

Lesson 1

Revelation



Write What You See

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

Introduction

The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) is without question the most unusual book of the Bible and poses a veritable minefield of problems. Through the centuries it's invited many strange interpretations, yet the Church includes this book in her canon of sacred Scripture. In the first chapter, the author tells readers: "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein" (*Rev* 1:3). The key to understanding the book of Revelation—from "Alpha" to "Omega," from beginning to end—is to read it within the context of the rest of the Bible—also from beginning to end—and to read all of Scripture within the context of the worship and teaching of the Church. Revelation is a book firmly rooted in the Old Testament, in the historical circumstances of the 1st-century Church, and in the liturgical worship of that Church. Its very structure is modeled on the liturgy of the Mass, beginning with the initial blessing (*Rev* 1:3-8), moving on to a penitential rite (the seven letters urging repentance), followed by the Liturgy of the Word (the opening of the scrolls), and culminating in the marriage supper of the Lamb (a common term for the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the early Church). Viewing this final book of the New Testament in its larger context can help make it relevant for contemporary Christians, and the apostle John provides much information that is helpful for Christians in any age—information such as how to respond to words of prophecy and where to look for Jesus. John even includes a reassuring message for those who may feel intimidated when approaching a Bible study about the book of Revelation: "Fear not" (*Rev* 1:17).

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¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and

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from the seven spirits who are before his throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

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

⁹I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet¹¹ saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast;¹⁴ his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire,¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters;¹⁶ in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.¹⁹ Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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Study Questions

It's best to read all of Revelation 1:1-20 and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

The Prologue

Revelation 1:1-3

1. According to the author of the book of Revelation, why does God give him this vision, and what are the means by which he receives it?
2. What must readers do to be blessed by the prophecy recorded in the book of Revelation?
3. Revelation 1:7 announces that Jesus is “coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.” What does the cloud symbolize (see *Ex* 13:21, *Ex* 40:34, and paragraph 697 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC])?

The Greeting

Revelation 1:4-8

4. To whom is the book of Revelation addressed (also see *Rev* 1:11)? Compare the greeting in Revelation 1:4 with St. Paul's greeting in his Letter to the Romans (see *Rom* 1:7).
5. How does the description of God in Revelation 1:4 relate to God's revelation of his name to Moses in Exodus 3:14?

6. Based on Revelation 1:4-5 and on paragraphs 253 and 254 in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, how would you describe the Blessed Trinity?

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7. Where is the author of the book of Revelation when he receives his vision from God? Whose voice is heard? What day of the week is it (see *CCC* 2174)?
8. Why does the author of the book of Revelation introduce himself not as an apostle or other important figure in the early Church but as “your brother,” who shares with his readers “in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (*Rev* 1:9)? What does this indicate about the role suffering plays in the Christian life (see *Mt* 16:24 and *Lk* 14:27)?
9. In Revelation 1:12-20, what imagery is used to describe Jesus Christ? How do these images show that Jesus represents the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies found in Daniel 7:13-14, Exodus 28:4, and Daniel 7:9? How do these images in the book of Revelation relate to information about Jesus found in the New Testament (see *Heb* 4:12 and *Jn* 12:46)?
10. A theophany is a visible appearance of God. Compare the vision of Jesus Christ recorded in the first chapter of Revelation with other theophanies in the Bible such as the Transfiguration of Jesus (see *Mk* 9:2-8) and the appearance of God to the Israelites at Mount Sinai (see *Ex* 19:16-24).

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in Revelation 1:1-20 might apply to your own life:

1. **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.** In Revelation 1:8 (our suggested memory verse), Jesus Christ refers to himself as alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Do you approach life with the confidence that everything from beginning to end ultimately is under God’s control? What areas in your day-to-day life do you have a tendency to try to control without the help of God? What steps can you take to turn these things over to Jesus Christ?
2. In Revelation 1:11, the apostle John is told to write letters to the seven churches of Asia. If Jesus were dictating a letter to your parish church, what do you think it would say?

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder— *Revelation 1:1-20*

Blessed Are Those Who Hear

The book of Revelation opens with these words of benediction: “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near” (*Rev* 1:3). In addition to stressing the immediacy of the time when his prophetic vision will be fulfilled, the apostle John is emphasizing the importance of two things—reading the words of the prophecy aloud, which implies sharing this apocalyptic vision with others, and hearing and keeping the words that have been written down. Merely hearing the words isn’t enough to secure divine blessing—listeners also must obey these divinely inspired words of Scripture. In recording the words of his prophetic vision, John himself is being obedient by bearing witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.

There’s a strong link between prophecy and the typological interpretation of history. The apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation uses Old Testament symbols or images to show the spiritual significance of historical events. Most Jewish apocalyptic literature written at about the same time as the book of Revelation (4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and other works) employs extensive dialogue between the author and an angel, who discuss evil and its relationship to God’s judgment. In addition, most apocalyptic visions are spread out over a lengthy period of time, and the authors bring them about by fasting. The apostle John’s vision eliminates all but a small amount of theological dialogue with angels, there’s no indication he’s been fasting, and his apocalypse appears to take place all at once with the various visions occurring in rapid succession—almost like scenes in an action movie. John records that he was “in the Spirit on the

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Lord's day" (*Rev* 1:10) when his vision occurs, which emphasizes the heavily liturgical aspect of the book of Revelation.

Instructed to "write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches" (*Rev* 1:11), the apostle does what he's told and starts by explaining how he came to be on the island of Patmos. He also sets out three major themes of the book of Revelation: "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (*Rev* 1:9). Those three themes are suffering (tribulation), the kingdom of God, and patient endurance. The virtue of patience is essential to the lifestyle of Christians and allows believers to pass through times of suffering or tribulation so as to be assured of entering into the salvation of the kingdom of God.

The apostle John also uses the first chapter of the book of Revelation to set up a number of important images that will reappear throughout the work—the throne of God as a seat of judgment, the significance of the number seven, the cloud of glory, the voice of God sounding like a trumpet, the two-edged sword of truth, and the keys of Death and Hades.

One Like a Son of Man

After his introductory blessing and the explanation of how he's come to be writing this prophetic vision, the apostle John wastes no time in introducing "one like a son of man" (*Rev* 1:13). The primary source for the title "Son of man" originates with the Old Testament prophet Daniel, who describes this mysterious figure in his night visions: "And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like the son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (*Dan* 7:13-14). In the Gospels, Jesus calls himself "Son of man" more than all other titles combined, and no one else ever calls him this. Because Jesus clearly chose this title for himself, it's worthwhile to look at how it's used in the prophecies of Daniel. In Daniel 7:9, the Son of man is described in language very similar to the language used to describe Jesus in Revelation 1:13-16: In the midst of the lampstands was "one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."

The image of the chariot throne in the seventh chapter of Daniel also deserves attention. The Ancient of Days, understood to be an image of God the Father, is seated on it: "As I looked the thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment and the books were opened" (*Dan* 7:9-10). In the prophecies of Daniel there's a distinction between the Ancient of Days and the Son of man, but this distinction gets blurred in the book of

Revelation, where Jesus Christ is described in such a way as to indicate that he's taken on the glory of God the Father.

Interestingly, at his trial before Caiaphas in the Temple at Jerusalem, Jesus predicts the exact same thing that the apostle John is shown in his prophetic vision. In Matthew 26:63, Caiaphas, the high priest, adjures Jesus under sacred oath: "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus, who's been silent until that moment in his trial, replies: "You have said so," and then goes on to apply the details of Daniel's vision to himself: "But I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (*Mt* 26:64). For Caiaphas, this is the final straw. The high priest tears his robes and exclaims: "He has uttered blasphemy" (*Mt* 26:65). Caiaphas is so upset because he recognizes that Jesus has claimed divinity. When Jesus identifies himself with the Son of man in Daniel's prophecy, Jesus is publicly admitting that he's God. When the apostle John connects Jesus to that same Son of man, he's emphasizing Jesus' divinity and pointing out the contrast between Jesus' earthly trial before Caiaphas and the book of Revelation's vision of Final Judgment in which Jesus Christ no longer is on trial but instead is acting as the eternal judge of all creation.

Behold, He Is Coming with the Clouds

The strongest Old Testament connections to the book of Revelation are found in the prophecies of Ezekiel. A comparison of these two books of Scripture discloses many close parallels. Images found in the book of Revelation even follow the same sequence as the same images recorded in the writings of Ezekiel. The first of these connections occurs with the Old Testament prophet's description of "wheels within wheels," a vision of a chariot throne on the clouds (*Ezek* 1:15-21) much like the throne in Revelation 1:4. Ezekiel further describes the throne as being surrounded by brightness: "Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about" (*Ezek* 1:28).

This image of the rainbow and cloud at once recalls the covenant between God and Noah after the flood, and the Shekinah, or the cloud that indicates the presence of God. This cloud, or the glory that surrounds the throne of God, is the same cloud that guided the Israelites out of Egypt (*Ex* 13:21) and that filled the tabernacle with the glory of God (*Ex* 40:34). It's a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus Christ comes in glory on the last day, he'll come on a cloud, just as the risen Jesus departed from the world in a cloud of glory. St. Luke describes the disciples' experience at the Ascension of Jesus: "And a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'" (*Acts* 1:9-11).

Both Ezekiel and the apostle John react to being in the presence of the glorified Jesus Christ in exactly the same way. Ezekiel writes that such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD ("like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain") that he fell upon his face when he saw it (*Ezek* 1:28), and John writes that he himself fell at the feet of Jesus "as though dead" (*Rev* 1:17). A case could be made that John, as the "beloved disciple," was closer to Jesus than any of the other disciples. At the time of his prophetic vision, John hasn't seen Jesus for years, yet he doesn't run up and embrace Jesus or start asking him what he's been doing for the

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past several decades. When the apostle John sees Jesus Christ as he really is—in all his heavenly power, glory, and honor—he immediately falls at Jesus’ feet as though dead. John isn’t being melodramatic. He’s reacting in a perfectly normal way to being in the presence of utmost holiness. Jesus’ all-surpassing holiness emphasizes his divinity, which John recognizes at once.

This anticipates the words that the book of Revelation will use to describe the holiness of God: “Holy, holy, holy” (*Rev* 4:8), and echoes the same hymn of praise the angels sing in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah’s vision of the Lord sitting on a throne (*Isa* 6:3). To indicate supreme holiness, biblical writers use repetition. The Hebrew language has no other way of expressing superlatives such as holy, holier, and holiest. Such repetition is used to describe only one attribute of God—his holiness. Nowhere in Scripture is God described as “merciful, merciful, merciful,” or “loving, loving, loving.” The single most important attribute of God is his holiness. The Letter to the Hebrews contains an important reminder of how Christians are, amazingly enough, called to share in that holiness of God: “He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (*Heb* 12:10), and the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews then encourages Christians to “strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (*Heb* 12:14).

The Keys of Death and Hades

In Revelation 1:17, Jesus places his right hand on John and reassures him with familiar words: “Fear not,” which are almost the same words that he speaks in his first Resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb: “Do not be afraid” (*Mt* 28:10). In the book of Revelation, Jesus goes on to explain to the apostle John the details about his circumstances in heaven: “I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (*Rev* 1:17-18). This is reminiscent of St. Peter receiving the keys to the kingdom of God, when Jesus promises him: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (*Mt* 16:19). As a result, St. Peter has the power to unlock Death and Hades—in the name of Jesus Christ. The image of the keys of Death and Hades will continue to be significant throughout the book of Revelation.

In the final section of the first chapter of the book of Revelation, the apostle John gives Christians some very practical information. He describes exactly where Jesus can be found: “Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man” (*Rev* 1:12-13). He goes on to explain what the lampstands represent: “As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (*Rev* 1:20). The first chapter introduces the first three series of sevens found in the book of Revelation—the seven spirits who are before the throne of God and who represent the Holy Spirit (*Rev* 1:4), the seven angels, and the seven churches. Seven is a number that symbolizes, among other things, universality and completeness. The place where the apostle John meets “one like a son of man” is in the midst of the lampstands, indicating to readers that they, too, should look for Jesus Christ in his Church.

Catechism Connections

- For more information about Jesus Christ as the fullness of all revelation, see *CCC* 65 and *CCC* 66.
- To learn about the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit found in Isaiah 11:1-2—wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the LORD—and about their effects in the lives of Christians, see *CCC* 1830 and *CCC* 1831.
- *CCC* 2854 explains how in praying the “Our Father,” Christians bring all the distress of the world before the all-holy God, him who “is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II taught that all Christians share in the priesthood of Christ.

The new people of God is a priestly people that has a share in the one priesthood of Christ: Through Baptism “he made us a line of kings and priests to serve his God and Father” (*Rev* 1:6). We are a people of praise and worship, of holiness and spiritual rebirth. In brief, this common priesthood of all the baptized is expressed in two ways—on the one hand by worshipping and adoring God, and on the other by working to extend his kingdom in the affairs of the human family. Both are part of our Christian vocation and should not be separated.

—homily, November 28, 1986

Summary

In Revelation 1:1-20, we observed that:

1. The key to understanding The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) is to read it within the context of the rest of the Bible—and to read all of Scripture within the context of the life, worship, and teaching of the Church.
2. The book of Revelation is modeled on the Liturgy of the Mass, beginning with the initial blessing, moving on to a penitential rite, followed by the Liturgy of the Word, and culminating in the marriage supper of the Lamb (a common term for the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the early Church).
3. Merely hearing the words isn't enough to secure divine blessing—listeners also must obey these divinely inspired words of Scripture.
4. The apocalyptic vision of the book of Revelation uses Old Testament symbols or images to show the spiritual significance of historical events.
5. The three major themes of the book of Revelation are suffering (tribulation), the kingdom of God, and patient endurance.
6. The primary source for the title “Son of man” originates with the Old Testament prophet Daniel, who describes this mysterious figure in his night visions.
7. The strongest Old Testament connections to the book of Revelation are found in the prophecies of Ezekiel.
8. The book of Revelation stresses that the single most important attribute of God is his holiness.

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