

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 2 - Chapter 1

The English word revelation is an attempt to translate the Greek word **apokalypsus**. The same word is also often transliterated into English as apocalypse. The word carries two senses with it: first, it speaks of a catastrophic or destructive ending. A second and different meaning is that it speaks of the unveiling of a mystery. As it applies to John's recorded visions, both meanings come into play. Since the English term revelation means to unveil or reveal and not to destroy or end, then the typical English Christian title that has been assigned to The Book of Revelation only reflects half the story.

As was discussed in our introduction to Revelation last week, a firm connection between the New Testament Book of Revelation and several Old Testament books is needed for proper interpretation. One of the many proofs of this need is that the New Testament regularly has statements that Yeshua of Nazareth is the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament prophecies. I want to begin today's lesson by drawing you towards a remarkable section of the Book of 1Corinthians whereby Paul makes that indelible connection between the Old Testament and the post-Christ times that the New Testament authors lived in. But also he mentions about when it was that he thought that the current age would come to a close. Turn your Bibles to 1Corinthians10 (page 1431 in the CJB).

CJB 1 Corinthians 10:1 *For, brothers, I don't want you to miss the significance of what happened to our fathers. All of them were guided by the pillar of cloud, and they all passed through the sea,² and in connection with the cloud and with the sea they all immersed themselves into Moshe,³ also they all ate the same food from the Spirit,⁴ and they all drank the same drink from the Spirit- for they drank from a Spirit-sent Rock which followed them, and that Rock was the Messiah.⁵ Yet with the majority of them God was not pleased, so their bodies were strewn across the desert.*

⁶ *Now these things took place as prefigurative historical events, warning us not to set our hearts on evil things as they did.⁷ Don't be idolaters, as some of them were- as the Tanakh puts it, "The people sat down to eat and drink, then got up to indulge in revelry."⁸ And let us not engage in sexual immorality, as some of them did, with the consequence that 23,000 died in a single day.⁹ And let us not put the Messiah to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by snakes.¹⁰ And don't grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the Destroying Angel.*

¹¹ *These things happened to them as prefigurative historical events, and they were written down as a warning to us who are living in the acharit-hayamim.¹² Therefore, let anyone who thinks he is standing up be careful not to fall!*

Acharit-hayammim is translated into English in most Bibles as “the end of the age”. An alternative term we use is the End Times. Paul says those things written about what happened to “our fathers”, things recorded in the Hebrew **Tanakh**, the Old Testament, were recorded as a warning “to us who are living in the end of the age”. Paul thought the time was upon him; he was not waiting for the End Times to eventually come; he was certain that he was living in the End Times. Yeshua would return momentarily, the world as Paul knew it would end, and a new age would be ushered in with Christ as an earthly King during Paul’s lifetime. As we read the words of Revelation today, and over the next many months, we shall see that John’s perspective of the imminence of the End Times was the same as Paul’s, as apparently it was for ALL the early Believers... especially the Jewish Believers.....because they were all too familiar with what their Prophets had to say on the subject.

I’ll repeat: Paul directly connected the Old Testament with the End Times teaching that the End Times **is** the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Therefore the Book of Revelation, which is mostly about the End Times, is also about the fulfillment of the purposes and prophecies of the Old Testament. If it were not so, then we’d have the Apostles Paul and John at an interolerable theological loggerhead with one another and we’d be left with trying to figure out who was right and who was wrong.

Another point I mentioned in our introduction last week that bears repeating is that there are many viewpoints of how to interpret Revelation. It is a book that is utter gibberish to many, merely confusing to some, and others have a firm and inflexible view of what the book reports that dismisses all other interpretations as but heresy. I believe the main cause for this bewilderment and wide array of interpretations is the Bible academic blind eye turned towards the very source Paul refers to in 1Corinthians 10: the Old Testament. At best, Revelation is difficult. Without the help and context of the Old Testament and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, understanding it is hopeless.

Apringius of Beja who lived in the mid 6th century said this: ***“Revelation makes known what we cannot know. From this we learn that his book is called an Apocalypse, that is, “revelation”, which manifests those secrets which are hidden and unknown to the senses, and that unless Christ Himself reveals them, he who (would) perceive the revelation will not have the strength to understand what he sees.”***

So as we get ready to open this the final book of the Bible, the final recorded historical words that will ever be given to the worldwide Body of Believers by means of divine oracle and inspiration, let us not be terribly rigid in how we take them. Much of the book is about a future filled with mystery; and as those many Jews just prior to the birth of Christ could attest if they were still living, religious doctrines and manmade traditions and our own personal interpretations of as yet unrealized prophesied events in the Bible must be held lightly or we’re liable to miss out recognizing the actual events for what they are when they finally do happen.

Open your Bibles to the Book of Revelation chapter 1.

READ REVELATION CHAPTER 1 all

The first few words of verse 1 are crucial as well as not just a bit controversial. The crucial part is that the words of Revelation are characterized as more than divinely inspired; they are divinely given. Let me explain what I mean. Since Christians tend to be primarily focused on the New Testament, then the level to which divine authority can be attached to those 27 books is important to determine. Thus Christian theologians say that, generally speaking, the New Testament is of a class of authority called “divinely inspired”. What does that mean? Using the accepted theological definition it means that while the words of the New Testament were thoughts of, and written down by, humans, the human authors were led by the Holy Spirit or otherwise divinely influenced in some unknowable way to think them and record them. The exception usually mentioned is, of course, the words directly spoken by Messiah Yeshua; those are direct divine words and instructions made without human mediation. Therefore Christ’s words rise to a higher level of divine authority than those which are merely divinely inspired. However the words of Revelation are essentially in the same category as the direct words of Yeshua because we are told unequivocally that “this is the revelation that God gave to Yeshua the Messiah” and were passed along to John. Such a circumstance is what also sets the Old Testament Prophets apart from most other writings of the Old and New Testaments. That is, the writers are given direct divine oracles; they are not passing along their own thoughts inspired or otherwise. John belongs in the same category as the Old Testament Prophets in this regard. That is, John is used as a human messenger of God’s directives.

This also tells us that to call this book the Apocalypse of John is a misnomer that waters down its divine authority. Revelation stands unique in the New Testament as not being merely “inspired of God”, by actually directly from God, partly given by oracle and partly by vision. But here’s where it can get controversial, depending on the particular doctrine of the Trinity that one holds. There is a very clear delineation that John makes between God and Yeshua the Messiah. We are told about as plainly as it can be done that God gave this vision to Yeshua. How are we to take this? If we go by the most prevalent Trinitarian view that the unity of God, Son, and Holy Spirit is so complete with each “person” having co-equal authority over the other, then why the distinct mention of God and Yeshua so separately from one another that Yeshua is NOT the author of the Revelation vision at all, but God is? Or, in Christian Trinitarian thought, could this mean that God created the visions and then passed them along to Himself? What we read is that God is the author who gives the visions to Yeshua, who is but 2nd in a long chain of 5 steps; the fifth step being the Believer who hears and/or reads the Book of Revelation. The oracles and visions begin with God the Father, are passed along to Yeshua the Son, then to angels, angels to John, and then finally to us in written form.

In both Testaments when the term God is used, it usually is meant in one of two ways: first, it refers to God the Father whose name as given to Moses was Yehoveh, but was known in earlier times as El or El Shaddai. Second it is at times used to refer to the **Godhead** that consists of all that God is. Typically in Christian thought (but not Jewish) it is seen of as an amalgam of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Over and over again in the Gospels we find Yeshua as subservient to God the Father; praying to God the Father, asking God the Father that the Father’s will be done, showing us in the Lord’s prayer NOT to pray to Yeshua but rather to “Our Father”, and even depicting God the Father on the central throne in Heaven but with Yeshua on a throne that sits to the right hand of the Father. This throne vision is a common and understood imagery in the ancient world; God the Father is the senior king

and God the Son is the junior king. Therefore while at its fundamental core I think it is Scripturally correct to speak of a trio of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as divine and together forming the basis of the Godhead, we must hold lightly how that all works. Ancient Hebrew Sages, Christian authorities, and Rabbis have debated for centuries about the nature and substance of God. I think in the end it is a fool's errand because even if His nature in all its glory and fullness was shown to us, humans are not equipped to perceive or process what we might see.

In verse 2 John speaks of himself as one "who bore witness to the Word of God and to the testimony of Yeshua the Messiah." That is, as one of the original 12 disciples, John heard the Gospel directly from the lips of Christ. The Word of God and Yeshua the Messiah are parallel terms in this instance as John in other places in his various books calls Yeshua "the Word".

Then we get this amazing promise that came to John from God that is to be passed along to the readers and hearers of Revelation: we will be blessed! We either take this as something that is serious; or it is just a happy sounding expression with not much substance that could be removed from the book without any harm. It is true that the exact nature of that blessing is open to debate; but to my mind any blessing from God is a great blessing. What *is not* open to debate is that the promise of this blessing comes with a caveat; the blessing only comes IF we are obedient to what has been written in Revelation. That is, this blessing is conditional and not automatic. As I pointed out in our introduction to Revelation, how can we be respond properly enough to what John has told us if we either don't understand the words at all, or we don't understand them as God, through John, meant for us to understand them?

It should not be lost on us that the blessing spoken of here is the first of 7 blessings in Revelation aimed at the reader or hearer (at all times assumed to be a Believer). The other blessings are found in chapters 14, 16, 19, 20, and two blessings in chapter 22. It should also not be lost that the word hearers (of this prophecy of Revelation) is directly connected to obedience to those words. Where have we encountered this hear-obey dynamic before? No doubt in John's Jewish mind the hear-obey connection is expressed in the Hebrew word **shema**, which means exactly hear and obey. Therefore, to passively read (or listen) and comprehend the words of the Book of Revelation without obeying them is useless (at least when it comes to hoping to receive the promised blessing). I'm sorry to say that while many Christians would probably deny it, the concept of obedience to God's Word is all but extinguished within the Church. The thought is generally that obedience is obviously connected to a rule, and a rule is connected to a deed or work (a do or a don't), and works are bad and fly in the face of grace. Further that while the Old Testament is all about rules, the New Testament is all about free grace. Therefore obedience has little to no place in the life of a New Testament Christian and in fact is seen as a negative. So fellow Believers I say this to you: if you believe that obedience is a thing of the past and not a requirement for you, then whatever blessing is available to you from reading or hearing Revelation will **not** be yours. To show obedience to God is how we show love to God. Obedience is God's love language; not our intent, our emotions, or our knowledge gained from study. This is why in Jewish thought the Hebrew word **shema** is one of the most important; it represents a concept larger than the word itself.

The final words of verse 3 are “for the time is near”. As with Paul, John believed he was living in the End Times. The time being near did not mean within decades; let alone within hundreds or thousands of years. It was at any moment in actual reality; it was not an indefinite expression of time as we tend to use it today. So when we understand this we also understand the extreme urgency in John’s mind (as with Paul’s). Wouldn’t you feel a heightened sense of urgency if you suddenly began receiving divine visions and oracles concerning God’s judgment of the world?

Verse 4 begins a section of Revelation that on the surface is not prophecy per se, but rather is instructions for the Believers located at 7 different congregations in Asia. Seven is the Biblical number of completion and perfection and Revelation is full of sevens. While the number is used in so many instances in the Bible, although mostly in the **Tanakh**, the number seven also carries with it a sense of finality. Thus the unusually prolific use of sevens in Revelation is more than a coincidence as the Book of Revelation speaks of the finality of God’s coming judgment upon all the earth’s inhabitants. It also speaks of the end of sacred time and space as we know it, of history as we know it, even of the substance of humans and other creatures as we know it. And as Christ tells us in Matthew 5:17-19, along with the many uses of sevens in Revelation and what is unveiled for us, these will indeed signal the end of the Torah and of all prophetic utterances because all will have achieved their purposes and been fulfilled; but not until the final moments depicted in John’s vision.

Thus it is appropriate that John is writing to 7 Believing congregations in Asia to relay to them their spiritual condition from Our Lord’s viewpoint since they are in the End Times. Depending on your Bible version, instead of the recipients being 7 Messianic communities like we find in the CJB, you’ll find the words “seven churches in Asia”. The English word church is not there and was added to give us a decidedly skewed mental picture. Rather the word in Greek is **ekklesia** and the full definition is: a gathering of citizens called out from their homes to some public space; an assembly. The word has NO religious connotation of its own. However when used in a religious context, it is appropriate to translate **ekklesia** to “congregation” but certainly not to “church”. Editing in the word church anywhere in the New Testament is an anachronism that muddies the waters.

There were many more than seven Believing congregations in Asia; but so far as we know they all met either in someone’s home or, more often, in a synagogue. So there is a great debate among Bible scholars about the nature of these 7 letters. Before we read them, let’s address what the great debate is about.

Some say that the letters to the 7 congregations are merely symbolic of what goes on in all congregations and so are not actual “letters” at all but rather are general examples. Others say that the 7 letters represent 7 stages of church development over the centuries. That is, the first letter to Ephesus represents the characteristics of the first stage of church development, the letter to Smyrna the characteristics of the second stage of development, and the letter to Laodicea the final stage of church development. Thus the idea behind all of these ways to interpret John’s meaning is that none of these represent actual letters that confront actual problems or conditions of these 7 named churches. I completely disagree with that. If it was so, I would have expected John to use wording that clearly marked these congregations’ letters as

symbolic. No such symbolic language is present. Rather, the various interpretations are quite specific and unambiguous.

It is my contention that the 7 letters are meant to address the actual conditions present within the 7 actual congregations John is writing them to. To John's mind, the only thing that made these 7 letters different from any regular letters he might have sent to them is that they are directed by God and so carry the greatest divine authority. Even so, I also believe that these letters are valuable for Believing congregations of all ages to use for learning and instruction and admonishment even if that isn't what John had in mind. Thus these letters fall within the scope of us needing to be obedient to what they say, at least partly so we can receive the blessing that John spoke of back in verse 3. While the 7 letters to the 7 specific congregations are real and actual letters, addressing real and actual issues within each congregation, it is fair to say that their message can be applied to a broader scope of congregations at all times in history since John's day to our time and beyond. However any attempt to make it that these 7 letters sum up all the possible conditions that could happen within all believing congregations during any age, or that they are the 7 characteristics or 7 stages of church development, is much too limiting if not fanciful. Church development in 7 stages is a pure manmade doctrine nowhere to be found in Holy Scripture. Besides; there are far more conditions that we could all think of that have found their way into the Body of Believers, and there are many more characteristics of churches over the centuries than the few that are mentioned in these 7 letters.

The next several words of verse 4 continue adding to the degree of theological difficulty. John's greeting of grace and peace to the 7 congregations is without doubt merely expressing Jewish John's Hebrew thought of **shalom**, a standard greeting from a Jew. Like the word **shema**, **shalom** is more than a word; it represents a concept of God-given well-being that includes grace, health, peace, loving-kindness, and more. But next we see John offer greetings on behalf of 3 different entities. First, from the One who is, who was, and who is coming. Second, from the sevenfold Spirit before His throne. And third, from Yeshua the Messiah. So once again John is drawing rather firm lines between the personages that Christianity labels the Trinity: Father, Holy Spirit, and Son in that order.

To add to the difficulty, we hear of what is apparently the Father described as the One who is, who was and is coming. In checking the Greek syntax, "is coming" is correct. And yet in Christian thought and doctrine it is Christ, not the Father, who is coming; as in coming back. So unless there is an error in the Greek manuscripts of the Book of Revelation, this throws us a bit of a curveball. Let me throw you a little bigger one that actually backs up John's description of (presumably) the Father as One who is coming.

CJB Zechariah 14:1 Look, a day is coming for ADONAI when your plunder, [Yerushalayim], will be divided right there within you. ² "For I will gather all the nations against Yerushalayim for war. The city will be taken, the houses will be rifled, the women will be raped, and half the city will go into exile; but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city." ³ Then ADONAI will go out and fight against those nations, fighting as on a day of battle. ⁴ On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies to the east of Yerushalayim; and the Mount of Olives will be split in half from

east to west, to make a huge valley. Half of the mountain will move toward the north, and half of it toward the south.

⁵ You will flee to the valley in the mountains, for the valley in the mountains will reach to Atzel. You will flee, just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of 'Uziah king of Y'hudah. Then ADONAI my God will come to you with all the holy ones. ⁶ On that day, there will be neither bright light nor thick darkness; ⁷ and one day, known to ADONAI, will be neither day nor night, although by evening there will be light. ⁸ On that day, fresh water will flow out from Yerushalayim, half toward the eastern sea and half toward the western sea, both summer and winter.

⁹ Then ADONAI will be king over the whole world. On that day ADONAI will be the only one, and his name will be the only name.

This passage is familiar especially to evangelical Christians, as it is said to depict Christ returning and descending upon the Mt. of Olives. Everywhere we see the word Adonai in the CJB, you'll find the word Lord in other English Bible versions in these verses. Of course, especially within Christianity, anywhere we find the word Lord it is usually assumed that this is referring to Jesus. But, when we look at this passage in its original Hebrew we find something a little startling. It seems that both the CJB using Adonai and the other standard English Bible versions using Lord mislead us. Everywhere we find Adonai or Lord in these verses in actuality in the original Hebrew we find Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh; Yehoveh, God's formal name as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Or better, Yehoveh, who is God the Father. Thus we have Yehoveh who is coming, setting his foot on the Mt. of Olives whereupon it splits. It is Yehoveh who will go out to Armageddon and fight the nations. It is Yehoveh who will be king over the whole world. However in Christian Theology all of these attributes and activities are strictly assigned to Yeshua, God's Son. Quite the mystery.

We won't be solving this mystery today. But remember: John was not a Western gentile Christian. He was a Torah believing, Torah following Jew who saw Yeshua of Nazareth as the prophesied Messiah of God. He did not know of Christian doctrines because none yet existed. He did not have a New Testament because none yet existed. So in some undefined way, according to what John wrote in Revelation, while Christ was indeed returning, in some other way so the Father was also "coming" in the End Times. And we just found proof of that in Zechariah 14. Do not ask me to explain it. I would have to speculate and I just don't have enough information to present any intellectually honest theory that couldn't be knocked down by any number of other theories. But in this short detour is a powerful lesson; manmade doctrines can at times be misleading and they can also suppress certain plain Scriptural truths by slightly modifying Scriptural words so as not to throw cold water on those doctrines. It would sure be a lot easier for us if Zechariah had said Messiah or Son of God instead of Yehoveh lighting upon the Mt. of Olives. But he didn't; he said Yehoveh. This is another of the many mysteries that we probably aren't going to unveil until the event happens. Nonetheless we learn that in the End Times the Father is coming as well as Yeshua, and it is something both John and Zechariah verify. In what manner or form is Yehoveh, the Father, coming? I don't know; but I do know that we need to be aware of Zechariah's prophesy of truth and expect it to happen just as he says it will even if we can't fully comprehend it or explain it just yet.

Now as for the remark about the Sevenfold Spirit; the truth is that in the Greek this could be legitimately translated as “the seven spirits”. Thus some think that this could be referring to 7 high ranking angels who serve before God’s heavenly throne (interestingly Judaism claims that there are 7 Archangels). And the term “seven spirits” is indeed present in a few other places in the Bible including Psalm 104 and Hebrews 1. However in the context of the absolute divine beings along which the Spirit comment is placed, it is hard to imagine including angels of any rank since they are by no means divine. In light of a constant barrage of sevens that symbolizes the divine perfection, completion, and finality that the Book of Revelation tells us about, then the characterization of the Sevenfold Spirit well fits the perfect fullness of the work of the Holy Spirit especially at the End of Days. Therefore I am convinced that this is indeed speaking of the ***Ruach HaKodesh***, the Holy Spirit.

Yeshua is described as the faithful witness and the firstborn from the dead. What did Yeshua witness to? God’s saving grace offered to humanity as the mostly costly ransom ever paid; the price of God’s Son. Christ’s faithfulness to His witness extended all the way to His own death. Firstborn from the dead does NOT mean that Christ was the first to be resurrected from the dead. We have earlier examples in both the Prophets and the New Testament of God resurrecting people from the dead. Rather it is probably better to focus on the **office** of the firstborn from a biblical and Hebrew perspective. That is, the firstborn (always a male) is given special authority within a family. Firstborn is a status so it was not uncommon that the son given the firstborn status was NOT the first son to have been born. Thus Christ was not the first to rise from the dead; but He was chosen to have special authority (given the status of the firstborn by God) over those of us who trust in Him and will be resurrected from the dead as He was.

Next at the end of verse 5 there is a turn from John telling his readers that God in His manifest forms brings greetings to the Believers of the 7 congregations. Now John pays a special homage to Christ as the one in the Godhead who freed us from our sins and caused us to be a kingdom of priests for God...God here meaning the Father....forever. So once again the Father is given preeminence just as Yeshua regularly insisted upon during his ministry on earth. Let’s talk for a minute about this remark of Believers becoming priests, or in Hebrew ***cohanim***, for the Father (another theological pothole, I’m afraid).

The concept of Believers as priests has, I think, been misconstrued and is at the root of some of the more blatant Replacement Theology doctrines that we find among some Christian denominations. That is, a widespread Christian doctrine is that the priesthood of gentile Believers in Christ will replace the Levitical priesthood during the Millennial Kingdom period because Israel has lost its place before God. Let me throw a little cold water on that thought. First of all, even if it was true (which it’s not) that God has replaced Israel with the gentile Church, Levites are exempt because they have not been part of Israel since early in the Exodus. God removed them from among the tribes of Israel and set them apart as non-partisan priests as explained in Numbers 1. All through Israel’s history beginning with the Exodus and right on until today the Levites are a unique case and are not to be counted as among the tribes of Israel.

But then there is also the issue of the Book of Ezekiel that spends several chapters having

Ezekiel measure and diagram the Temple that will be built by God to reign in during the Millennial period. In addition Ezekiel chapter 44 carefully explains all the duties of the Levite Priesthood that is to be reconstituted, based solely on the descendants of Tzadok, a rightful heir in the line of Aaron. Listen to how the Lord describes who will be the priests of the Millennial Temple.

¹⁰ "Rather, the L'vi'im, who went far away from me when Isra'el went astray, going astray after their idols- they will bear the consequences of their guilt, ¹¹ but they are to serve in my sanctuary. They will have charge of the gates of the house and of serving in the house; they will slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people; and they will attend and serve them. ¹² Because they served them in the presence of their idols and became an occasion of sin for the house of Isra'el, I am raising my hand against them,' says Adonai ELOHIM, 'and they will bear the consequences of their guilt.

¹³ They will not approach me to serve me in the office of cohen or approach any of the holy things or the especially holy things; but they will bear their shame for the disgusting practices they committed. ¹⁴ Yet I will put them in charge of the house and all its maintenance and everything to be done in it.

¹⁵ "However, the cohanim, who are L'vi'im and descendants of Tzadok, who took care of my sanctuary when the people of Isra'el went astray from me- they are the ones who will approach me and serve me; it is they who will attend me and offer me the fat and the blood,' says Adonai ELOHIM.

¹⁶ 'They will enter my sanctuary, approach my table to minister to me and perform my service.

A priest is a person set apart to serve God; and folks that is how all Believers are to look at ourselves because that's how God sees us and what He fully expects from us. However that is entirely different than being a member of the official Priesthood that was created to serve God by performing very specific duties at His sanctuary. The Book of Ezekiel makes it crystal clear that it is not gentile Believers (the Church) that will form a new priesthood that replaces the Levites; it will be actual Levites who descend from Tzadok who will serve God at the Temple during the 1000 year reign of Christ.

We'll continue with Revelation chapter 1 next time.