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Revelation 1:1-8

First Message

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POWER ON EARTH TO STAND IN THE FACE OF HELL

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Four weeks ago, I was on the island of Patmos on the Lord's Day. Patmos is a small, rocky island in the Greek Aegean, not far from the coast of Turkey. When I contacted one travel agent in Greece about my plans to visit Patmos, he asked me, "Why do you go to Patmos? Do you have family there? ... Are you sure that you want to see Patmos???"

Nineteen hundred years ago there was another man on Patmos, of whom scholars have ever since asked, "Why did he go to Patmos?" Four times, a man named John is identified as the author of the Book of Revelation (1:1,4,9; 22:8). From the beginning the tradition of the early church has identified this John with the city of Ephesus, and dated the Book of Revelation to the closing years of the reign of Domitian (ca. AD 95). With a population of 250,000, Ephesus was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire. It was the capital of the province of Asia, one of the most prosperous provinces in the empire. Ephesus was a major port, and the starting point of the road that led through Asia to the eastern reaches of the empire. Ephesus was famous as the home of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. But this was far from being the only temple in the city. Ephesus was awarded the coveted title *neokoros*, keeper of the temple. It was a city that was full of temples, but the title *neokoros* was given to those cities awarded the honor of building a temple for the official worship of the Roman Empire. These temples came in two types: temples built for the worship of Roma, the goddess of Rome; and temples built for the worship of the Roman emperor. Cities competed vigorously for the honor of building these temples.

Around AD 90, a new temple was built in Ephesus, a temple to the emperor Domitian, who reigned AD 81-96. The Caesars had been flirting with divinity since the first Caesar, Julius, had encountered the concept of divine kings when he was in Egypt. The wiser emperors were reluctant to claim divinity for themselves. But Domitian was eager to promote himself as a god, and took the title "Lord and God" (*dominus et deus*). The citizens of Ephesus were expected to go to the temple of Domitian and there offer a pinch of incense on the altar, acclaiming Domitian as Lord and God. For most citizens this was no problem. They worshiped a multiplicity of gods, and it required no mental gymnastics to stretch their pantheon to include Domitian. Indeed, the city had clamored for the honor of building this temple, vying with the two other great cities of the province, Smyrna and Pergamon. For the Christian, though, these titles that Domitian arrogated to himself were blasphemous. They were titles that belonged to God alone.

John says that he was on the island "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). This is a phrase that occurs several other times in the book. The most likely explanation is that John continued to bear witness to Jesus, and that witness was that it was Christ, not Domitian, who was Lord, or to put it in Greek, *Christos Kurios*, not *Caesar Kurios*. Fifty years later, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna,

would be killed for just this issue. After his arrest on the charge of atheism, Polycarp was urged to change his mind: "What harm is there in saying Lord Caesar?" Polycarp remained firm to the end; his final words as he faced the crowd in the stadium were, "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me injury: how then can I blaspheme my king and my Savior?"

John's insistence that Christ not Caesar was Lord was troubling to the authorities, all the more so since he was a leader in the church in Ephesus. John did not share the fate of Polycarp. Instead he was exiled. Patmos is only 40 miles from Ephesus, but it might as well be 1000. Though he is isolated from the church in Ephesus and other churches throughout Asia, John has a passionate concern for the churches back home. How is he to encourage them not to compromise? He receives a revelation, the message of which he sends as the word of God, in the form of a letter to seven churches in the province of Asia.

A. What is the Book of Revelation?

1. A Revelation (1:1-2)

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. (1:1-2 NIV)

Though we frequently call this book The Revelation of John, the book itself identifies it as The Revelation of Jesus Christ. But note that this revelation begins with God. Indeed everything in this book begins with God. This is one of the central messages of the book: all things begin with God. God is rarely described as God. The usual term for him is "the one seated upon the throne." John says more about the nature of God by calling him "the one seated upon the throne" than if he called him simply "God." God gives this revelation to Jesus Christ so that he in turn might show it to his servants. He does so through the intermediary of an angel, whom we encounter several times in the book. John in turn testifies or witnesses to everything that he saw. And he sums this all up as being "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

The revelation is an apocalypse, from the Greek word for revelation. An apocalypse is an uncovering or revealing of things that are otherwise hidden. This revelation concerns what must soon take place. Most people assume therefore that the revelation is of a detailed timetable concerning future events, the events at the end of time. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there is no such detailed timetable in the book. The revelation does indeed concern the events that will soon take place, but we won't understand those events unless we first understand the present. A characteristic of apocalyptic is that the revelation concerns not just what will happen in the unseen future, but what is happening right now in unseen realms.

There are two of these unseen realms that John is shown: heaven and hell. Caught in the middle is the visible realm of earth. Throughout the book, John sees people and things ascending and descending between heaven and earth, and between earth and hell (or the Abyss, as he usually calls it). John sees that nothing on earth is independent. All that happens on earth is dependent either on heaven or on hell. Furthermore, much that happens on earth is a counterfeit of what happens in heaven.

The book is punctuated with visions into heaven. The central feature of heaven is a throne and the one seated upon the throne. Gathered around the throne are worshipers. This is reproduced on earth: there is a throne, one seated upon the throne, and worshipers: “The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority... Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?’” (Rev 13:2,4). There is a false prophet who deceives the people to worship the beast (Rev 13:14). The beast is the imperial might of Rome, headed by the emperor. Throughout the Roman empire, citizens gave their allegiance to him. But John sees that the beast’s throne is given him by the dragon, elsewhere identified as Satan. The beast is merely a puppet of Satan. Rome, both empire and emperor, is therefore Satanic. John sees that the vast majority of earth is a colony of hell. But there are some who refuse to bow the knee, some who march to the beat of a different drum. These are God’s people, who form a colony of heaven on earth. In the vision of Revelation there are only two colonies. The colony of hell on earth is peopled by “the citizens of the earth.” They live in Babylon, they worship the beast, and they bear the mark of the beast. The colony of heaven on earth is peopled by the faithful witnesses, who worship God, who bear the seal of the Lamb, and whose city is the New Jerusalem.

The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants concerns what must soon take place. What is it that must soon take place? The colony of hell will be revealed as the Great Deception that it is. From heaven God will rain down his judgments upon this colony until it falls. He will rain down his judgments upon the false prophet who deceives the world, upon the beast who occupies the counterfeit throne, and upon the dragon who is the Deceiver behind this Great Deception.

The colony of hell on earth far exceeds the colony of heaven on earth in size and in apparent power. How are the citizens of the colony of heaven to have power on earth to stand in the face of hell? All they need do is hold to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. All they need do is be faithful witnesses. The colony of hell might put them to death, and gain apparent victory over them, but the faithful witnesses will emerge as the victors, for they will enter the heavenly throne room.

Such is the revelation that John receives. But the book is more than just a revelation. It is also a prophecy.

2. A Prophecy (1:3)

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (1:3)

A prophecy is not primarily a prediction of future events. It is first and foremost the word of God to people in the present. The revelation that is given to John is the word of God, but it is not intended for John alone. In written form he passes on this word of God to the churches back home. So important is this word from God that

he pronounces a blessing, the first of seven beatitudes in the book (the others are 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Blessed are both the reader and the hearers. The reading in question is not silent reading in one’s home, but reading aloud to God’s assembled people. Imagine the Christians in Ephesus, gathered together on a Sunday. They are seemingly powerless. But one stands up in their midst and reads them what we know as the Book of Revelation. This is how Revelation was intended to be encountered.

3. A Letter (1:4a)

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia: (1:4a)

In addition to being an apocalypse and a prophecy, the book is also a letter, addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11). There were more than seven churches in the province of Asia: the New Testament tells us of churches in Colossae (Col 1:2), Hierapolis (Col 4:13), and Troas (Acts 20:6-12). Like every other number in the book, seven is symbolic. Seven is the complete number of churches; it’s not an exhaustive completeness, but a symbolic completeness. We commonly think that the Book of Revelation contains the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is a letter. Within the one letter are contained seven messages to seven churches. But each message is to be read by all seven churches. John knew these churches. He knew the struggles they were facing and he knew their successes and failures. The message to each church can be summarized as “Don’t compromise.”

B. The Trinitarian Theology of Revelation

1. Benediction (1:4b-5)

Following the standard order for a first-century letter, John continues with a greeting. As in the other New Testament letters this greeting takes the form of a benediction:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4b-5a)

The usual greeting for New Testament letters is “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this, the longest greeting of any New Testament letter, John departs from the pattern in two significant ways: he elaborates greatly on the names of God and of Jesus Christ, and he includes the Spirit in this benediction.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not formally worked out until the ecumenical church councils of the fourth century. The word “trinity” never occurs in the Bible. Nevertheless, the Book of Revelation is trinitarian throughout. We are prone to confuse the various members of the trinity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the songs we sing, where we freely substitute one person of the trinity for another. The Bible is careful to distinguish the roles of the godhead. John is careful to distinguish their roles even in this benediction, the only trinitarian greeting in the New Testament.

John first pronounces blessing, not simply from “God our Father,” but from “him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” The Book of Revelation is infused throughout with the language and imagery of the Old Testament. This three-fold reference to God the Father is no exception. The first two parts of the name, “The one who is, and

who was,” are a reference back to Yahweh, God’s personal name in the Old Testament.

When God encountered Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God what his name was. God replied with the enigmatic statement, “I AM WHO I AM,” which he then shortened to “I AM.” Since Moses needed a name he could refer to in the third person, God re-stated it as “He is” (Exod 3:13-15). But that’s not what you read in your Bibles. Wherever you see the title “The LORD” in small capitals, the Hebrew text reads the four consonants YHWH. Most probably this was pronounced Yahweh, and is derived from the verb “He is.” This is the personal name of God, but Jews came to consider the name of God too holy to speak. They treated the name YHWH as the ineffable tetragrammaton, the unspeakable four-letter word! Instead of pronouncing Yahweh, Jews would say Adonai, meaning “my Lord” or simply “Lord.” This practice has been copied by many translators, including the translators of most English versions. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, God’s name “I AM” is rendered as “the one who is.” This is the name that John uses here.

But God is not simply the one who is. He is also the one who was. There was never a time when God was not. Though Rome called itself The Eternal City, there was a time when Rome was not. Though Domitian called himself “Lord and God,” there was a time when Domitian was not. There was a time when there was no emperor. But there was never a time when God was not.

We would expect John to continue by describing God as “the one who will be.” But instead, he calls God “him...who is to come.” This name also is rich in Old Testament language and imagery. At a time when Israel’s fortunes were low, God revealed to his people through the Old Testament prophets that he would come. It is of this “coming” that we sing in the recent popular song “He will come and save you.” The language is drawn from Isaiah 35:4,

say to those with fearful hearts,
 “Be strong, do not fear;
 your God will come,
 he will come with vengeance;
 with divine retribution
 he will come to save you.” (Isa 35:4)

Notice that there are two aspects to God’s coming: judgment and salvation. Notice that they are interrelated. God will come in judgment upon his enemies, and this will be simultaneously his coming in salvation for his people. The day for this coming to take place is described variously as The Day of the LORD, That Day, The Day of the LORD’s wrath, or The Last or Latter Days. When is this day? The overthrow of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC, and the subsequent decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem certainly qualified as that day. So did Jesus’ death on the cross whereby God simultaneously judged the greater enemies—sin, death, and Satan—and brought salvation to his people. But neither the return of the captives from exile nor Christ’s death on the cross exhausted the language of the coming of God. We do not yet see evil completely vanquished. We do not yet see God’s salvation of his people complete. There awaits, therefore, a completion to the coming of the Lord. But come he most surely does and come he most surely will. Any divine intervention whereby God simultaneously wreaks judgment on his enemies and works salvation for his people qualifies as the coming of the Lord on the day of the Lord. But a day is coming when God will complete both the judgment of his enemies and the salvation of his people. This is a central message of the Book of Revelation. The Last Days

do not lie in the future. Rather, we have been in the last days for the past 2000 years, throughout which God has been coming in judgment and salvation. What does lie ahead, though, is the completion of the Last Days.

Once you discern the pattern of Revelation, it should be no surprise that there is a counterfeit: “The beast...once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction” (17:8). But in this case, the coming of the beast is to his own destruction.

The second person of the trinitarian greeting is the spirit, described by John as “the seven spirits before his throne.” The role of the Spirit is to execute the will of God. The Spirit, here pictured as sevenfold for completeness, waits before the throne, ready to be sent out into all the earth (5:6).

The third person of the trinitarian greeting is Jesus Christ, who is described with three titles, each of great significance to the themes of the book. Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Witness is a dominant theme of the book. John testifies concerning what he saw, namely the testimony of Jesus (1:2). John calls God’s people to be faithful witnesses. What does it mean to be a faithful witness? In the language of Revelation, it means to hold fast to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The Word of God is revealed as Jesus himself (19:13), and the testimony of Jesus is to worship God (19:10) and not worship the beast (20:4). Such testimony is costly. It may lead to death. John is on Patmos because of his testimony (1:9). In the city of Pergamum, Antipas has been put to death for his faithful witness (Rev 2:13). The two witnesses are put to death by the beast (11:7). The dragon wages war against God’s people who hold to the testimony of Jesus (12:17). Those who do not worship the beast are beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus (20:4).

In killing the faithful witnesses it seems that the beast is victorious. But it is the slaughtered saints who emerge victorious. How do they conquer? They overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (12:11). They don’t have to overcome through any of their own strength. All they have to do is to be covered by the blood of the Lamb, and hold on to the testimony of Jesus. Their inspiration is Jesus Christ, himself the faithful witness.

Just as in their faithful witness the saints are not alone, so in their death they are not alone. Jesus was killed for his faithful witness. But death could not hold him. God brought him forth from the grave, victorious over sin, death and Satan. Furthermore, he is the firstborn from the dead. Those faithful witnesses who follow him therefore have the hope of resurrection. The faithful witnesses are raised in the first resurrection. At the end of the book a beatitude is pronounced upon them: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them” (20:6).

Thirdly, Jesus Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. The dragon has set the beast up as the apparent ruler. But he is a counterfeit ruler. The Book of Revelation opens our eyes that we might see that it is Jesus Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16; 17:14). It is not *Caesar Kurios* but *Christos Kurios*, not Caesar is Lord, but Christ is Lord. And so we sing the Hallelujah Chorus:

**The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord
 and of his Christ,
 and he shall reign for ever and ever.
 King of kings and Lord of lords
 Hallelujah. (11:15; 19:16,6)**

2. Doxology (1:5b-6)

So enraptured is John with the thought of Christ that he moves straight from the benediction to a doxology addressed to Christ:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (1:5b-6)

Jesus Christ has freed us from our sins by his own shed blood. In chapter 5, John will see in heaven “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne” (5:6). Through apparent weakness, akin to a lamb prepared for slaughter, Jesus has emerged the victor. His blood is the means whereby the slaughtered saints, the faithful witnesses, emerge victorious despite their apparent weakness (12:11).

Jesus has shed his blood not just that we might be free from sin, but that we might be the people of God. He has redeemed us from the colony of hell and transferred us into the colony of heaven, the colony of God’s people. Repeatedly throughout the book we are told that this colony is populated “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” This is what the church is: the worldwide family, drawn from every nation, to be God’s people, a colony of heaven on earth. No wonder then that John breaks into praise: to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

3. Old Testament Quotation (1:7)

With his mind still on Jesus Christ, John weaves together two Old Testament texts drawn from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10:

**Look, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.
So shall it be! Amen. (1:7)**

In Daniel 7:13, “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven,” approaches the Ancient of Days in the heavenly throne room. God gives him authority, glory and power in an eternal kingdom, which contrasts with the human kingdoms described earlier in the book. Despite their claims to permanence all these earthly kingdoms fall to make way for the kingdom of God given to the son of man, who is none other than Jesus Christ. Rome may boast that it is The Eternal City, but it, too, must give way to the kingdom of God in Christ. So must every other kingdom on earth, for they are all manifestations of the kingdom of hell, not the kingdom of heaven.

4. The first and last word belongs to God (1:8)

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (1:8)

This book is full of God. It contains the revelation of Jesus Christ which originates in God. It is therefore fitting that the last word in this, the Prologue, should go to God.

The Lord God describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. It is fitting that he should be described as such, for he is God. But as the book unfolds, an extraordinary thing happens. These titles are progressively ascribed to Christ also. In the first chapter, God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8), then Jesus says, “I am the first and the last” (1:17). At the end of the book, God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (21:6), then Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (22:13). Throughout the book, God is on the throne receiving the worship of the heavenly choir. Right beside him is the Lamb, also receiving the worship of the heavenly choir. They are distinct and have distinct roles, yet both sit upon the one throne. Both are worshiped with the worship that can properly be given to God alone. Indeed, twice in the book we read the forceful statement, “Worship God” (19:10; 22:9). There is no inconsistency between worshiping God and having the Lamb be within the circle of the worshiped. This is the highest Christology in the New Testament.

God’s last word is that he is the Almighty. The Greek word is *Pantokrator*, which means universality of rule, not universality of power. God is the ruler of all.

Atop a hill in the center of the island of Patmos sits the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, founded in 1088. A highlight of our trip was a personal tour of this monastery by two old monks, twin brothers. Since this was an Orthodox monastery there were many icons, and the monks took their time to explain these. For most of us an icon is a small picture on a computer screen. The icon is a symbol that points to a file or program. Similarly, an icon in the Orthodox church is a symbolic representation of God or Christ that points to some theological truth. At the top of the interior of the dome of the chapel was an icon of the *Pantokrator*. This icon, either painted or in mosaic, can be found at the top of most Orthodox churches. The picture portrays the theological reality that God is on his throne as ruler over all. The clear message of Revelation is that the true throne is in heaven, and that there is one seated upon it. All earthly thrones are counterfeit. All earthly occupants are imposters, and the worship they receive is counterfeit worship. The true worship is taking place in heaven around the true throne.

Why do we gather together on Sundays? We meet to remind ourselves that God and the Lamb are on the throne, and that we are a colony of heaven. During the week we tend to lose sight of that. The colony of hell intrudes into our horizon. The vision of God as *Pantokrator* at the dome of our thinking grows dim. We grow weak in our affirmation that God is the beginning and end of all things. Our vision fades as the great deceiver attempts to ensnare us with the great deception. We gather each Sunday for a revelation. Not a revelation of some personal timetable or a timetable for the world. But a revelation of God. What we need each Sunday morning is as much God as possible.

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