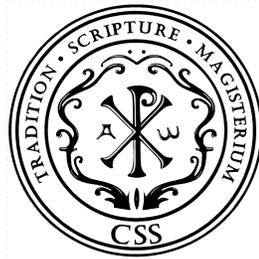


The Revelation to John

*A Bible Study by Dr. Scott Hahn and Mark Shea
Edited by Jennifer Phelps*



Revelation

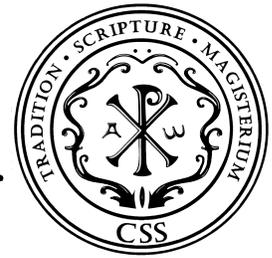


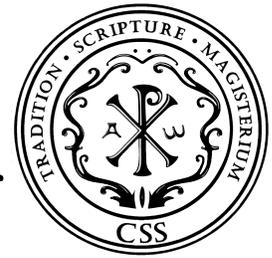
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Introduction

Revelation



An Invitation to a Wedding

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

Apocalyptic Literature: Removing the Veil

The Greek word for “revelation” is *apokalypsis*, and it’s the root from which the English word “apocalypse” derives. Not surprisingly, many scholars interpret The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) as falling within the literary genre of apocalyptic literature, a style of writing common from roughly 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. Canonical examples can be seen in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Zechariah, as well as in portions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. This form of prophetic writing concerns future events filled with cataclysmic and cosmic imagery. Apocalyptic literature isn’t merely interested in the struggles of God’s people on earth. Rather, it relates earthly situations to heavenly strife involving angels, powers, and principalities. Because it emphasizes the inevitable end of history, apocalyptic literature deals almost entirely with catastrophic events. Old Testament symbols, or types, are used by New Testament writers to describe the action of Jesus Christ in the world—for instance, the Passover lamb is a type of Jesus, the Lamb of God. This typological way of looking at human events characterizes prophecy in the Bible.

Although the book of Revelation is related to the Jewish tradition of apocalyptic literature, it differs from it in one key way. Most Jewish apocalyptic literature was written to whip up religious-nationalist frenzy against a political oppressor, usually Rome. In stark contrast to this, the book of Revelation was written to help early Christians understand the spiritual dimensions of events of their time so that in the Spirit of Jesus Christ they might overcome the persecutions that they were undergoing. This final book of the New Testament also clearly appears to have been written with a deep interest in the relationship between the Old Covenant that God made with his people during Old Testament times and the New Covenant instituted by Jesus Christ.

One fascinating and little-known detail about the word *apokalypsis* is that it may have been used in everyday speech in connection with weddings. During the 1st century, when the book of Revelation was written, a typical Jewish wedding could take as long as a week. On the seventh day, the festivities culminated in the actual wedding ceremony. Bride and bridegroom would be dressed as king and queen, and groomsmen would carry them aloft on their shoulders in a procession. At the conclusion of this, the couple would be lowered before the bridal canopy, a

Revelation Introduction

large tent under which the wedding ceremony was performed. Then, bride and bridegroom would enter into the inner room of the tent where the bridegroom would perform the *apokalypsis*, or removal of the veil, from the bride's face. This "removal of the veil" refers by extension to the removal of more than just the bride's facial covering. It is, if readers will pardon the pun, a "veiled" reference to that moment when the newlyweds enter into the most intimate and fulfilling relationship in the natural order—the nuptial union when husband and wife become one flesh.

The definition of *apokalypsis* is "an uncovering or a revelation." The author's choice of the word *apokalypsis* as the Greek title for the book of Revelation indicates Jesus Christ's unveiling—not to his slaves, nor to his business partners, nor to his students—but to his bride. In this final book of the New Testament, *apokalypsis* (or revelation) is, at its most fundamental level, not about acquiring information, facts, or data about God. It's rather about entering into an ecstatic and eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. Everything written in the book of Revelation is built upon this bedrock fact of intimate, nuptial relationship between Jesus Christ and his bride. This mystical understanding of Jesus Christ as the bridegroom and of the Church as his bride burns with hidden fire at the heart of the book of Revelation. It's a biblical work that's not primarily intended as a political tract, codebook, puzzle, or conglomeration of theological concepts, but as a wedding invitation.

Authorship, Location, and Audience

The book of Revelation provides some sketchy details about its author. His name is John (*Rev* 1:1-9 and *Rev* 22:8), and he counts himself among the prophets (*Rev* 22:9). Although biblical works rarely include information about where they're written, the author of the book of Revelation explicitly states its place of composition—the island of Patmos, to which he's been banned by unknown authorities for his Christian testimony (*Rev* 1:9). The letters he sends to the seven churches (*Rev* 2:1-3:22) presuppose his pre-eminent position among Christians in Asia. It's primarily to these Christians that John addresses his book of Revelation.

Many early Church Fathers—including Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Gregory of Nyssa—regard the apostle John as the author of the book of Revelation. Some in the early Church, however, claimed the work wasn't apostolic—most frequently because its text was misused and abused to support various heresies. Others, noticing differences between the literary style of the book of Revelation and John's Gospel and Letters, concluded that the same person couldn't have written all five works. One theory dating back to Dionysius of Alexandria, who lived during the middle of the 3rd century, holds that only the Gospel and the First Letter of John are the work of the apostle John, and that the book of Revelation was written by a figure known as "John the Presbyter." While debate over the authorship of the book of Revelation never has been completely resolved, the Church included the work when the canon of Scripture was established in the late 4th century. Although scholars encounter some problems attributing the book of Revelation to the apostle John, there are as many or more problems connected with assigning the work to another author.

The Catholic Scripture scholar Andre Feuillet, in his book *The Apocalypse*, sets out a persuasive summary of the arguments supporting authorship by the apostle John. Among the most

compelling reasons are the many close similarities between the way theological language is used in the book of Revelation and in the Gospel of John. For example, those are the only two books of the New Testament that use the phrase “living water.” In the Gospel of John, this “living water” flows from the hearts of those who believe in Jesus (*Jn* 7:39), while in Revelation it flows from the throne of God located in the new Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ—(*Rev* 7:17 and *Rev* 22:1). The same mystical train of thought appears to be at the center of both books. And there are other similarities found nowhere else in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is presented as “the Lamb” twice in the Gospel of John, and 28 times in Revelation. Jesus is the “Word of God” (*Jn* 1:1, *Jn* 1:14, and *Rev* 19:13), and the Church is “the bride” (*Jn* 3:29, *Rev* 21:2, *Rev* 21:9, and *Rev* 22:17). The absence of any Temple in the new Jerusalem (*Rev* 21:22) seems to be in line with Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman at the well: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (*Jn* 4:21).

A number of historical facts also point to the idea that The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) actually was the work of the apostle John. Many of the early Fathers offer written evidence to corroborate authorship by the apostle John. St. Justin Martyr, for instance, specifically refers to the author of the book of Revelation as “one of the apostles of Christ.” St. Justin Martyr was converted to Christianity around 135 A.D. in Ephesus, the same city where it’s known that the apostle John served as bishop. Ephesus also is the first of the seven cities addressed by Jesus Christ at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Both St. Melito of Sardis, another of the cities whose churches are addressed in the seven letters, and St. Irenaeus attest that the apostle John is the author of this final book of the New Testament. St. Irenaeus learned the Gospel from St. Polycarp, who is said to have heard it directly from the apostle John.

Theology: Four Views of the Book of Revelation

Christian theology generally has taken four different approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation. The most common is the futurist view, which is held by Evangelical Protestants and Fundamentalist Christians. Proponents of the futurist view argue that the prophetic vision recorded in the book of Revelation won’t make sense until the end of time. Writers such as Hal Lindsey have popularized futurist theories that match up various contemporary images with corresponding images from the book of Revelation—the U.S.S.R. pairs up with Gog and Magog, the European Common Market is seen as the 10-headed beast, and Soviet helicopters are represented by the armies of locusts. Many futurists believe that Jesus soon will return to slaughter the political threat du jour, and that he’ll establish an earthly kingdom lasting 1,000 years. This particular futurist view specifically has been condemned as a heresy by the Catholic Church.

A second way of looking at the book of Revelation is the historicist view, which holds that the final book of the New Testament predicts all the various stages of Church history from the beginning to the end of time. Because the triumph of Jesus Christ over the whole world is a fact throughout history, the historicist view provides a fruitful way of studying the book of Revelation.

A third view, and the one probably held by more Church Fathers than any other, is the idealist view. Proponents hold that the book of Revelation describes the ongoing spiritual struggle that every believer faces in his or her life and that the Church faces in every generation. This struggle takes place on earth, and it’s taking place at this very moment even in heavenly places. It’s a struggle involving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and it will intensify

Revelation Introduction

throughout history until Jesus Christ brings it to a decisive conclusion. The idealist view explains the prophetic vision recorded in the book of Revelation as a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The idealist view can be particularly valuable because it recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, he's enthroned in heaven, and he sends his angels to fight the battle between good and evil going on here on earth.

The preterist view looks at the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book of Revelation as already having occurred, at least in a literal sense. Preterists believe that the book was written for 1st-century Christians prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This isn't to deny the second coming of Christ at the end of time. In fact, Catholic Tradition long has regarded the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. as a type of the coming judgment of the world. The preterist view holds that the book of Revelation primarily was written to address the immediate historical circumstances of the apostle John and his Christian community. That's why the apocalyptic vision opens with the proclamation that it's given by God "to show to his servants what must soon take place . . . for the time is near" (*Rev* 1:1-3). This strong note of imminence echoes throughout the book.

Date and Basic Theme

The question of the date when the book of Revelation was written intertwines with the basic theme of the book, especially for those who hold the preterist view when interpreting the work's meaning. For the preterist, the coming of Jesus Christ that's envisioned by the apostle John concerns not so much the end of *the* world as the end of *a* world in which Old Covenant thinking predominated.

The majority of scholars believe that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John toward the end of his life around 96 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Domitian. A growing number of scholars, however, argue that the book of Revelation may have been written shortly before 70 A.D. Contradictory evidence makes it difficult to establish a firm date. But underlying the argument that the book of Revelation was written prior to 70 A.D. (an argument advanced by Kenneth L. Gentry in his book, *Before Jerusalem Fell*) is the fact that throughout the rest of the New Testament the persecution of Jesus and his apostles isn't precipitated by the Romans but instead is instigated by the Jews in Jerusalem. This persecution of the early Church by the Jews culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., just exactly as Jesus had prophesied (*Mt* 24:1-2). Theologically, this can be seen as signifying the passing away of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

The great challenge faced by any modern reader of the book of Revelation is to try to view the book the way its intended audience would have. That audience was composed of 1st-century Christians coming out of Jewish background, and they would have read it in its covenantal context. The authors of the New Testament are, with the exception of Luke, all Jews. They've all been formed under Mosaic Law and their minds are steeped in Old Covenant thinking. The one idea that lies at the center of the world view of the New Testament authors is their unshakeable belief that through Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Covenant has entered into a New Covenant with his people.

Christian Perspective

The relationship of this New Covenant to the Old, therefore, should be the controlling principle that governs the interpretation of the apostle John's prophetic vision in the book of Revelation. For what, after all, is the climax of the book of Revelation? The nineteenth chapter is explicit—a city described as a “harlot” is destroyed by fire. Though many scholars argue that this city refers to Rome, that interpretation doesn't explain the fact that Rome never is described as a harlot anywhere else in Scripture, while such prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel frequently describe Jerusalem that way and in other similar terms. In the latter chapters of the book of Revelation, it's not a new Rome but a new Jerusalem that descends from heaven as the mystical bride of the Lamb of God after the destruction of the city called “harlot.” The parallelism isn't hard to see—the “harlot” isn't Rome but Jerusalem. The book of Revelation then can be understood to be saying that the virginal bride of Christ—the new Jerusalem, the Church of the New Covenant—won't be revealed in its fullness until the old Jerusalem—a prototype of the new—passes away.

The writers of the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all see apocalyptic significance in the destruction of the Temple. Indeed, the Olivet discourse, recorded in all three synoptic Gospels, sometimes is called the “little Apocalypse.” In it, Jesus speaks of wars, rumors of wars, famine, earthquake, pestilence, persecution, and various cosmic signs, and he declares that “this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (*Mt* 24:34). In Jewish reckoning, a “generation” was 40 years, and Jesus spoke just fewer than 40 years before the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Also, significantly, only one Gospel doesn't record the Olivet discourse, or “little Apocalypse.” Instead of writing a “little discourse” of a chapter or two, the apostle John writes an entire book—The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse). The underlying theme of both little and big Apocalypses is the same, however—the relationship of the New Covenant to the Old.

The apostle John's entire prophetic vision in the book of Revelation is about this relationship, and his work is consummated by nothing less than the marriage supper of Lamb of God. That nuptial term significantly was used in the early Church to describe the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and it's used the same way today to describe the Catholic Mass. Both marriage and the Eucharist have at their heart the vision of lover and beloved united in intimate embrace, and both Matrimony and the Eucharist are sacraments of the Church. According to the saints, the only experience in the natural realm of human relations to even approach the ecstasy of heavenly union with God is the sexual bond of the marital union—and even then the experience provides little more than a faint understanding of union with the Blessed Trinity. That's why it's difficult to understand the book of Revelation apart from this vision of sacramental love. The message of the book of Revelation is that all Christians are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. There the faithful will feast forever on the life and love of God, who even now offers himself to and for his bride the Church in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass.

Outline of The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse)

- I. Liturgy of the Word (1:1—11:19)**
 - A. Letters to the Seven Churches (1:1—3:22)
 - B. Heavenly Liturgy (4:1—5:14)
 - C. The Seven Seals and the 144,000 (6:1—7:17)
 - D. Trumpets and Plagues (8:1—11:19)
 - a. Trumpets in Zion (8:1-13)
 - b. The Bottomless Pit (9:1-21)
 - c. The Scroll and the Two Witnesses (10:1—11:19)
- II. The Incarnation—The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-17)**
- III. Liturgy of the Eucharist (13:1—22:5)**
 - A. Beasts from Sea and Land (13:1-18)
 - B. Heavenly Zion and Fallen Babylon (14:1-20)
 - C. The Seven Bowls of the Wrath of God (15:1—16:21)
 - D. The Punishment of Babylon (17:1-20:15)
 - a. The Harlot, the Beast, and the Lamb (17:1-18)
 - b. Fallen Is Babylon the Great (18:1-24)
 - c. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:1-21)
 - d. The Thousand Years (20:1-15)
 - E. The New Creation (21:1—22:5)
- IV. Epilogue—Behold, I Am Coming Soon! (22:6-21)**

Catechism Connections

- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* defines revelation as “God’s communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan, a gift of self-communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ.”
- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see *CCC* 112 through *CCC* 114.
- *CCC* 1404 explains more about the veiled nature of the presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are—knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that “all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—address, 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

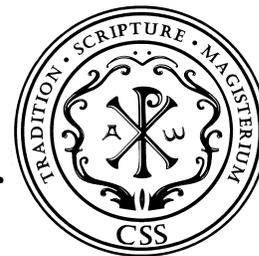
Summary

1. Apocalyptic literature is a style of prophetic writing that attempts to understand events in light of their spiritual significance.
2. Because The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) was written to explain the spiritual dimensions of persecutions that early Christians were undergoing, it's useful to all Christians in all times who are seeking to overcome persecutions in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.
3. The book of Revelation is written with a deep interest in the relationship between the Old Covenant of the Jewish people and the New Covenant instituted by Jesus Christ.
4. One use of the word *apokalypsis* in everyday 1st-century speech may have been in connection with weddings, especially the ceremony surrounding the unveiling the bride.
5. For the author of the book of Revelation, his work isn't about acquiring facts or data about God but rather is about entering into an ecstatic and eternal relationship with Jesus Christ.
6. The book of Revelation is, first and foremost, a wedding invitation—not a political tract, codebook, puzzle, or conglomeration of theological concepts.
7. The “marriage supper of Lamb” is a term used to describe the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
8. In the Eucharist, the Church as the bride of Christ is invited to the eternal heavenly banquet—a divine feast celebrated on earth in the Liturgy of the Catholic Mass.

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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).

Revelation 1:1-20

1¹The 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

Revelation 1:1-20

from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and 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 blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, 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. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, “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, ¹³and 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; ¹⁴his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶in 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, ¹⁸and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. ²⁰As 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?

Write What You See
Revelation 1:9-20

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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