away with an entirely different image than the historical literalist will have. The literalist simply sees a throne that holds someone looking like gemstones, surrounded by a green rainbow. This may make for a pretty painting, but holds no message for the reader. However,

⁵³ David E. Aune. "Revelation 1-5." In: *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 52A*. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997: 286.

⁵⁴ Genesis 9:13-24.

⁵⁵ David Arthur DeSilva. "Out of our minds?: appeals to reason (logos) in the seven oracles of Revelation 2-3." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 31(2), (December 2008): 125

when one applies appropriate processes employed in the interpretation of apocalyptic style, one comes away with a profound spiritual truth that is both instructive and encouraging. This tremendous message of hope came from only two apocalyptic-style verses that are a small part of the bulk of the Revelation of John. It takes a little bit of time to research the context of the imagery used in apocalyptic passages, but the time is worth it.

It might be interesting to note that John gradually moves into the apocalyptic imagery in this book. In fact, he makes use of some initial images that would have not been in the "vocabulary" of the ancients. For example in 1:20, John explains the interpretation of the images of the stars and candlesticks. If one combines what we know about ancient imagery with John's explanation of some of those original images he utilizes, we can come away from the apocalyptic text finding that there is little mystery.⁵⁶ The mystery of the apocalyptic genre is solved in the same way that the content of any biblical text is determined: through a comprehensive exegesis of the text. "It should be clear that the images of Revelation are symbols with evocative power inviting imaginative participation in the book's symbolic world. But they do not work merely by painting verbal pictures. Their precise literary composition is always essential to their meaning."⁵⁷

Biblical apocalyptic literature is not something to be avoided.⁵⁸ In fact, the Revelation⁵⁹ was written to be read⁶⁰ and those who read it are blessed. "The Apocalypse is

⁵⁶ "Semiotics, the scientific study of signs as systematized by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) shows that signs in a sign-system, like a biblical text or book, can be interpreted in three very different ways, depending on the relationship to the object they represent.

First, the exegete can assume that a sign has no physical relationship to the object it signifies, like for example, a national flag symbolizes a country. These signs, called symbols can only be understood by associating their meaning. So can, for example, the woman clothed with the sun in Rev 12 obtain the symbolic meaning of the people of Israel, the Christian Church, or the entire People of God.

Second, the exegete can treat a sign as an index. An index is in some way physically connected to the object it represents. For example, smoke calls attention to the existence of fire. John himself makes use of indexical references as he describes Satan as great dragon and old serpent (Rev 12:3. 7ff), thus correlating Satan with the ferocious and evil nature of these creatures.

Third, the interpreter can believe that a sign is the icon of the object it describes. An icon almost fully represents the physical nature of the object it signifies. For example, the merchants in Rev 18:3. 11. 15. 23 are icons of real tradesman in the Roman Empire during the time of John, and as early as the 4th century, the woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet was identified with Mary the mother of God." Marcus Locker. "A Semiotic Analysis of the 'New Jerusalem' in the Book of Revelation." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 4(23), (July 2003): 2.

⁵⁷ Richard Bauckham. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 18.

⁵⁸ The avoidance of apocalyptic literature is not a new response to the genre. "From about the end of the first century A.D. these apocalyptic and martyrological texts were banished from mainstream, post-war Judaism and—as far as we know—were no longer preserved in Jewish circles. It is arguable that the Jewish apocalypses and martyrological texts were regarded as dangerous by the Jewish Rabbis in view of the role which they played in strengthening Jewish resistance against Hellenism and Roman Imperialism. After the disastrous ending to the First Jewish War, such texts appear to have been written out of the Jewish Canon as a consequence of the need to dampen down the fierce flames of nationalism which had burst out spasmodically since the time of the Maccabees." Peter Staples. "Revelation 16:4-6 and its vindication formula." *Novum Testamentum*, 14(4), (October 1972): 282.

⁵⁹ e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:28,29; Ephesians 4:11.

the product of the NT gift of prophecy, administered by the Holy Spirit, referred to frequently in the NT as a gift,⁶¹ as a product of the gift,⁶² as a person possessing the gift, or as an exercise⁶³ of the gift."⁶⁴ The central element in apocalyptic literature, common to all biblical prose, is the glorious second coming of Jesus Christ, who will raise the dead, judge persons and usher in the glories of the Age to Come.⁶⁵ We find this theme whether we read from Isaiah 11 (a king from the line of Jesse), or in Daniel 7 (the Ancient of Days, the Son of Man.) Apocalyptic literature was not written for some great-learned scholar to analyze, but for everyday people who were experiencing extreme persecution. "Each book, at the time of its writing, helped those who were hungry for truth to catch a glimpse of the ultimate victory of God. These apocalyptic books have provided that same glimpse of victory for readers through the centuries – and continue to do so even today."⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Revelation 1:3.

⁶¹ e.g. Romans 12:6.

⁶² e.g. 1 Timothy 1:18.

⁶³ e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:31.

⁶⁴ Robert L. Thomas. "Literary genre and hermeneutics of the Apocalypse." *Master's Seminary Journal*, 2(1), (Spring 1991): 82.

⁶⁵ George Eldon Ladd. "New Testament apocalyptic." *Review and Expositor*, 78(2), (1981): 205.

⁶⁶ Kevin Hall. "Apocalyptic literature." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(4). Summer, 2005: 11.

Revelation 1:1-20.

Faithfulness in the Tough Times.

*On the deepest level,
the Book of Revelation provides a story
in and through which the people of God
discover who they are and what they are to do.⁶⁷*

Revelation 1:1-2. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: ²Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.*

Though there is some modern controversy surrounding the author, date, and validity of this book, the early church confidently ascribed its authorship to John, the Apostle. "Few scholars today believe that the gospel and Revelation were written by the same person, because of their linguistic and theological differences."⁶⁸ This was not always the case. Justin Martyr, about the year 140, was acquainted with this book, and received it as written by the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee,⁶⁹ for in his dialogue with Trypho, he expressly says: 'A man from among us, by name John, one of the apostles of Christ, in the Revelation made to him, has prophesied that...' "⁷⁰ This testimony was accepted by his contemporaries Irenaeus and Polycarp, the latter whom personally knew the Apostle. However, there is significant disagreement among the early writers as to the identification of this John, and his identity cannot be firmly established.⁷¹ Because of the necessity of his advanced age at the predominantly accepted period of its writing, some have attributed the text to his younger followers.⁷² However, one can draw several biographical points from the internal evidence of the book.

- John was a "brother" to those whom he wrote, not a priest.
- John claimed the gift of prophesy.
- John functioned as an elder.

⁶⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins . "Reading the book of Revelation in the 20th century." *Interpretation*, 40(3), (July 1986): 229.

⁶⁸ Adela Yarbro Collins. "Dating the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Research*, 26, (1981): 33.

⁶⁹ Matthew 4:21.

⁷⁰ Adam Clark.

⁷¹ R. Alan Culpepper. "John and Ephesus." *Sunday School Lesson Illustrator*. 4(1), (Fall 1977.)

⁷² "It has been composed and written by a disciple of St. John, ... True, he worked by the authority of the apostle, but depended entirely on his memory when he did his best to reproduce what he had heard John telling his audience of the visions he had had." Paul Gaechter. "The original sequence of Apocalypse 20-22." *Theological Studies*, 10(4), (December 1949):

- John did not claim to be among the twelve apostles (21:14); he included himself among the persecuted "apostles and prophets."
- John testifies that he has seen Christ, and received the Revelation from Him.
- John was from, and familiar with, the city of Jerusalem.
- John demonstrates priestly interests and knowledge.⁷³

Whether the writer of the Revelation was one of the twelve apostles, or was another dynamic elder, there is a compelling argument that the writer of the gospel of John and the writer of the Revelation were, indeed, the same individual as each document utilizes similar structure (including the use of seven signs to present the message), literary skill, and content. Irenaeus, a second-century historian was a contemporary of Polycarp, who knew John personally, and wrote "Afterwards John the Apostle of our Lord, the same that lay upon his bosom, also published the gospel, while he was yet in Ephesus of Asia."⁷⁴

There are several well-accepted opinions concerning when the letter was written, mostly formed around historical evidence of Christian persecution. Though there was little intense Roman persecution of the Christian church during John's lifetime,⁷⁵ there are a suitable number of references in the text to incidents of persecution to understand that such experience had become a way of life for members of the Church.⁷⁶ Though many early historical documents refer to the martyrdom of John, there is no evidence that such martyrdom could not have come when John had attained advanced age. Many hold that John wrote the Revelation during his exile on the island of Patmos.⁷⁷ However, his banishment to labor in a stone quarry⁷⁸ on the island of Patmos (now called Patino) makes this position unlikely. This exposition will present the letter as written by John, the Apostle, penned from Ephesus, after his release from exile on the island of Patmos shortly after the end of Roman Emperor Domitian's reign around 90 – 95 A.D.

The style of the letter is apocalyptic, referring to a prophecy that is presented in a poetic and symbolic form that reveals an open secret that was previously hidden. Apocalyptic writings from a variety of cultural sources appeared about 400 years before Christ, and continued for another 200 years after the Revelation of John was written. These writings were written as a response to cultural stress. As the apocalyptic prose and poetry is examined, one must take into consideration the nature of that genre of literature and how it was utilized by those to whom it was directly written. Appendix 1 lists some of these early apocalyptic documents.

⁷³ John J. Gunther. "The elder John, author of Revelation." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 11, (April 1981): 3, ff.

⁷⁴ Eusebius, 164

⁷⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins. *Crisis and Catharsis, The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1984: 153

⁷⁶ For example, Revelation 1:9; 2:10; 2:13; 6:9; 16:5-7; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4

⁷⁷ James A. Brooks. "The seven churches of the Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, 13(4). (Summer 1987): 6.

⁷⁸ David M. Wallace. "Patmos described." *Biblical Illustrator*, 22(4), (Summer 1996): 12.

The organization of the book is uncanny. Determination of the structure of the book can be as daunting a task as understanding all of its content.⁷⁹ In the Revelation there is "no consensus over structure, apart from the easily observed fact that there are at least four series of sevens. We might almost say that there are as many proposals as proposers."⁸⁰ However, this study will be organized in a fashion similar to that structure, originated by Loenertz,⁸¹ further developed and presented by Merrill E. Unger,⁸² and included in Appendix 2. The seven major sections of the text may be organized as follows:

Prologue.	1:1 - 1:20
1: The seven churches.	2:1 - 3:22
2: The seven seals.	6:1 - 8:1
3: The seven trumpets.	8:2 - 11:19
4: The seven persons.	12:1 - 13:18
5: The seven bowls.	16:1 - 16:21
6: The seven dooms.	17:1 - 20:15
7: The seven new things.	21:1 - 22:21
Epilogue: Closing testimonies.	22:6 - 21

Following the introduction or prologue, the book is a vivid drama in seven acts, with a narrative break between the six and seventh in several of these. Each of these acts is divided into seven sub-acts, again with a frequent narrative break between the sixth and seventh. This recursive geometric complexity of the book is profound, yet simple. This structure is also consistent with the seven-fold structure of the Gospel of John as the writer presents the ministry of Jesus as a sequence of seven signs. The number seven symbolized fullness or perfection in ancient Jewish thought. Since the number six is less than seven, it is considered symbolically to represent falling short, a metaphor for sin. Hence we learn in this book of the number 666 which is imperfection presented three times, used to represent the concept of total depravity. In scripture we often observe terms repeated three times, doing so to provide a complete and inviolable presentation. So, the narrative break between the sixth and seventh acts and sub-acts in this literature prepares that move from incompleteness to completeness. The book then ends with an epilogue, a testimony of Christ.

The Revelation of John was written during a time when the early church was under a great deal of stress. It was viewed as a Jewish cult (which by all cult definitions is quite defensible), was hated by the Jews because of their rejection of the Law, "Jews already disagreed vehemently with Christians over the identity of Jesus Christ and resented the fact

⁷⁹ " One of the tasks of the commentator on sacred Scripture is to provide the reader with an outline of the structure of the work under consideration. Accordingly, every commentary on Revelation includes some such outline within its introductory pages. However, a glance at two or more outlines reveals that this can be a fairly subjective procedure." R. Alastair Campbell. "Triumph and delay: the interpretation of Revelation 19:11-20:10." *Evangelical Quarterly*, 80(1), (January 2008): 3

⁸⁰ Donald Guthrie. *Relevance of John's Apocalypse*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987: 20.

⁸¹ R.J. Loenertz. *The Apocalypse of St. John*. Tr. Hilary J. Carpenter. London: Sheed & Ward, 1947.

⁸² Compiled from Merrill F. Unger. *The New Unger's Bible Handbook*. Chicago IL: Moody Press, 2005. See Appendix 2.

that many Jews were turning to Christ. Yet, Christians claimed to worship the God of the Jews, and told the Roman authorities as such."^{83, 84} Many Christians who were of Jewish heritage found themselves rejected by their families, often treated as though they had died, losing their inheritance and land. It was often difficult for Christians to find employment, particularly in communities that were predominantly Jewish.

Christians found themselves in conflict with the Roman authorities because of their unwillingness to worship its emperors, among other things. "Roman emperor worship began with the worship of Roman Caesars such as Julius Caesar (49-44 B.C.) and Caesar August (31 B.C. – 14 A.D.). By the time of the early church, an imperial cult had developed which instituted regular emperor worship. Although most Roman emperors did not claim to be divine during their own lifetimes, their successors often deified them, giving them new names."⁸⁵

Maintaining faithfulness to the LORD and to the doctrines of the early church was not a simple task, and the temptations to reject the faith were great. The Christian community was crying for help, and this letter was provided to encourage them by teaching that this experience is only for a time, and that God, who is just, will soon vindicate them by the return of Christ in glory, resulting in security for the believers and judgment for the unbelievers.

The basic issues that define social culture have changed little in the passing millennia. Fulfilling the prophecy of Matthew 24:9, the church is still under attack from those who despise the gospel. More Christians have been martyred in the last forty years than in the sum of all the previous years since the ascension of Christ.⁸⁶ Fundamentalist Islamic zealots systematically persecute and kill Christians. Several nations are becoming quite dangerous places for Christians, including Somalia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, and Iraq. The church is under ideological attack in the United States, with many denominations surrendering almost completely to secular humanism and universalistic themes, failing to take a stand for biblical-based morality against the current of public apostasy.

The book was written to churches not unlike today's congregations, faithful people who were struggling to withstand the forces of the present darkness.⁸⁷ John's Revelation (1) defends the authority of its message, (2) challenges the churches in its examination of their weaknesses, and (3) encourages them through giving them a glimpse of God's judgment that will come upon their oppressors. The basic message is that God is on His throne, His plan will not be altered by the world, and He will ultimately win the battle and reward all those who are faithful to Him.

If we hold that the writer of the Revelation is John, the Apostle, we can arguably state that at the time of this writing he is probably best positioned among anyone to write what the LORD has revealed to him, both through his experiences when walking with Jesus, through a long life that was filled with experiences with the Holy Spirit, and now when the other Apostles have been martyred, he stands alone, sentenced to a labor camp on the island of

⁸³ William A. Chambers. "Jews in Asian cities." *Biblical Illustrator*, 26(2), (Winter 1999-2000): 80.

⁸⁴ Acts 24:14-15; 26:6-7,22.

⁸⁵ Steve W. Lemke. "Christianity in an age of emperor worship." *Biblical Illustrator*, 40(4), (Summer 2014): 68.

⁸⁶ *International Journal of Missionary Research*

⁸⁷ 1 John 2:11.

Patmos where he encounters the risen Christ again. John begins the book with the clear statement that what follows is the revelation given to him by Jesus Christ, and is not his own. Unlike the anonymity he enters into the gospel, John writes in the first-person, using the pronoun "I" repeatedly, giving first-hand testimony to what he has seen and learned. He then states that what he is about to reveal, referring to the narrative that results in the destruction of Babylon and her replacement by the New Jerusalem.⁸⁸ His statement suggests that he would not have expected that we would still be reading his words nearly two millennia later, though he does address in the book the reasons why the LORD tarries.⁸⁹

Revelation 1:3. *Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.*

The imperatives of verse three call upon people to respond to the prophecy in three ways: read it, hear it, and take it to heart. Why do people tend to shy away from dealing with this last book of the Bible? Of the sixty-six books of the Bible, this book is probably the least read and heard. There is a "fundamental difference between those who interpreted the book literally and those who interpreted it spiritually. The tension between these two schools of thought still dominates twentieth century quests for the meaning of this book."⁹⁰ There are some who prefer to approach the text literally, while there are others who choose to approach it symbolically. To study the book of Revelation, it must be approached a little differently than the rest of scripture. The detailed exegetical methods that we apply to non-apocalyptic literature do not work as well because the apocalyptic literature style communicates ideas in sweeping vistas, presented in metaphorical imagery. If we pick apart the translation and application of every word, as we do with theological literature, we will most likely find ourselves getting bogged down in hermeneutical discussion and miss the big-picture altogether. Though sometimes difficult to understand, "the language and imagery of the Book of Revelation is unmatched in the entire Bible. When a reader is willing to spend the necessary time in careful and deliberate study of the book, the mined treasures will be well worth the effort. Nearly every detail of the writing has some significance and deserves careful examination."⁹¹

⁸⁸ Marko Jauhiainen. "Αποκαλυσπισ Ιεσου Χριστου (Rev. 1:1): the climax of John's prophecy?" *Tyndale Bulletin*, 54(1), (2003): 99-117.

⁸⁹ One characteristic that is common to ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses is that they were written using the literary device of pseudonymity. John's choice to identify himself and write this in the first person gives his apocalypse a unique and personal character. "John frequently uses the first person singular of aorist verbs for seeing and hearing throughout the vision report found in 4:1 through 22:59. Six times he uses the phrase "after this I saw (and behold)" (4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1) as a formal device to introduce substructure; "I saw" is found thirty-two times, "I heard" twenty-six times, "I saw and behold" eight times, and "I saw and heard" twice. Though John very occasionally takes upon himself the role of analyst or commentator (cf. 6:9; 7:13-17; 9:6; 13:9-10; 14:4-5, 12; 20:6), he generally limits himself to a straight sequential narrative report. This autobiographical character of the Apocalypse has the function of encouraging the unconditional acceptance of the vision report at face value." David E. Aune. "The social matrix of the Apocalypse of John." *Biblical Research*, 26, (1981): 18

⁹⁰ Donald Guthrie. *Relevance of John's Apocalypse*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987: 28.

⁹¹ Terence B. Ellis. "The Lion of Judah." *Biblical Illustrator*, 23(3), (Spring 1997): 51.

Apocalyptic literature is meant to be read in a broader view than in the typical prose of scripture. One might liken an apocalyptic presentation to an impressionist's painting, versus the poetry and prose of the remainder of the biblical text to a Norman Rockwell illustration. One approaches impressionist art in a completely different manner than still-life art. Apocalyptic is to be approached in a more impressionist manner as one absorbs the meaning behind images.

The best way to read prophecy is to sit and read it in its entirety. The prophecy in the Revelation can be read in about 30-45 minutes. Repeated readings will start to bring to the reader a broad picture, where details will start to fall into place with continued familiarity with it. Prior to taking part in such reading it is a good idea to become familiar with how the ancients understood some of the more common metaphors, images, and numerology.

Verse 3 refers to the reader being blessed by the reading of the prophecy, not frustrated by it. We can become frustrated if we stray from the central focus of the letter and seek answers to questions that the prose is not intended to provide. With a little help from reliable commentaries, we can go a long way to understanding what the Revelation of John is all about.

Finally, the writer encourages the reading of this Revelation as he observes the end of the age unfolding. The writer believed that the time for the final judgment was near. When we look back over the more than 2 millennia since the book was written, observing that all the events of the Revelation have not been completed we might question the accuracy of the writers. The apostle Paul, like John, expected Jesus to return quickly; most likely within his own lifetime. These two would most likely be surprised to have known that over 2000 years later we would still be waiting. However, we understand that (1) no one has been given knowledge of when these events would take place, and (2) God's timing is defined by his nature, not ours. Jesus could come back tomorrow, so we are called upon to be prepared.

Revelation 1:4a. *John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace,*

Though it is likely that John's letter was an open letter to all of the churches in the region, he designated seven communities of churches as specific recipients.⁹² These were real churches with real people and real problems. Most of these churches were founded during Paul's Ephesian ministry,⁹³ so by the time John writes, they are about 40 years, or roughly two generations, old.⁹⁴ John was writing to church members, not theological scholars.

⁹² Many hold that John is writing specifically to these seven churches and no others. "The term αἱ ἐκκλησίαι occurs thirteen times in Revelation (only in 1-3 and 22.16), seven times in the formula 'what the Spirit says to the churches' (2.7,11,17,29; 3.6,13,22). In four of the remaining occurrences, the seven churches to whom the Revelation is addressed are specifically in view (1.4,11,20 [2x]); the two remaining occurrences are 2.23 and 22.16). In all these references with the possible exception of 22.16, it is either clear or probable that the seven churches are specifically in view. There is no evidence to suggest that αἱ ἐκκλησίαι as a collective term refers to any group other than the seven specific Christian communities to whom the book as a whole is addressed." David E. Aune. "The prophetic circle of John of Patmos and the exegesis of Revelation 22:16." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no 37, (October 1989): 107

⁹³ Acts 19:10.

⁹⁴ James A. Brooks. "The seven churches of the Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, 13(4). (Summer 1987): 6.

Consequently, it is useful to understand that it was the author's intent that his work be accessible to all Christians, and that would certainly include the membership of today's Christian church. Unlike the Gospel of John where the author never reveals himself by name (but does do so by context and attributes), he uses his name in this letter. Furthermore, notwithstanding the acceptance of the Apostle as the author by the early church, the reference to the Island of Patmos in verse 11 provides internal evidence that the author is, indeed, John the Apostle.

John uses a borrowed play on words in his salutation that is literally identical to that used by Paul in most of his letters,⁹⁵ by Peter in both of his letters and by John in his second letter. Making use of a common secular idiom, the writer invokes immediately his confidence in the LORD and His concern on their behalf. Where a Greek letter often opened with "rejoice", *charein*, Paul replaced it with a similar sounding word, *charis*, or grace. He also included the typical Jewish salutation, *shalom*, but in its Greek form, *irene*. By so doing, the writer has formed a bridge between Jewish and Gentile expression. Those who have faith in God through Jesus Christ have already experienced God's grace, yet by using this play on words, Paul reminds them and us that we are God's people only by his grace, and he desires that we fully accept that grace so we can also experience God's peace in our hearts and minds. This peace refers, not only to a cessation of turmoil, but to that which is derived from spiritual wholeness, or fullness.

Revelation 1:4b. *from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne;*

John continues to state that this grace and peace is bestowed upon us by God, (Him who was...), from the Holy Spirit (the "seven spirits" or "seven-fold" spirit, referring to the perfection of the Holy Spirit), and from Jesus Christ. Though no form of the word, "Trinity" is found anywhere in the content of Biblical scripture, this is one of several comprehensive references to the Three Persons of God. Using a literary device similar to the Old Testament prophets who presented their work as the "Word of the LORD," John is about to present to his readers a message that he fully understands as coming directly from God. Many, if not most Christians, following the imperative of scripture, consider all of its content to be the true, inspired Word of God.⁹⁶ The Revelation of John moves beyond simple inspiration to actually report words and events that were revealed to him personally by the triune God, following a command from the LORD to do so in written form.⁹⁷ Once we get into the prophetic passages in the text, we will observe much of the personality of the writer in the words, but little personal opinion or theological imperatives, as we see in most other types of scriptural writings. However, the Revelation is first a book of Christian theology as John presents theological truths in sweeping visual vignettes.

⁹⁵ Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:4.

⁹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16.

⁹⁷ Revelation 1:11, 19; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5.

Revelation 1:5a. *And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth.*

John describes himself by name, and he describes the three persons of the Godhead in a series of flowing attributes. This pattern of describing someone or something by a set of attributes is common to the apocalyptic style of writing. To understand the intended identity of who is named, we must investigate the list of attributes and assign them to one who we already know, one to whom we have already been introduced. This attention to attributes will be a continual task as we approach this literary style. John demonstrated his own humility in his Gospel by refraining from using his name at all. In the Revelation, by referring to himself simply by name and to God by a set of flowing attributes, he is communicating this same humility and, by contrast, the exceeding greatness of God. He also refers to the "life, death, resurrection, and eschatological triumph of Jesus by calling him the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the earthly kings. This invokes the narrative of Jesus' life, as well as the narrative that will follow in the rest of Revelation, especially with the emphasis upon Jesus' eschatological glory in which the faithful will share. This victory, however, comes only after Jesus' own ultimate suffering on the cross, whereby he took on human sin; indeed he died because of human sin."⁹⁸

Therefore it is instructive for us to observe those attributes:

God: *him which was, is, and is to come.* These are allusions to God's timeless self-definition that we find in Exodus 3:14, and described by John in Revelation 21:6 and 22:13. There is none other than God who can be accurately described in this manner.

The Holy Spirit: *Seven Spirits which are before His Throne.* We may observe the use of apocalyptic numerology as John uses the number seven as a reference to completeness and perfection.⁹⁹ John is referring to the "complete and perfect Spirit of God." There is no other spirit that fulfills this definition.

The LORD, Jesus Christ: *faithful witness, first begotten of the dead, and prince of the Kings of the earth.* We find the LORD as the faithful witness in Jeremiah 42:5. We find that the LORD Jesus is the first to rise from the Dead, Acts 26:23, as alluded to in Psalm 89:27.¹⁰⁰ The LORD is the one who is the King over all Kings of

⁹⁸ Jeffrey S. Siker. "Revelation 1:4-9." *Interpretation*, 61(2), (April 2007): 212.

⁹⁹ "All of the numbers are symbolic and are understood against their Old Testament background: seven equals the number of completeness (seven days of creation, seven days of the week, complete judgment [Lev. 26:18,21,24,28], fullness of wisdom [Prov. 9:1]. So, for example, the completeness of judgments in Revelation is designated by seven seals, trumpets, and plagues. In addition, the fullness of the Holy Spirit is referred to as the seven Spirits who are before his throne. Some of the symbols are also explained through understanding early Jewish interpretative tradition, Greco-Roman customs, history, and so forth." Gregory K. Beale. "The purpose of symbolism in the book of Revelation." *Calvin Theological Journal*, 41(1), (April 2006): 56.

¹⁰⁰ The word rendered as "first begotten of the dead" is also translated, "first-born," and both of these terms can be used to hold to the heresy of Jesus as one who was created. However to the Hebrews, "first-born" and "my son" functioned in the same dual capacity. "They were collective terms which represented and included that *one* who was to come and the *many* who already believed on him."

the earth, 1 Timothy 6:15.¹⁰¹ Again, as with the two previous descriptions, there is none other than Jesus Christ who can be defined in this way.

As we are only beginning to enter the text of the Revelation, John is providing us with some instruction on how to understand the literature form. As we continue, he brings us gently into the form with numerous literary formulas to guide us along our way.

Revelation 1:5b-6. *Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, ⁶And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.*

The salutation ends with words of praise. Recall that this letter was written to Christians in stress. Note how John describes his readers as loved by God. God has completely forgiven all of the faithful for their many sins. God has called the faithful to be His Kingdom, endowing them with two important tasks: (1) to be kings, or to carry the authority of His word to a lost world, and (2) to be priests with access to him, to serve Him as God and Father and to communicate His nature and purpose to that lost world.¹⁰² This is a tall order for a community of faithful who do not understand their appointment by God as kings and priests. "It is a sad commentary on the intelligence and spiritual acumen of believers that they should be so slow to perceive truths that are so clearly stated in Holy Writ. Man clings fatuously to the carnal and temporal, and is indifferent to the eternal and spiritual. He holds rigidly to the shadow and lets the substance go. The type means more to him than the antetype; the prophecy bulks larger in his mind than the fulfillment."¹⁰³

When we consider all of these things God has done for us, how can we do anything but praise Him, and seek to live lives that are worthy of our calling?¹⁰⁴ We recognize God as having all power, deserving of all of the glory that we can give, and He is worthy of this for eternity.

We can readily observe that God has called people to faithfulness in him, for to be unfaithful would place us outside of the context of what John describes as the church in these verses. We are to be faithful in times of trouble because of what God has done for us and because of who God is.

Revelation 1:7-8. *Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. ⁸I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.*

Consequently, a defensible translation is "Son of God." Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.

¹⁰¹ The language and imagery of Psalm 2 is quoted often in the book of Revelation to refer to the "ultimate role and triumph of the man born to be King." Ralph L. Smith. *Old Testament Theology: its History, Method, and Message*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1993: 414.

¹⁰² Exodus 19:6.

¹⁰³ Robert Clark. "The imperial priesthood of the believer: Revelation 1:6; 1 Peter 2:5,9." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 92(368), (October 1935): 442.

¹⁰⁴ Ephesians 4:1; 2 Peter 2:5,19.

Following the salutation is an attention-getter: "Look!" It is the same word that is used in John's Gospel by John the Baptist when he, speaking to his own disciples, points out the Messiah, Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁵ In this same manner of identification, John now points the readers to this same Messiah, Jesus. However, as John the Baptist was pointing out Jesus in His "first coming," John is pointing his audience to this same Jesus, in His glorified post-resurrection state as the Eternal LORD. Where Jesus, during His earthly ministry was recognized by only a few faithful, a pattern that would continue until the Second Coming, when He comes again He will be recognized by all.¹⁰⁶ John makes a point that this is inclusive of all people, even those who pierced him, a reference to all those who rejected Him and until now were not given the opportunity to witness the resurrected LORD. This theme is repeated throughout the Revelation: the second coming will be witnessed by all people, living and dead, righteous and unrighteous. The faithful will see His glory in excitement and fulfilled anticipation.¹⁰⁷

Another contrast in the Revelation of the Eternal LORD is the manner in which He will be seen,¹⁰⁸ and now be received: in mourning.¹⁰⁹ This statement is similar in grammar to the statement in 18:9, where the world wails over the destruction of Babylon. The rapture event is described later in this book in great detail: when Jesus comes and takes away the faithful, and the Holy Spirit leaves the people to their sin, there will be much pain and suffering. The impact of the loss of God's hand of protection over mankind will be so great that all would die if God does not intervene one last time. The faithful will also mourn as they witness (1) the cost that God paid for our redemption, and (2) the cost the world will be paying for their rejection of God. Christ assured the faithful "that dying for the faith need not be feared, for he had died before them and now holds the keys to death and Hades. For that reason, it will be appropriate for all the tribes of the earth to offer ritual devotion of lamentation for Christ, when they see him with the clouds."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ John 1:29.

¹⁰⁶ "In the Old Testament only one coming of the Christ is spoken of, and with this one coming the fulfillment of all the messianic predictions and promises is connected. The New Testament has shown that what to the point of view of prophecy appeared as one undivided act resolves itself in the historical outcome into two distinct chronologically separated events, called by us the first and the second coming of Christ. With this in view it would be quite conceivable that in the further progress of New Testament revelation the second coming again should have divided itself into a twofold appearance of the Lord with an interval between the second and third coming, as is the case between the first and second. Such a gradual resolution of the unit of Old Testament prophecy into a series of successive fulfillments would be quite in keeping with what we know of the method of revelation and even can claim a sort of historical attractiveness." Geerhardus Vos. "The Second Coming of Our Lord and the Millennium." *The Presbyterian*, 86, (1916): 6.

¹⁰⁷ "Preterists contend that this verse refers to the "cloud coming" of Christ in A.D. 70 in judgment on Israel with the Romans as the instrument of that judgment. Thus for preterists this verse refers to the local event in A.D. 70, not a global event in conjunction with the second coming of Christ." Mark L. Hitchcock. "A critique of the preterist view of Revelation and the Jewish war." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 164(653), (January 2007): 89-90.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel 7:13.

¹⁰⁹ Zechariah 12:10-14.

¹¹⁰ Leonard L. Thompson. "Lamentation for Christ as a hero: Revelation 1:7." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 119(4), (Winter 2000): 703.

John finished this short, yet profound prophecy, with a "So shall it be, Amen!" making this one of the most powerfully presented messages in scripture. He then quoted the words of Christ that place these events into context. God testifies to His eternity and mankind's temporality. This creation of God, everything that we see and know of our universe and beyond, has a beginning and an ending.¹¹¹ God describes himself outside the limitations of this creation by being both the beginning and the ending, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last.¹¹² "Although one might think that the origin of the expression would be found in the Greek world, most interpreters are convinced that it began in Hebrew thought and the Old Testament. The ancient Jews often used the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet to indicate the totality of a thing."¹¹³ Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, which like the Jewish *Aleph* and *Taw*, were used to represent beginning and ending in a significant and symbolic way. God is present in all time. This attribute of God may be referred to as "omnitemporality."¹¹⁴ The Eternal God exists before, during, and after time as we experience it. He is not limited by time as we are, but observes all time for His own pleasure. The beginning, the ending, and everything in between are His. How big is your God?

Revelation 1:9. *I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

With the salutation concluded, John wastes no time getting into the presentation of the message of the letter. He starts by presenting the actual physical setting for that which he is about to describe. In his typical humble manner, John does not use this Revelation to place himself above anyone else, but rather recognizes the true equality that all people share at the foot of the throne of God. Therefore, he refers to himself as our brother, fellow sufferer, sharer of the kingdom, patiently enduring his exile in the Name of Jesus. He is not writing this letter from a position of authority or superior status, though at the time of this writing, John is advanced in years and greatly respected by the church. "When John defines himself, he draws the picture of a prophet, an instrument of the divine manifestation and a voice of the risen Christ. His highest ambition is to create and communicate the images of witness to the divine mysteries which he narrates and of brother to his Christian companions."¹¹⁵ He is familiar with the same persecution that his readers are experiencing, so he can write to them as a peer, and his words will be heard. "For John 'suffering' is probably the most essential ingredient in

¹¹¹ Though, arguably, it could be billions upon billions of solar years from the point of the creation of the universe to the point in time when it comes to a complete, physical, end.

¹¹² Isaiah 41:4.

¹¹³ James E. Carter. "Alpha and Omega." *Biblical Illustrator*, 18(3), (Spring 1992): 14.

¹¹⁴ John W. Carter. "The epistemological impact of an omnitemporal eternity on theological paradigms." *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, 2(1). (March 2001): 2.

¹¹⁵ François Bovon. "John's self-presentation in Revelation 1:9-10." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 62(4), (October 2000): 700.

the Christian proclamation."¹¹⁶ John is about to tell of one of the greatest experiences of his life, one that is directly related to that suffering, and has now set the stage to do so.

Located about sixty miles southwest in the Aegean Sea, Patmos is a small, barren island that is about 10 miles long and six miles wide and was typically the last stop on a voyage from Rome to Ephesus. Of volcanic origin, it is the smallest of the islands in the Greek Archipelago. The island saw little use prior to its appropriation by the Roman Empire for use as a place of banishment,¹¹⁷ largely because of the pirating that took place on the open sea. "Banishment to an island could have occurred only as the result of a legal sentence. In the case of the province of Asia, this sentence would have been imposed by the proconsul of that district. This Roman official would not have been able, upon his own authority, to punish a Christian preacher, if he had not felt himself authorized to act by some decree issuing from the imperial government. Apparently, the Roman government had decided that the propagation of the Christian religion was to be checked by the courts or by the police."¹¹⁸ Caught up in this policy, John was arrested and exiled to Patmos where he, most likely, was forced into hard labor in its stone quarries.¹¹⁹ John had been teaching his disciples to worship the LORD, a direct violation of an edict from Domitian to worship him. Domitian was obsessed with power. "From the beginning Domitian controlled the government completely. He considered his authority supreme, looked at the Senate and all public officers as his subordinates, and refused to observe constitutional rights."¹²⁰ Domitian did not interact with the Christian community for the first twelve years of his reign. However, at this point he worked to strengthen his borders and embolden his own position, turning his offense on religions that included Christians, Jews, and worshippers of Isis.¹²¹ "John was among many Christians whom Domitian persecuted, exiled, or killed. It is estimated that John's exile lasted eighteen months, ending when Domitian was assassinated in AD 96."¹²²

Revelation 1:10-11. *I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, ¹¹Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.*

¹¹⁶ Leonard L. Thompson. "A sociological analysis of tribulation in the Apocalypse of John." *Semeia*, 36, (1986): 150.

¹¹⁷ Many Christians were banished to inhospitable islands such as Patmos. "It was a penalty for humbler criminals, provincials, and slaves. It was in its worst form a terrible fate: like the death penalty it was preceded by scourging, and it was marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground in a dark prison, and work under the lash of military overseers. It is an unavoidable conclusion that this was St. John's punishment." William M. Ramsay. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1963: 85.

¹¹⁸ Ray Frank Robbins. "The Isles of Patmos." *Biblical Illustrator*, 13(2), (Winter 1987): 41.

¹¹⁹ Gary Hardin. "Patmos, the place." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(1), (Fall, 2004): 72.

¹²⁰ Cecil Ray Taylor. "Emperor Domitian." *Biblical Illustrator*, 26(4), (Summer 2000): 20.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²² David M. Wallace. "Patmos described." *Biblical Illustrator*, (Summer 1996): 22(4) 9.

It is instructive to observe what was John doing on the Lord's Day. He states that He was "in the Spirit." John was where he was supposed to be on the Lord's Day. We open opportunities for sin when we are not where we are supposed to be. David sinned with Bathsheba when he should have been with his army on the field.¹²³ When we are in the center of God's plan, He can use us in it. It was the Lord's day, and for John that was Sunday, the first day of the week. Apparently, John was focusing on this being the Lord's Day, and was in prayer and meditation, honoring God in his heart.

While meditating, John heard a loud voice like a trumpet. This *trumpet* metaphor implies that the voice was clear and unmistakable, similar to the call of the trumpet heard by Israel coming from Mt. Sinai.¹²⁴ We can observe several uses of the trumpet in scripture where it is used to as a call, preceding a clear, discernible, and truthful message.¹²⁵ It was not "a feeling" or a "still, small voice." John is describing a call that he could distinguish as clearly as if someone were speaking loudly next to him.

As we read the Revelation we may note that it is a spoken narrative rather than prose to be read. The narrative "was written as oral-aural communication, not to be read as a text.³ At the most literal level, the voice that the hearer/reader of Revelation actually hears is the voice of the lector. Thus one set of quotation marks surrounds all of Revelation that the lector reads forth to the assembled congregation."¹²⁶

Personally, I have heard the voice of God twice. These came in times of stress when I had been doing some long-term praying, seeking God's help. Once, it was in a time of emotional depression, and the other in a time of spiritual depression. In both occasions I was completely delivered from the situation in the instant that the LORD's message got through. God's voice was as clear in my ears as though He were a person talking to me. This is the kind of voice that John is talking about. They are clearly heard, formed words, words spoken by the One who can speak to us: Jesus Christ.

Though this letter is an open letter to all churches,¹²⁷ John refers to very specific situations and events that exist in seven cities that are specifically mentioned in this list. "Located on a major trade route, these cities were in easy reach of each other, and communication between them was common."¹²⁸ These are not isolated messages. The LORD has a message for the churches of Asia Minor, and John would be the angel, the messenger, that would deliver that message.

Revelation 1:12-13. *And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; ¹³And in the midst of the seven*

¹²³ 2 Samuel, Chapter 11.

¹²⁴ Exodus 20:28.

¹²⁵ A casual observation of the more than fifty uses of the trumpet in the biblical text show that it is consistently used to herald a seminal message, one that changes the experience of the listener from one situation prior to the call to a different situation after the call.

¹²⁶ M. Eugene Boring. "The voice of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John." *Novum Testamentum*, 34(4), (October 1992): 335.

¹²⁷ Donal McIlraith. " 'For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the Saints': works and wife in Revelation 19:8." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 61(3), (July 1999): 514.

¹²⁸ George W. Knight. "The cities of Revelation 1-3." *Biblical Illustrator*, 26(2), (Winter 1999-2000): 72.

candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

When John turned to face the call he had heard, he was given an understanding of who he was facing, one that he again describes by attributes. Turning to look upon the speaker, John sees the speaker standing in the midst of seven lampstands.¹²⁹ In later verses John clarifies the imagery of the lampstands as a metaphor that represents the seven churches to whom the Revelation was to be written. Literally, John uses the Greek word *luchniai*, the plural form of *luchnia*, that we find frequently in scripture to refer to the stand upon which oil lamps, usually formed from clay or precious metal, were placed.¹³⁰ During the Old Testament era, these lampstands were most commonly made from wood, though clay, bronze and iron was also used. When used in the Temple, the word refers to a lampstand that holds seven lamps, similar to the common Menorah that we are familiar with today.¹³¹ Consequently, some envision a setting where Jesus is standing among seven lampstands, each holding seven lamps.¹³²

Like physical lampstands, the church has a purpose of sending out light, showing people (1) where they are, and (2) where they are going. In a statement that would serve to encourage the churches, John describes the One who stands amongst them. The reference to "Son of Man", is drawn from the Old Testament,¹³³ and refers to the Messiah, the person of God who would come as a human to bring salvation. Jesus also used this name to describe himself more than any other.

In a statement of clarification, John notes that he is not looking upon some mystical or ethereal being, but rather upon the form of a physical person who is dressed in a long robe with a wide, golden, belt.¹³⁴ "The long robe and the golden girdle speak of dignity, for the girdle around the breast, *μαστοι*, suggest a noble bearing and work completed, unlike the workman's girdle around the loins."¹³⁵ Though some have argued that the use of *μαστοι* is an allusion to Jesus as the lover in the Song of Solomon,¹³⁶ such a position may be speculative and unnecessary. Jesus, who by His very nature has always stood among those in His church, is still standing there, in a form of dignity that is an amazing contrast to His humiliation on the Cross of Calvary, and standing in a posture that indicates that His work is completed. At a time when his readers may be questioning whether Jesus is truly amongst them, John is given a clear revelation of the LORD's continuing presence, and relates it to the church in a way that

¹²⁹ Exodus 25:37, 27:23.

¹³⁰ Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2000: 606.

¹³¹ Exodus 25:31-40; 37:17-24; 1 Kings 7:49; Zechariah 4:2.

¹³² Timothy Paul Jones. "Lampstands in Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(1), (Fall 2004): 62.

¹³³ Daniel 7:13.

¹³⁴ Daniel 10:5.

¹³⁵ Donald Guthrie. *Relevance of John's Apocalypse*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987: 40.

¹³⁶ Jesse Rainbow. "Male *mastoi* in Revelation 1:13." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 30(2), (December 2007): 252.

they can know that He is, and always has been, in their midst, and that His work will not go unfinished.

Revelation 1:14-16. *His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; ¹⁵And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. ¹⁶And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.*

In these verses we begin to observe the metaphorical language that was commonly used in apocalyptic literature as John introduces us to a deeper level of its form and application. The descriptions of things that John has come to observe and understand are described by their nature rather than by their visual appearance with the intent on communicating that nature. Recognizing and understanding the manner in which these metaphors are used is an important part of understanding the book of Revelation. When the literature describes the appearance of objects and persons, the text style uses imagery to describe the nature of the object or person. It is not the imagery that is the point of the presentation, but rather it is the person, place, or theological truth that the reader is to observe in that imagery. As we study this imagery we should not see it as a literal description of visual or physical appearance. When we are freed from this literal interpretation method, we can begin to recognize the "big picture," the deep meaning behind the visual vignette. When we use this form of understanding, we can observe many of the characteristics of the LORD that John is communicating. In this example, as Jesus is described in such graphic character, these will be revisited in the following passage as each of these characteristics is employed for His purpose.

His head and hair were like wool, as white as snow. White hair was a sign of wisdom and called for respect, and the purity of the white that is described illustrates complete wisdom. This description is an allusion to the "Ancient of Days" of Daniel's prophecy,¹³⁷ scriptures that John and his readers would have been very familiar with. By referring to this messianic title, "John made it clear that all the attributes of the Father which the Old Testament visions described are also attributes of the Son. To the Son has been given all power and authority both to reign and to be the world's Judge."¹³⁸

His eyes were like blazing fire. Taken literally we would be taken aback at flames coming out of someone's face. However, falling back upon our understanding of the use of metaphor in apocalyptic writing, we can understand that Jesus' attributes are being described, not the physical appearance of his eyes. The eyes are the most expressive area of an individual's face and can serve as a window whereupon one can look into the nature and character of the individual. As John describes the eyes of the Messiah, he is describing His nature. Fire serves to purify and separate; and it often represents a final judgment. By His knowledge of every facet of our lives, both our faithfulness and our sinfulness, in His eyes we see the complete truth of who we truly are. It is the very nature of Jesus to serve as the One

¹³⁷ Daniel 7:9, 10:6.

¹³⁸ S. M. Horton. *Revelation*. Springfield, MO: Complete Biblical Library, 1990: 29. Cited by Thomas E. McComiskey. "Alteration of OT imagery in the book of Revelation : its hermeneutical and theological significance." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36(3), (Summer 1993): 307.

who will purify those who love Him, separate from Himself those who do not, and by so doing, serve as the final judge of all mankind. Isaiah describes the Messiah as lacking in physical attractiveness.¹³⁹ Jesus was most likely quite common looking. However, I would conjecture that the expressiveness of His eyes had to be incredible.

His feet were like white-hot bronze¹⁴⁰. Again, the metaphor that John uses would be understood as an unapproachable and indomitable force. There would be no protection against a weapon of white-hot bronze. This suggests Christ's ability of treading triumphantly in judgment on all who reject the Gospel.

His voice was compared to mighty waters,¹⁴¹ and like the power of the white-hot bronze, mighty waters represent a force that simply cannot be stopped. The Word of God is truth that cannot be challenged. Later in his Revelation, John will return us to this metaphor to better illustrate the overwhelming power of truth to forever dispel the lies and heresies of this lost and wicked world. John gives us an impression of the divine power and sovereignty of God's Word.

As the seven lampstands are the seven churches to whom the letters in this passage are written, the seven stars will be described as the angels of those seven churches. Some may interpret these as literal angels, but I would suggest that it is referring to the faithful pastors who lead those respective churches. The right hand was considered the position of power, so by holding the stars in his hand, He is protecting each of them as they serve. By visualizing this colorful vignette, we may be able to observe an image of Jesus' continual presence with the churches that John is writing to, and His nature as the Eternal Messiah who is faithful to guide and protect them in this time of severe difficulty. If we were to ignore the use of metaphor and imagery in apocalyptic literature we might interpret this passage as an outlandish physical description of Jesus. However, the ancient churches were familiar with apocalyptic writing, and would find John's writing as an encouraging word of God's concern for them.

The double-edged sword, coming from Jesus' mouth, refers to His words and the power they have.¹⁴² Most swords are single-edged, and cut on the down-stroke. The double-edged sword cuts in both directions without discrimination. This metaphor describes the power of the Word of God to attain its intended purpose without regard to any plan of mankind. It cannot be stopped. Human armies conquered with physical swords. God conquers with words.

Finally, Jesus' face appeared like the sun shining in all of His brilliance.¹⁴³ His countenance reflected the divine glory that is truly His, a brilliance that cannot be measured by the light of any object in this universe, a glory that is brighter than anything this world has ever known.

Revelation 1:17-18. *And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: ¹⁸I am he*

¹³⁹ Isaiah 53:2.

¹⁴⁰ Ezekiel 1:7.

¹⁴¹ Ezekiel 1:24, 43:2.

¹⁴² Isaiah 49:2.

¹⁴³ Judges 5:31.

that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

John's response to seeing the glorified Christ is quite reasonable. John started this Lord's Day with prayer and meditation; a day that was probably like most others before it. However, he heard a voice, turned, and saw a familiar face, the face of Jesus whom he has not seen in many years. This time John is witnessing the return of the glorified Christ and he is overwhelmed with humility, dropping to the ground in an overpowering mixture of emotions that would have included a joy and a fear that is serving to culminate his entire life's experience in this one moment.

There is no doubt that one of the emotions that John experienced was fear, because the first actual words that Jesus spoke were, "Do not be afraid." Most likely it was the Aramaic form of the Hebrew word, "Shalom," since that word is so often translated in this manner. Then Jesus introduced Himself to John in a manner that would serve to remove any possible doubt in John's mind of who He is.¹⁴⁴ John's description of Jesus' words share the omnitemporality of First and Last,¹⁴⁵ the Eternal Christ. Furthermore, He states Jesus' authority over death and the grave.¹⁴⁶ By conquering death, "Jesus through His resurrection will so fill His church with unconquerable life, infusing it into her by the Spirit, that death will be wholly conquered by the Church."¹⁴⁷

This book of Revelation was written to encourage the faithful to endure during times of difficulty. "There is not a chapter in the book, not a paragraph in any chapter, not a scene in the entire drama, not a voice or a note in any of its seven anthems that is not relevant to the author's purpose to fortify the faith of believers and to strengthen the morale of the church."¹⁴⁸ Like those who first read John's words, we can be encouraged that God, is indeed, on His throne, and has an unchanging, ultimate plan that is not impacted by man's sinful nature. Jesus is alive in all of His power and glory, and, as He walks among the lampstands holding the stars in his hands, He walks among the churches today, holding in His hand all of those who are faithful.¹⁴⁹ His ultimate plan will include reward for the faithful and final condemning judgment for those who reject the Gospel. We can look at the book of Revelation and be encouraged as we seek to be faithful to God in our daily lives.

Revelation 1:19-20. *Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; ²⁰The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches; and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.*

¹⁴⁴ Daniel 8:17-18.

¹⁴⁵ Isaiah 41:4, 44:6, 48:12.

¹⁴⁶ Hosea 13:14.

¹⁴⁷ Geerhardus Vos. *Biblical Theology*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1948: 400.

¹⁴⁸ Albert H. Baldinger. "A beastly coalition: an expository sermon on the Revelation 13:1-18." *Interpretation*, 2(4), (October 1948): 445.

¹⁴⁹ John, Chapter 10.

Note that John is introducing us to the symbolism of the Revelation in a gentle and straightforward manner. He uses simple imagery in the first few chapters and explains some of it to make the transition into the later chapters a little easier. Though most of the metaphor and imagery that John uses was common to the literary style and easily understood by his readers, John also creates much of his own, for example, the stars and lampstands of verse 20. When John uses his own imagery he explains its meaning, though he may wait for the reader to consider what they might mean before he explains them, as he did in this passage. When we compare the symbolic function of the lampstand with the intended function of the church, we can gain a better understanding of John's imagery. Zechariah writes that the lampstand symbolized the "eyes of the LORD which range to and fro throughout the earth"¹⁵⁰ We find similar references to the "eyes of the LORD" that also refer to God's protective presence in the world,¹⁵¹ and later in the Revelation John is shown the "two witnesses" who are described as "two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth."¹⁵² Though we lack scholarly agreement of the identity of the witnesses, it is clear that they serve as God's representatives in a hostile world.¹⁵³ The assignment of this metaphor to the church speaks directly to its purpose as a representative of God to a hostile world as the "light of the world,"¹⁵⁴ that it would "show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."¹⁵⁵

John explains that the stars represent the individual or individuals who bring the message of God's grace to the church body. Though some argue that there was no formal "pastor" in the early church,¹⁵⁶ There are many passages in the book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul that refer to Paul's interactions with one or more leaders in local church fellowships who certainly exercised pastoral skills and responsibilities. One could create a list by simply compiling the names of those in the churches that Paul addresses in his letters. If we accept the voracity of the messages to these churches for the body of believers today, we might understand how the letters to the angels would often be given to pastors, priests, bishops, or others who may have the responsibility and calling to share God's Word with their congregations.

Because of the poetic imagery utilized in the biblical text we should be careful not to get bogged down by applying too much scrutiny to the chronology, or the order of events in an attempt to create a cohesive pre-historical platform. A "chronological view is typically based on a straightforward, literal reading rather than a figurative approach to interpreting the book, the latter of which is more suitable to an apocalyptic genre."¹⁵⁷ Apocalyptic poetry often "dispenses with chronology altogether, and responds to the overall impact rather than

¹⁵⁰ Zechariah 4:10.

¹⁵¹ Genesis 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:12; Judges 18:6; 1 Chronicles 16:9.

¹⁵² Revelation 11:3-4.

¹⁵³ Timothy Paul Jones. "Lampstands in Revelation." *Biblical Illustrator*, 31(1), (Fall 2004): 64.

¹⁵⁴ Matthew 5:14, ff.

¹⁵⁵ 1 Peter 2:9.

¹⁵⁶ Henry Clarence Theissen, Ed. "The angels of the seven churches (Rev. 1:20)." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 91(364), (October 1934): 435.

¹⁵⁷ Gregory K. Beale. "The interpretative problem of Rev 1:19." *Novum Testamentum*, 34(4), (October 1992): 61.

searching for a continuing development."¹⁵⁸ John is presenting a sequence of theological truths, not a pre-historical timeline, though there are certainly passages that do present a definable sequence of events. In the light of Jesus' teaching and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, John is given "an interpretation of history. It is not a preview of events to the end of time, but an insight into principles which govern the course of history in all times."¹⁵⁹ Apocalyptic literature "unveils something other than future history. It works to lift the veil from the worldly appearances of power and legitimacy—whether those of Antiochus Epiphanes or Imperial Rome—which call for the allegiance and conformity of Jew, Christian, and Pagan alike."¹⁶⁰

John notes that the LORD commanded him to write (1) what he has seen, (2) the things that are, and (3) the things are to come. "While 1:19 may function effectively as an outline of John's Apocalypse, the author's original concern in this verse was to assert the divine inspiration of his work and specifically its superiority to contemporary pagan prophecies, customarily attested with similar formulae as a guide to the future and the will of God."¹⁶¹

The command of the LORD for John to write what he observes returns continually throughout the Revelation. Where many today would hide the words of the Revelation in preconceived secrecy, John is clearly communicating that the Revelation is to be read by all. Certainly, many in our culture are not familiar with apocalyptic style and the use of the metaphors in contemporary ancient culture. As we continue in this study of the Revelation, an attempt will be made to describe the application of the style, and by doing so, the writing should be better understood. The Revelation was written by a person using the common language of the day to people who read using the common language of the day. Our task is to ascertain how that language was understood.

Do not approach this study with fear or anxiety. Approach it with an active curiosity and anticipation of what will be learned by this exegetical presentation of John's theology as illustrated by this dramatic imagery. Rather than basing the writing on people's opinions of what will happen in the end times, exegesis demands that scripture is based upon scripture only and is studied in the historical context of the writing. The culture of the day, the language used, and other factors that affect how the original reader would understand the literature is investigated and provides the foundation for interpretation. Buckle your seat belt, for we are in for an amazing ride.

¹⁵⁸ Donald Guthrie. *Relevance of John's Apocalypse*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987: 23.

¹⁵⁹ Henry Sloane Coffin. "To him that overcometh: a meditation." *Interpretation*, 5(1), January (1951): 40.

¹⁶⁰ David Arthur DeSilva. "The 'image of the beast' and the Christians in Asia Minor: escalation of sectarian tension in Revelation 13." *Trinity Journal*, 12(2), (Fall 1991): 185.

¹⁶¹ Christopher R. Smith. "Revelation 1:19 : an eschatologically escalated prophetic convention." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 33(4), (December 1990): 461.

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