

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 4 - Chapter 1 Conclusion

We left off last week trying to decode the symbolism of the two-edged sword that came from the mouth of the divine being that was speaking to John. We'll get to that, but there are a couple of other items we need to address first so let's re-read a short section of chapter 1 of Revelation.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 1:16 – end

When John saw the vision of this divine being he fell on his face as if dead, we're told. Then the unidentified divine being placed his right hand upon the motionless, stricken John and said: "Don't be afraid!" Was John perhaps only awestruck with what he saw? Clearly not; he was petrified! That's why the divine being said to him, "Don't be afraid". One of the reasons John was afraid is because although he knew he was dealing with divinity....some puzzling form of the God of Israel.... he didn't know exactly who he was dealing with. Why the mention of the detail that it was this being's RIGHT hand that was placed upon him? Because this was not a warm and fuzzy encounter. Biblically and historically the right hand is always the hand of authority and power. It is also the hand of favor. So since John was commanded (and reassured) to not be afraid, and indeed the being exuded divine authority, then it is logical from the culture of his day for John to tell his readers that it was the right hand that touched him.

In addition to the divine being telling John not to be afraid he said: "I am the First and the Last, the Living One, I was dead, but look....I am alive forever and ever". Christians look at this verse and say that obviously this being is Christ. Once again we see John's words conflating standard Jewish imagery of God the Father (The First and the Last) with standard Believer's imagery of God the Son (I was dead but now I'm alive). I remind you that what is happening is that this is NOT John editorializing in his own words what he saw; it is John recording what this being said to him, whether he clearly understood what he heard or not. Here's where this gets sticky: nowhere does Yeshua ever call Himself "The First and the Last" in the Gospel accounts. At the same time God the Father certainly didn't die and then come alive again. And yet if we look at Christian articles and commentaries it is usual to find them say that Christ *is* the First and the Last; but guess what they use as their biblical proof? This statement right here in Revelation! This mysterious divine being says He is the First and the Last but doesn't give us His name. It is **only** Christian doctrine that says this is Christ; the being doesn't say so and there are no words to that effect. And since Christian doctrine says this is Christ, then the description of First and Last must also apply to Him. It's a circular argument. The reality is that at this point of chapter 1, based on the First and the Last description we could say that this is The Father speaking just as easily as we could say that the 'died and alive again' description says this is Yeshua. Obviously this divine person speaking to John defies conventional theological characterization as understood in his era and ours.

The point is this: we have forever attempted to put the form, nature and substance of God in a nice neat box. That box is usually labeled The Trinity; and then rather rigid descriptions and functions of each “person” are defined. Any disagreement is met with the charge of heresy. There is no denying the multiple attributes of God (sometimes called persons) that the Bible itself identifies clearly as God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However the Old Testament also adds other attributes of God called the Shekinah and the Angel of the Lord. Yet just how these attributes mesh together and how precisely they function and what form or forms they appear in is not so cut and dried in the Holy Scriptures. Yes, it is biblically explicit that God the Father is preeminent. It is equally explicit that God the Son (Jesus Christ) saves sinners and the Holy Spirit empowers Believers with new natures. But beyond that the functions and forms of each are not exhaustively defined and seem to have rather elastic boundaries.

For instance, I have shown you in previous lessons that Zechariah 14 actually turns on its head the nearly universal Christian doctrine that when Christ returns He’ll step foot on the Mt. of Olives and then it splits. Yet the original Hebrew of the Bible says unequivocally that YHWH, God the Father, is coming and it is HE that will step foot on the Mt. of Olives and split it in two. John seems to agree with Zechariah by identifying God the Father as the One who is, was, and is coming. And now we see this divine being in John’s vision identify Himself in non-standard terms that seem to mix the long standing attributes of God the Father with the unmistakable attributes of God the Son. How are we to decipher this? First, I think it unwise to simply apply a tidy solution in order to not have to deal with what is clearly an untidy problem. Rather we should take these unconventional descriptions of unnamed divine persons with an open mind as a mystery, knowing that in one form or another this is the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our real challenge is that as modern humans, including Believers, we just don’t like lingering unanswered questions about God. So the quickest solution is to decide that one of the Trinity MUST be assigned to this divine being of John’s vision because there is no other choice. New Testament Christianity insists this can only be Christ. I’m not saying it isn’t. I’m saying something is very different about this being because His description is unlike anything we’ve seen to this point in the Bible. Therefore we need to address this with humility, not read predisposed doctrines back into it, and hold whatever our opinions of it might be very lightly. Therefore, I prefer at this point in Revelation to refer to this unnamed divine being as God (meaning the Godhead) and leave it there for now.

Verse 19 was a most important bit of information to John, and it ought to be a caution for us. God tells John that this vision is both for now and for the future. Yet which part of it is “for now”, which part is for the future, and how much into the future the future part might be are left unanswered. So before we deal with the last verse of chapter 1, let’s return to the issue of the double-edged sword that comes from the mouth of God.

Last week I told you that while the symbolic imagery of a sword was not uncommon in the Old Testament or New, John is the first to make mention of a sword that is double-edged; therefore the characteristic of this particular sword as having 2 cutting edges has meaning. The consensus of Christianity is that John is thinking of Paul’s allegorical use of the sword as being the Word. Christianity says the Word is the teachings of Christ, and therefore Paul is speaking of the New Testament. However a New Testament didn’t exist in Paul’s day and

wouldn't for another 150 years. It is also questionable that John would directly borrow from Paul, and besides: adding the modifier of double-edged makes Paul's sword image and John's sword image quite different.

As I contemplated this dilemma, I ran across two very early Church Fathers who may have the more probable answer to what John saw and what it meant since they lived at a time not that far removed from John. The first is Victorinus of Petovium (also called Pettau and Poetovio). He lived in the 200's A.D. He says this in his Commentary on the Apocalypse:

The two-edged sword is the Law and the Gospel. The phrase "a sharp two-edged sword issued from his mouth" shows that it is he himself who earlier gave to the whole world knowledge of the Law through Moses, but now gives the blessings of the Gospel. And since by the same Word every human race will be judged, whether of the Old or the New Testament, he is called a "sword".That he might show the Apostles that he was announcing judgment, he said, "I have not come to send peace, but a sword".

Another early Church Father, Jerome, who wrote about 100 years after Victorinus, said this:

The Saints have the two-edge sword of the Letter and the Spirit. We read in the Apocalypse of John....which, by the way, is read in the churches and is accepted, for it is not held among the Apocrypha but is included in the canonical writings.....as I was saying, it is written there of the Lord Savior: 'Out of His mouth came a two-edged sword'. The Lord, therefore, gives the sword from his mouth to his disciples. It is a two-edged sword, namely, the word of his teachings. It is a two-edged sword, historically and allegorically, the Letter and the Spirit.

So essentially two of the earliest of the Church Fathers who lived before the Old Testament was pushed aside and marginalized said that the two-edged sword represents what we call the Old and New Testaments; or to use their words, the Law (or the Letter) and the Gospel or spirit. I suspect that because they interpreted John's words without the bent against the Old Testament that developed later on over the centuries within the Christian Church, they have better captured the essence of what John saw and meant by the double-edged sword than what modern commentators typically claim. So the symbolism of the two-edged sword means that judgment is coming and the standard that all will be tested against will be the Old Testament Law together with the Gospel of Christ.

The last verse of chapter 1 directly relates to the subject matter of chapters 2 and 3: the letters to the 7 Believing congregations of Asia. Back in verse 16 God is said to be holding 7 stars. Now in verse 20 God explains that the 7 stars symbolize 7 Heavenly angels. Stars are standard Old Testament imagery for symbolizing angels so this wasn't hard for John to recognize. But what is a bit more difficult for modern Believers is that it is said that these are 7 angels each associated to one or the other of 7 Asian Churches. Western Christianity generally has a harder time with this than some of the other branches of Christianity because the more evangelical denominations tend to emphasize the ministry of Christ and the Holy Spirit and deemphasize the ministry of angels. Thus it is common in Revelation commentaries to say that these are NOT heavenly angels at all, but rather they are messengers.....human messengers. I

deny that these are human messengers; clearly the words and their context make them angels. Stars don't signify human messengers in God's Word. So clearly there is some type of angel that is dedicated to each of these churches. Does that apply to all Believers' congregations? This is the only reference I have found to angels dedicated to Believing congregations and it is only to these particular 7. So your guess is probably as good as mine.

And finally we see that the 7 menorahs in the vision (typically, but wrongly, characterized in English translations as lamp stands) symbolize the 7 congregations. Now that we have completed chapter 1, and before we delve into the letters to the 7 Asian congregations beginning in chapter 2, we're going to go off-schedule to discuss some things that I think are important for students of the Bible and disciples of Christ to know so that perhaps our minds will be more open and ready to receive what God has for us not just in the Book of Revelation but also in the entire Bible.

While we are usually unaware of it, we all live in our own religious and cultural bubbles (others might call this our personal worldviews). These bubbles are often opaque and so we aren't always conscious (or only vaguely conscious) of what exists outside of them. For instance as concerns the Christian faith: European and American Christians usually believe that whatever we know of Christianity is generally shared by all who call themselves Christians. This hugely broad type of Christianity shared by Europeans and Americans today is known as **Western** Christianity because there are other types in other parts of the world. Because time has a way of making us forget our past, it surprises Western non-Catholics to learn that the main branch of Western Christianity called Protestantism owes its existence and probably at least 90% of its holidays, sacraments, customs and doctrines to Catholicism from whence it came.

Until around 1000 A.D. the Catholic Church represented and controlled the bulk of the known world's Christianity; but then the Eastern Orthodox Church split off from it in what was called "The Great Schism". What remained of the still immense Catholic Church as controlled by the Pope remained largely intact until the early 1500's A.D. when Martin Luther shook things up and began his protest movement that eventually led to the Protestant Reformation that led to the Protestant branch of the Western Church. However in the 5 centuries that had passed since the Great Schism, by the time of Luther many sub-branches of the Eastern Orthodox Church had already come into existence. And of course since the creation of the Protestant branch with Luther as its founder, a few thousand sub-branches of Protestantism have sprung from it.

Most Western Christians don't know much about any denomination beyond their own, let alone anything about the workings of the Eastern Orthodox Churches or their doctrines and beliefs. Even further removed from our awareness are the many independent and lesser known Christian branches such as the Chaldean, Coptic and Ethiopian whose Bibles contain some books the Western Branch doesn't have, and vice versa. I'll give you a concrete example of this a little later in this lesson. From our Western Christian perspective these strange and remote Church branches might call themselves our Christian brothers and sisters; and perhaps we accept that association until we find out just how different some of their doctrines are from ours, their sometimes divergent views of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit,

how they worship, and so much more, and then we have doubts about their faith or whether they can even rightfully be called Christian. But what is perhaps at least as troubling is that the part of the make-up of these bubbles we all inhabit that defines our faith has also led to most Believers being unaware of the actual beginnings of our faith as presented in the Old Testament and later in the Gospel accounts; a Jewish faith, on account of one very special Jew (Yeshua), and within the backdrop of the Jewish religion as it existed in the 1st century. It is within that context and mindset that John writes and his visions from God are tailored. It is not an easy context to access or understand for gentile Believers of all eras past or present. And the farther in time we live from those amazing days of the New Testament authors, the challenge becomes greater. Yet without interpreting God's Word in the proper context, the door opens wide to a nearly infinite variety of interpretations and doctrines. Common sense says that since those many interpretations and doctrines vary so greatly they can't all be right. How do we discover the truth?

I'm asking today that we begin by bravely climbing out of our familiar and comfortable bubbles where we live believing and confident that inside our own bubbles is the truth.....or at least all the truth that we want or need to know. Inside our bubbles is right....and outside of them is wrong. Inside our bubbles are assumptions and stereotypes we hardly know are there (because we've lived with them a long time) and so they go safely untested and unchallenged. That is not to say that everything we think to be true isn't, or that anyone is capable of knowing all things; nor in this case is it necessary to know about all the many branches of Christianity in order for us to have a firm and proper faith. Nonetheless just as I think you have gained from learning about the Torah and the Old Testament, and that they are anything but a threat to our faith in the salvation that Christ offers (in fact the OT makes us appreciate what He did for us and why, all the more) so now I want to show you that perhaps there are some other wonderful, faith-strengthening truths that reside just outside these bubbles we have inhabited for so long.

I suspect you are already beginning to realize the vast complexities of the Book of Revelation after only 1 chapter. Some of it is because it was written within the construct of the ancient Jewish faith, mindset and culture of the 1st century A.D., and yet it is handed down to us in Greek manuscripts and then translated into English (which complicates the issue of communicating Jewish thought). Therefore we are going to discuss some underlying elements of Revelation that are necessarily based on Jewish thought and culture and so can easily be (and have been) overlooked and misconstrued. Hopefully by addressing several of these in detail, one by one at various points of our study, by the time we've completed Revelation we'll have not just a greater understanding of this book, but also the New Testament in general.

So today we're going to pause to discuss the critical passage in Daniel 7 that is alluded to by John in Revelation 1:7 and 1:13, which speaks about "the one like a son of man" coming in the clouds. What does Daniel mean by "son of man"? What did "son of man" mean to Jews in Christ's era? And most importantly, since Yeshua regularly used "son of man" as a title for Himself, what did **He** mean by it? If you studied the Book of Daniel with us, then you've already been familiarized with the issue. If not, then this will be entirely new to you. Either way, we'll try to peel this onion back one more layer. We'll not repeat everything I spoke in Daniel week 19 on this topic; so I recommend that you get that lesson and go over it. I will review

some of it but will also add some new information.

Before I go there, however, let me deal briefly with the title Son of God. The most prevalent Christian doctrines of our day say that the title Son of God refers to Christ's divine nature, while the title Son of Man refers to His humanness. Sounds nice but that is clearly not what the Scriptures say or mean. In Old Testament times it was believed (and the Scriptures say) that the Lord essentially adopted each Israelite King as His own son (mostly from a spiritual viewpoint, but in a very real way nonetheless). We get a straightforward example of this adoption as God spoke to David about the issue of David not being allowed to construct a Temple for the Lord, but that his son Solomon would.

1Chronicles 28:6 CJB

⁶ ***"Moreover, he (God) said to me, 'Shlomo your son will build my house and courtyards, for I have chosen him to be a son to me, and I will be a father to him.***

So the idea of a King of Israel being God's adopted son (Son of God), was at this point in history merely establishing an unusually close bond between the earthly, entirely human, ruling King of Israel and God Almighty. This king is not divine, he is not God, but he is raised up by God to rule over His people and given special attention, wisdom, and protection. This adoptive father/son relationship between the God of Israel and an Israelite king was primarily aimed at kings who came from the authorized line of kings: the line of David.

I want to give you an example of how this knowledge changes our perspective in reading the New Testament as we see it from the Jewish worldview in which it was written. The opening words of Mark's Gospel are: ^{CJB} **Mark 1:1 *The beginning of the Good News of Yeshua the Messiah, the Son of God.*** The term "son of God" is meant to communicate that Yeshua is the long awaited for Davidic king; it is not meant to refer to Yeshua's divine nature at that point. That is not to say that Mark didn't think that Yeshua was divine. It is only that the term the Son of God coupled with the term Messiah (***Mashiach***) had a long established, well understood and culturally specific meaning to the Jewish people. It spoke of the Jews' breathless expectation for not just any Hebrew who might be king, but of a **Davidic** King to once again appear. So naturally these culturally familiar terms are what Mark uses to convey to his Jewish readers that Yeshua of Nazareth is not only the anointed one (***Mashiach***) but as Son of God, He is also from the line of David. Thus, as counter-intuitive as it seems to gentile minds, the term Son of God actually refers to the human nature of Yeshua and not His divine.

With that let's now deal directly about the "one like a Son of Man" as described in Daniel's vision in Daniel 7. In verse 13 Daniel speaks of two distinct divine figures: The Ancient One and the "One like a Son of Man". It must be understood that the original Aramaic this was written in says ***bar-enash***, which correlates directly to the Hebrew ***bene-adam***; both simply mean human being. That is, son of man is the Aramaic and Hebrew way of saying human being. And those terms mean absolutely nothing more nor less than that. So when in Daniel's vision he sees this one like a Son of Man come on clouds from heaven, and in verse 14 it says that the Ancient One (God the Father) is giving him rulership, glory and a kingdom over all the inhabitants of the earth, Daniel sees a human being coming on the clouds. And yet, Daniel

knows it can't be a human being, so he writes "One LIKE a Son of Man"; or better "One LIKE a human being". So Daniel was given a divine prophetic vision that introduced a new and confusing element of the term son of man. Daniel had received a vision of a future divine/human Messiah, but didn't realize it. A new theological concept was born here in Daniel in Israelite religious understanding; the theological concept of a human-appearing deity, who is given the title of the Son of Man, who is directly associated with Yehoveh, the God of Israel. Such a concept wouldn't have raised so much as an eyebrow among pagan gentiles because all gentiles saw their gods and goddesses as human-appearing deities. But the Israelites had spent centuries being punished in the most terrible ways by the God of Israel for harboring those kinds of thoughts because they manifested themselves in idolatry. This was a most difficult concept for Daniel to digest to the point that it made him sickly pale.

As modern Believers we have a leg up on Daniel. Around 600 years after Daniel his puzzling vision began to come into focus. Daniel provided several attributes that would help identify this special Son of Man. Those attributes are: He is human, but in some inexplicable way he is also divine. He will come in clouds. He will occupy a throne, in Heaven, right next to Yehoveh, the Ancient of Days. The Ancient of Days delegates dominion over the entire planet, and over everyone, to this unique Son of Man. These attributes that we find of the Son of Man concept in Daniel 7 we find in Yeshua of Nazareth. So what we learn is that, ironically, it is the Son of Man concept and the claim of Yeshua that He is that Son of Man that identifies Him as divine.

It is nearly universally explained by Bible scholars that it was Christ's claim of being the divine Son of Man that led to His execution. That is, the Jews were in no way ready to accept the idea of a human....even a human Messiah.....also being divine. Therefore this led them to accusing Jesus of blasphemy and asking Rome to execute Him for them. Jewish history proves that construct to be incorrect. In fact, it was the highly revered Daniel who first introduced the idea of a human/divine person that would rule over God's Kingdom. So by Christ's day this concept of a human/divine Messiah was long established Jewish theology. Although not all Jews subscribed to it, many did. So let's be clear: this accepted notion that Christians invented the idea of a divine/human Savior or that the Jews were sent into a murderous rage over it and wanted Yeshua crucified for claiming it does injustice to reality. Rather the image of Yeshua as a divine/human Messiah that we find in the Gospels well spells out what a major portion of Jewish society already believed.

There is a reason that thousands and thousands of Jews were the first Believers in Yeshua as their divine/human Messiah; they were expecting such a thing and they became convinced He was that Messiah. Such an expectation was already built-in to Jewish Tradition. In fact, because the Son of Man concept had existed and been accepted (and debated) within Jewish culture for hundreds of years, it is not found only in the Bible but also in the book of 1 Enoch, which is really a group of 5 books, one of them called Similitudes of Enoch. It is now fairly well agreed that this was written at or before the time of Christ.

I mentioned earlier in our lesson that other branches of Christianity can have different books in their Bibles than we do, but we of the West are typically unaware of it. The Ethiopian Church as well as some of the Eastern Orthodox sub-branches include these 5 books of 1 Enoch in their Bibles. Listen to an excerpt taken from the **Similitudes of Enoch, chapter 46**:

There I saw one who had a head of days, and his head was like white wool. And with him was another, whose face was like the appearance of a man; and his face was full of graciousness like one of the holy angels. And I asked the angel of peace, who went with me and showed me all the hidden things, about that son of man....who he was and whence he was and why he went with the Head of Days. And he answered m and said to me: "This is the son of man who has righteousness."

Sounds amazingly similar to the Gospel accounts and our passage in Revelation doesn't it? As well it should because the Gospel accounts didn't innovate a new concept in the Son of Man; rather the new Believers in Yeshua just assigned a long held Jewish concept to this carpenter's son from Nazareth. Also note that the Similitudes were written before the Gospels were written and also likely before Yeshua even started His earthly ministry.

So for John the Son of Man concept was a very old and familiar one, well understood among his Jewish readers of the Book of Revelation, and so not particularly controversial. In fact Yeshua's Son of Man claim simply verified what most Jews had been waiting for in their Messiah. But for the new gentile Believers? Most wouldn't have had a clue about the Son of Man matter. How about modern commentators and readers of the Gospels and the Book of Revelation? Due to notoriously less than favorable mindsets towards anything Jewish (sometimes a sub-conscious mindset) and a reluctance to delve into the Old Testament or at least to reflect upon those Bible books in their native Hebrew context, the concept of the divine/human Son of Man seemed to be new and innovative with Jesus and perhaps the very theological doctrine that was to separate Christ from His Jewishness, and the Church away from its Hebrew heritage. Now you all know better.

We'll begin Revelation chapter 2 next time.