



# THE REVELATION OF JOHN

## Bible Study 05

Text: 1:17-20

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**QUICK LINKS**

1. What the text meant.  
 Historical Aspects:  
 External History  
 Internal History  
 Literary Aspects:  
 Genre  
 Literary Setting  
 Literary Structure

Exegesis of the Text:  
 A. John fainted, v. 17a  
 B. Jesus reassured him, vv. 17b-20

2. What the text means.

1 Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀγίου καὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοισιν αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ, καὶ ἐσήμανεν αὐτῷ τὰς ἐπισημασίας διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου οἰκτιροῦντος αὐτόν· καὶ ἐλάλησεν ἡ ἀγγελία πρὸς τὴν ἑβδόμην, 2 καὶ ἐμαρτύρησεν τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀγίου τοῦ ὄντος ὅσα εἶδεν. 3 Μακάρι οἱ ἐκράδουσιν καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας καὶ τηροῦντες τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα, ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.

Greek NT	La Biblia de las Américas	NRSV	NLT
<p>17 Καὶ ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν, ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός, καὶ ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ’ ἐμὲ λέγων· μὴ φοβοῦ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος 18 καὶ ὁ ζῶν, καὶ ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου. 19 γράψον οὖν ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα. 20 τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων οὓς εἶδες ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς· οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσὶν καὶ αἱ λυχνίαί αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσὶν.</p>	<p>17 Cuando lo vi, caí como muerto a sus pies. Y El puso su mano derecha sobre mí, diciendo: No temas, yo soy el primero y el último, 18 y el que vive, y estuve muerto; y he aquí, estoy vivo por los siglos de los siglos, y tengo las llaves de la muerte y del Hades. 19 Escribe, pues, las cosas que has visto, y las que son, y las que han de suceder después de éstas. 20 En cuanto al misterio de las siete estrellas que viste en mi mano derecha y de los siete candeleros de oro: las siete estrellas son los ángeles de las siete iglesias, y los siete candeleros son las siete iglesias.</p>	<p>17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. 19 Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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.”</p>	<p>17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, “Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. 18 I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. 19 Write down what you have seen -- both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen later. 20 This is the meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.</p>

### APOCALYPTIC VISION, part three

#### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this final segment in vv. 9-20 is on John’s response to seeing the risen Christ. He finds reassurance and instruction from this Christ. Technically the Greek text contains a single sentence with two core sections (main clauses), ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ... καὶ ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ’ ἐμὲ (I fell at his feet...and he placed His right hand on me) serving as foundational to a temporal clause introduced by ὅτε (when) and a participle clause (λέγων) introducing direct discourse (vv. 17b-20). Thus the interaction here is between John and the Son of

Man, who does all the talking. John’s reaction to seeing the Son of Man in this apocalyptic vision (vv. 13-16) is to faint and drop to the ground.

John’s very typical response to such a theophany as this reflects both the genuineness of his experience as well as reminds us of the overpowering presence of God. In this initial encounter with the risen Christ we can anticipate the way John will respond during the unfolding of this lengthy vision at several points through chapters two through twenty-two.

## 1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

Central to proper understanding of any ancient document, and scripture texts in particular, is to first seek to understand the intended meaning by the writer to his targeted audience in his own world. How did the readers of this text in the Christian communities of these seven cities in Asia understand what John was saying? This is the exclusive basis for drawing any legitimate conclusion about the meaning of this passage for our day and time. Bypass this step, and the interpretive conclusions made are nothing but garbage!

### Historical Aspects:

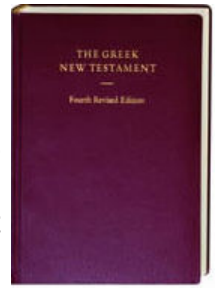
**External History.** Again regarding sources, John will turn somewhat to his Jewish heritage in the Old Testament prophets for examples and terminology.<sup>1</sup> This heritage gave John the imagery and terms

<sup>1</sup>“The stereotypical responses of recipients of visions upon the appearance of supernatural revealers constitute recurring literary themes in revelatory literature and are of two main types, both involving fear and prostration (Bauckham, *NTS* 27 [1980–81] 323–24). In one type the visionary is extremely frightened and involuntarily prostrates himself or herself (Rev 1:17; Isa 6:5; Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17; 10:9–11; Luke 24:5; 1 Enoch 14:14, 24; 2 Enoch 1:7; Apoc. Abr. 10:2; Jos. As. 14:10), while in the other type the prostration is the result of reverential awe (Josh 5:14; Rev 19:10; 22:8; see Comment on 19:10; 4 Ezra 4:11; cf. the voluntary kneeling for prayer in *Hermas Vis.* 1.1.2; 1.2.1). In the first type the simile of death as a response to a divine epiphany, as in Rev 1:17, is less common. The reference to death can simply be a way of saying that the visionary fainted, or it can allude to the cataleptic state associated with trance experiences. According to Matt 28:4, those guarding the tomb of Jesus became ὡς νεκροί, ‘as dead men,’ a consequence of the terror caused by an angelic appearance. In *T. Abr.* [A] 9:1 (tr. Charlesworth, *OTP* 1:886), when Michael appeared to Abraham, the latter ‘fell upon his face on the ground as one dead.’ When Uriel appeared to Ezra, the seer ‘lay there like a corpse’ (4 Ezra 10:30). That this death simile plays a literary function greater than simply a stereotypical response to a divine epiphany is suggested by the reassuring words of the risen Lord in Rev 1:18, where he says ‘I was dead, and behold I am living forever.’ Further, there is a traditional connection in ancient Judaism between revelation and death; see Exod 20:19: ‘Let not God speak with us lest we die.’ A similar perspective is reflected in Deut 5:22–27 and was taken up in the later Midrashim (*Exod. Rab.* 29:4; 34:1; *Cant. Rab.* 5.16.3; *Num. Rab.* 10:1; *b. Šabb.* 88b see Chernus, *Mysticism*, 33–57). Further, in admittedly late rabbinic traditions, “the mystic who accepts this self-annihilation will be resurrected by the dew of life which God will pour upon him” (Chernus, *Mysticism*, 40). Thus the lethal dangers that must be faced in the quest for divine revelation, particularly in Jewish Merkavah mysticism, can be overcome by divine intervention. It is possible that the terror experienced in connection with a theophany was eventually transformed into the theme of danger in revelatory ascents (see Grunewald, *Apocalyptic*, 37; J. Maier, “Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der Jüdischen Apokalyphtik und ‘Gnosis,’” *Kairos* 5 [1963] 18–40). The close association between death and trance is found in a number of different cultures; see J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983)

for describing his personal experience with the risen Christ.

In the history of the copying of this passage, no variation of wording surfaces among the existing manuscripts of Revelation that the editors of *The Greek New Testament* (UBS 4th rev. ed.) considered sufficiently important so as to impact the translation of this text into modern languages.

But this does not imply that no variations in wording do not exist among these manuscripts. The text apparatus of the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (UBS 27th rev. ed.) lists fifteen places where alternative readings are found in these verses of scripture.<sup>2</sup> But close examination of each of the variations reveals that no meaningful change in meaning is created by any of the copies. The majority of the variations are attempts to update the language to a more current form at the time of the



29–32.” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 99–100.]

#### <sup>2</sup>Offenbarung 1,17

\* εις κ 2053. 2062. 2329 pc (the preposition πρὸς is replaced by the preposition εις)

\* επεθ– κ 2050. 2329 al h; Cyp (ἔθηκεν is replaced by ἐπέθηκεν)

\* χειρα κ<sup>2</sup> M<sup>A</sup> sy; Bea (χεῖρα is added after αὐτοῦ)

\* κ\* 2053. 2062 pc (μὴ φοβοῦ is omitted in some mss)

\*<sup>1</sup> πρωτοτοκος A (πρῶτος is replaced by πρωτότοκος)

#### Offenbarung 1,18

\* gīg vg<sup>mss</sup>; Prim (καὶ ὁ ζῶν is omitted by some mss)

\* αμην κ<sup>1</sup> M sy (ἀμήν is inserted after αἰώνων in some mss)

| txt κ\* A C P 1611. 1854. 2050. 2053. 2062 pc latt co; Irlat

\* 4 2 3 1 M<sup>K</sup> (θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ἄδου is resequenced)

#### Offenbarung 1,19

\* 2050 al (οὖν is omitted in some mss)

\* δει μελλειν κ\* (C) pc (μέλλει is replaced by δεῖ μελλεῖν)

| δει 2050 latt

\* γιν– κ<sup>2</sup> A 1006. 1611. 1841. 1854. 2053. 2062. 2329. 2351 M<sup>A</sup> (γενέσθαι is replaced by γινέσθαι)

| txt P<sup>98vid</sup> κ\* C P 046. 2050 pm

#### Offenbarung 1,20

\* ὧν 1006. 1841. 2351 M<sup>K</sup> (οὗς is replaced by ὧν)

\* εν τη δεξια μ. A 1611 pc (ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου is replaced with ἐπὶ τῆς λυχνίας or with ἐν τῇ δεξιᾶ μου)

| επι της λυχνιας 2329

\* αι (–κ\* pc) επτα λ. (+ αι χρυσαι 2050) κ\* 1854. 2050. 2053. 2062. 2351 al (αἱ λυχνίαι αἱ ἑπτὰ is replaced by one several alternatives)

| αι λ. επτα C

| αι επτα λ. ας ειδες M<sup>A</sup> syph<sup>bo</sup>

| txt A 046. 1006. 1611. 1841. 2329 pm latt

\* 2329 pc ar h; Prim (ἑπτὰ is omitted)

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 634]

copying of the text.

**Internal History.** The time and place markers inside these verses focused on John's experience are very limited. John fainted and fell down at the feet of the risen Christ: ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός. Physically John was on the island of Patmos when this happened. But by being in a trance through his visionary experience he was projected into another realm so that he was also at the feet of the Son of Man. And He was standing in the middle of seven lampstands in this other worldly realm.

Consequently the markers in vv. 17-20 define location and time inside this reality beyond the physical realm. As such they become important signals of spiritual reality more than of physical reality.

### Literary Aspects:

**Genre:** These verses stand as part three of the apocalyptic vision contained in vv. 9-20. Consequently what was described in the two preceding studies continues to apply here as well.

In the Jewish apocalyptic literature, visionary experience revolves around a visionary dialogue with God or else a visionary throne room encounter with God. Both of these kinds of religious experiences center on a divine call to some kind of action in behalf of God.<sup>3</sup> These experiences grow out of the more general OT theophany encounters with God by both the prophets and other leaders in ancient Israel.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Zimmerli (Ezekiel 1:97–100) has distinguished two types of prophetic call narratives in the OT: (1) A visionary dialogue with Yahweh (often lacking a visionary element) in which the prophet's reluctance is overcome, as in the calls of Moses, Gideon, Saul, and Jeremiah (Exod 3:1–22; 4:1–17; 6:2–12; 7:1–7; Judg 6:15–16; 1 Sam 9:21; Jer 1:4–10). (2) A throne-room vision (lacking the dialogical element) in which prophetic commission is given following a vision of the throne of Yahweh, as in the visions of Micaiah ben Imlah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel (1 Kgs 22:19–22 [though Micaiah himself is not called]; Isa 6:1–8; Ezek 1:1–3:15; 10:1–22). Black ("Throne-Theophany," 67–69) suggests that the same type of theophanic prophetic call is found in Dan 7:9–13 (which is dependent on Ezek 1; cf. A. Feuillet, RB 60 [1953] 170–202, 321–46) and in 1 Enoch 14:18–22; 46:1–3; 60:1–3; 70–71; 89:52; 90:20–23, 31–33, 37–38. Yet these texts exhibit much more variety than Black suggests: (1) While Dan 7:9–13 is certainly a throne theophany, it lacks a prophetic commission and hardly fits Zimmerli's typology. (2) 1 Enoch 14:18–22 represents the culmination of a heavenly journey. (3) Enoch's celestial journey, his vision of God upon his throne, and the divine commission are found in 14:8–16:3; 70:1–71:17. (4) 1 Enoch 46:1–8; 60:1–6 are indeed throne visions, but they lack the element of prophetic commission. (5) 1 Enoch 90:20–39 is a throne vision, though the throne is upon earth, and the entire scene is one that focuses on eschatological judgment." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 70-71.]

<sup>4</sup>John's response to the vision in v 17a follows the fourfold

Determining the type of vision which John depicts in vv. 9-20 is somewhat more challenging, simply because of the distinctives of John's description. Clearly it is apocalyptic visionary depiction.<sup>5</sup> The 'call' elements come in vv. 11 and 19 with the command to write down what John has seen. Whether John's experience was a visionary dialogue or a throne room encounter depends on the determination of the setting of the encounter. This initial vision does not clearly define a setting. But the repetition of the encounter in 4:1-2 clearly places the setting in Heaven before the throne of the Almighty:

4.1 Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ θύρα ἠνεωγμένη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, καὶ ἡ φωνὴ ἡ πρώτη ἦν ἤκουσα ὡς σάλπιγγος λαλοῦσης μετ' ἑμοῦ λέγων· **ἀνάβα ὧδε**, καὶ δεῖξω σοι ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα.

2 Εὐθέως ἐγενόμην ἐν πνεύματι, **καὶ ἰδοὺ θρόνος ἔκειτο ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ**, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον καθήμενος,

4.1 After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "**Come up here**, and I will show you what must take place after this."

2 At once I was in the spirit, and **there in heaven stood a throne**, with one seated on the throne!

John clearly links this vision to the initial one described in 1:9-20. This would point toward this continuing vision beginning in chapter one and continuing through chapter twenty-two as basically a throne room vision with a calling from God to record what he has seen and then to send copies of this record to each of the seven churches.

**Literary Setting:** The context here is simple. Verses 17-20 comes as the third and final segment of the apocalyptic vision in 1:9-20. It has something of a climatic role in depicting John's reaction to seeing the pattern found in Daniel 8 and 10: the prophet observes a vision, falls on his face in fear, is strengthened by a heavenly being, and then receives further revelation from that being, which is introduced by a form of λαλέω ('speak'). This is another clue further identifying John and his message with OT prophetic authority (cf. 1:10)." [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 213.]

<sup>5</sup>One fortunate aspect for John was that he was transported into the heavenly throne room simply by God's power. Ezekiel had a slightly different experience (Ezek. 8:1-3):

1 In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there.

2 I looked, and there was a figure that looked like a human being; below what appeared to be its loins it was fire, and above the loins it was like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming amber. 3 **It stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my head; and the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem**, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, to the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy.

Son of Man. He then reaches out to John with encouragement and instructions.

This vision in vv. 9-20 comes both as the climax to the introductory materials in chapter one and as an introduction to the seven letters in chapters two and three. Additionally it will be picked up again and expanded as foundational to chapters four through twenty-two.

Thus vv. 17-20 play an important role in the narration of the apostle John.

### Literary Structure:

The two-fold structure of these verses is clearly visible through the block diagram of the text below, which reflects a very literal translation of the underlying Greek text. Although a few grammar irregularities are present in the biblical text, the structural sense of the passage is quite clear and can hopefully be grasped more easily from this visual representation of it. What surfaces is a rather typical apocalyptic response to encountering the overpowering presence of God.

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17                   And  
                      when I saw Him,  
22           **I fell**  
                      at His feet  
                      as dead,  
                      and  
23           **He put his right hand**  
                      on me,  
                      saying,  
  
**A**                   **Stop being afraid;**  
**B**                   **I am the first**  
  and  
  **the last**  
  and  
  **the living one**  
  and  
**C**                   **I became dead**  
  and  
  behold  
**D**                   **I am living**  
  forever and ever  
  and  
**E**                   **I hold the keys of death and Hades.**  
  
19                   Therefore  
**F**                   **write what you saw**  
  and  
  **what is**  
  and  
  **what is going to be**  
  after these things.  
  
**G** 20               **The mystery of the seven stars**  
  which you saw  
  in my right hand  
  
  and  
**H**                   **the seven golden lampstands:**  
**I**                   **the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches**  
  and  
**J**                   **the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**

### Analysis of structural arrangement of the Text

Clearly the text falls into two clearly defined segments. Statement 23 describes John's reaction to turning around and seeing the image of the Son of Man (vv. 12-16). His reaction is to be overwhelmed to the extent of fainting and falling down at the feet of the risen Christ.

Statement 24 depicts the response of the risen Christ to John. His touching of John revives him and encouraging words are then offered to John by Christ. He is told to not be afraid because of the overpowering presence of this Son of Man (#s A-E). The second set of words come as instructions for John to write (# F). The third set (#s G-J) stand as an interpretive explanation

tion of some of the symbolism contained in the vision described in vv. 12-16.

### Exegesis of the Text:

The exegesis of the passage is naturally divided into the two parts of the text as demonstrated by the block diagram above.

#### A. *John fainted, v. 17a*

Καὶ ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν, ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός,

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

The very core expression is the verb ἔπεσα, *I fell down*. Modifiers specify when, where, and how he fell. The **temporal marker**, ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν, *when I saw Him*, links John's falling down to the moment of seeing the risen Christ in this glorious apocalyptic vision. Consistently throughout the Bible such epiphany experiences of encountering God's presence in overpowering ways produces dramatic responses by the humans. Rather consistent in the apocalyptic encounters the heightened sense of the presence of God tends to "knock the human off his feet" with absolute 'overwhelmedness.' Thus for one to "fall on their face" before the Almighty is standard reaction: cf. Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28, 3:23, 43:3; Dan. 8:17, 10:9-11; Luke 24:5; also *1 Enoch* 14:14, 24; *2 Enoch* 1:7; *Apoc. of Abraham* 10:29; *Joseph and Asenath* 14:10.<sup>6</sup>

The **where aspect** is defined as πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ, *at His feet*. Usually the depiction specifies, in some way, the individual falling down in front of the divine figure. Note Rev. 19:10, καὶ ἔπεσα ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ, *And I fell down at his feet in order to worship him*. Here we have explicitly the motive for falling down in front of the divine figure: προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ, *to worship him*. This experience of overwhelming awe in the presence of the divine points toward submission to the absolute control of the divine person in the experience.

The **how dimension** is in the sense of manner: ὡς νεκρός, *as dead*. This qualifier can either specify fainting or entrance into the cataleptic state associated with trances.<sup>7</sup> Most likely from a purely human perspective,

<sup>6</sup>"It is striking that the stereotypical motif of inadequacy or insufficiency, frequently included in OT prophetic call narratives (Hafemann, *Suffering*, 90–98; id., *Paul*, 39–62), is conspicuous by its absence both here in Rev 1:9–20 and in 10:1–11." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 100.]

<sup>7</sup>"In the first type the simile of death as a response to a divine epiphany, as in Rev 1:17, is less common. The reference to death can simply be a way of saying that the visionary fainted, or it can allude to the cataleptic state associated with trance experiences. According to Matt 28:4, those guarding the tomb of Jesus became

it would best be described as fainting. But that more than a mere physiological reaction to seeing the Son of Man is obviously taking place in this experience.

John's experience was not quite so dramatic as that of Daniel.<sup>8</sup> But it possesses the same essential ὡς νεκροί, 'as dead men,' a consequence of the terror caused by an angelic appearance. In T. Abr. [A] 9:1 (tr. Charlesworth, OTP 1:886), when Michael appeared to Abraham, the latter 'fell upon his face on the ground as one dead.' When Uriel appeared to Ezra, the seer 'lay there like a corpse' (4 Ezra 10:30). That this death simile plays a literary function greater than simply a stereotypical response to a divine epiphany is suggested by the reassuring words of the risen Lord in Rev 1:18, where he says 'I was dead, and behold I am living forever.' Further, there is a traditional connection in ancient Judaism between revelation and death; see Exod 20:19: 'Let not God speak with us lest we die.' A similar perspective is reflected in Deut 5:22–27 and was taken up in the later Midrashim (*Exod. Rab.* 29:4; 34:1; *Cant. Rab.* 5.16.3; *Num. Rab.* 10:1; *b. Šabb.* 88b see Chernus, *Mysticism*, 33–57). Further, in admittedly late rabbinic traditions, 'the mystic who accepts this self-annihilation will be resurrected by the dew of life which God will pour upon him' (Chernus, *Mysticism*, 40). Thus the lethal dangers that must be faced in the quest for divine revelation, particularly in Jewish Merkavah mysticism, can be overcome by divine intervention. It is possible that the terror experienced in connection with a theophany was eventually transformed into the theme of danger in revelatory ascents (see Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 37; J. Maier, "Das Gefährdungsmotiv bei der Himmelsreise in der Jüdischen Apokalyptik und 'Gnosis,'" *Kairos* 5 [1963] 18–40). The close association between death and trance is found in a number of different cultures; see J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 29–32." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 99–100.]

<sup>8</sup>**Dan. 10:4-14.** 4 On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river (that is, the Tigris), 5 I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. 6 His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude. 7 I, Daniel, alone saw the vision; the people who were with me did not see the vision, though a great trembling fell upon them, and they fled and hid themselves. 8 So I was left alone to see this great vision. **My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength.** 9 Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, **I fell into a trance, face to the ground.** 10 **But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees.** 11 He said to me, "Daniel, greatly beloved, pay attention to the words that I am going to speak to you. Stand on your feet, for I have now been sent to you." So while he was speaking this word to me, I stood up trembling. 12 He said to me, "Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. 13 But the prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me twenty-one days. So Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, and I left him there with the prince of the kingdom of Persia, 14 and have come to help you understand what is to happen to your people at the end of days. For there is a further vision for those days."

**Dan. 8:15-18.** 15 When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I tried

qualities.

**John:** Καὶ ὅτε εἶδον αὐτόν, ἔπεσα πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ὡς νεκρός, *and when I saw Him, I fell at his feet as dead* (1:17)

**Daniel:** καὶ οὐκ ἤκουσα τὴν φωνὴν λαλιᾶς αὐτοῦ, ἐγὼ ἤμην πεπτωκῶς ἐπὶ πρόσωπόν μου ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν.<sup>9</sup> *Then I heard the sound of his words; and when I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a trance, face to the ground.* (Dan. 10:9)

What John's experience tells us is important. And it is that the heightened experience of being in God's presence entails certain danger and risk. As Aune correctly points out (above footnote), death is linked to divine presence all through the Bible. At the heart of this is the indescribable purity of a holy God absolutely destroying everything with impurity that it comes in contact with. Only in Christ is it possible to come somewhat close to this total purity of God and survive it, since Christ stands as a shield for us as believers in Him. But even in the full presence of Christ there comes much of the same dynamic of destruction. It will be only by divine intervention in behalf of the servant of God that he or she can survive the encounter, and even profit from it.

I think that this is a biblical reality largely lost to the modern western world. We have little ability to grasp such reality. And perhaps for this reason, God tends to never make Himself known to us in such powerful ways, although believers in other parts of our world readily testify to such encounters with God. Our western world seeks a "Coke-machine" god whom we can manage and manipulate, not a God to blasts us off our feet in absolute power and authority.

But if we are to understand the contents of Revelation properly and correctly, we must begin with this awe inspiring vision of Almighty God and thus respond appropriately with awe and reverence to Him.

### **B. Jesus reassured him, vv. 17b-20**

17b καὶ ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ' ἐμὲ λέγων· μὴ φοβοῦ· ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος 18 καὶ ὁ ζῶν, καὶ ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ἄδου. 19 γράψον οὖν ἃ εἶδες

to understand it. Then someone appeared standing before me, having the appearance of a man, 16 and I heard a human voice by the Ulai, calling, "Gabriel, help this man understand the vision." 17 *So he came near where I stood; and when he came, I became frightened and fell prostrate.* But he said to me, "Understand, O mortal, that the vision is for the time of the end." 18 *As he was speaking to me, I fell into a trance, face to the ground; then he touched me and set me on my feet.*

<sup>9</sup>Literally, ἐγὼ ἤμην πεπτωκῶς ἐπὶ πρόσωπόν μου ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν means "I was fallen on my face on the ground." πεπτωκῶς here and ἔπεσα in Rev. 1:17 come from the same Greek verb, πίπτω (I fall).

καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα. 20 τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων οὓς εἶδες ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς· οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσὶν καὶ αἱ λυχνίαί αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσὶν.

17b *But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. 19 Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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."*

In these kinds of apocalyptic encounters with God, one of the uniform patterns is God reaching out to the individual in compassion and instruction. The background imagery for John here is Dan. 10:10, 18.<sup>10</sup> Such divine action makes the difference between surviving and not surviving the encounter.

The Son of Man both touches John and then speaks to him. 1) ἔθηκεν τὴν δεξιὰν αὐτοῦ ἐπ' ἐμὲ, *He placed His right hand on me.* The touch was immensely important in an ancient Jewish culture extremely concerned with ritual purity as essential to worshiping God. For God then to extend an arm and touch John, especially with His right hand that initially was holding the seven stars, had profound significance. It affirmed acceptance from and acceptability to God.

2) Christ's words of instruction took several directions (see above diagram for clear visual presentation of this). **First came words of reassurance:** μὴ φοβοῦ. Literally, the meaning is "Stop being afraid." It was sheer fright that caused John to faint. These words were fairly commonplace in Jewish religious tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Quite often with such divine assurances, a basis is

<sup>10</sup>**Dan. 10:10.** *But then a hand touched me and roused me to my hands and knees.*

καὶ ἰδοὺ χεῖρα προσήγαγέ μοι καὶ ἤγειρέ με ἐπὶ τῶν γονάτων ἐπὶ τὰ ἴχνη τῶν ποδῶν μου.

**Dan. 10:18-19.** 18 *Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me.* 19 He said, "**Do not fear,** greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!"

18 καὶ προσέθηκε καὶ ἤψατό μου ὡς ὄρασις ἀνθρώπου καὶ κατίσχυσέ με† 19 καὶ εἶπέ μοι Ἄνθρωπος ἐλεεινὸς εἶ, μὴ φοβοῦ, ὑγίαινε· ἀνδρίζου καὶ ἴσχυε. καὶ ἐν τῷ λαλήσαι αὐτὸν μετ' ἐμοῦ ἴσχυσα καὶ εἶπα Λαλησάτω ὁ κύριός μου, ὅτι ἐνίσχυσέ με.†

<sup>11</sup>"The μὴ φοβοῦ is found also separately in Isa. 44:2; Matt. 14:27, 17:7; Luke 1:13, 30, etc. It is used to give comfort (cf. Matt. 14:27 = John 6:20; Acts 27:24), and to remind the Seer that He that is seen is no unknown one (Spitta)." [R.H. Charles, vol. 1, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1920), 31.]

given for the admonition to not be afraid.<sup>12</sup>

What follows in vv. 17c-18 is a series of “I am” declarations.<sup>13</sup> Collectively these claim full deity for the Son of Man as well as assert qualities about Him as being divine.

**a) ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, I am the first and the last.** Very likely this is taken from Isaiah, as is illustrated in these references:<sup>14</sup>

**Isa. 44:6.** Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: **I am the first and I am the last;** besides me there is no god.

Οὕτως λέγει ὁ θεὸς ὁ βασιλεὺς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ὁ ῥυσάμενος αὐτὸν θεὸς σαβαωθ **Ἐγὼ πρῶτος καὶ ἐγὼ**

<sup>12</sup>“Again, contextual links consisting of catchword phrases and common pictures have given rise to reflection on Isa. 41:4; 44:6; and 48:12: (1) the Isa. 41:4 context contains a picture of God’s servant defeating the enemy with a sword (41:2) and the key phrase μὴ φοβοῦ (‘do not fear’), immediately followed by divine words of comfort that God will ‘strengthen’ and ‘uphold’ the righteous one with his right hand (41:10); (2) the Isa. 44:6 context also has the phrase μὴ φοβοῦ (cf. 44:2); (3) Isa. 48:12 is directly followed by a picture like that of Isa. 41:10; Dan. 12:6–7; and Rev. 1:17, which is expressed by ‘Surely my hand founded the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens’ (48:13). These common elements provided the associative bridge leading from the Daniel 10 picture of prophetic comfort to that of the three Isaiah passages concerning Yahweh’s comfort of Israel.” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 214.]

<sup>13</sup>“The *ego-eimi* or ‘I am’ self-predication formula occurs five times in Rev (1:8, 17; 2:23; 21:6 [textual problem]; 22:16), always with a predicate in the nominative case. The *ego-eimi* formula occurs a total of forty-eight times in the NT, almost always attributed to Christ or God and therefore of christological or theological interest. It occurs five times in Matthew (14:27; 22:32; 24:5; 26:22, 25), three times in Mark (6:50; 13:6; 14:62), four times in Luke (1:19; 21:8; 22:70; 24:39), twenty-four times in John, six times in Acts (9:5; 10:21; 18:10; 22:3, 8; 26:29), and five times in Revelation. The ‘I am’ formula is particularly important for Johannine studies (see Brown, *John* 1:533–38; Schnackenburg, *John* 2:79–89). The ‘I am’ formula in Revelation is uttered exclusively by God (1:8; 21:6) and Christ (1:17; 2:23; 22:16) and is used to make divine predications of the speaker.” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 100-01.]

<sup>14</sup>“The formula ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ‘the first and the last,’ was probably derived from Deutero-Isaiah: (1) Isa 44:6, ἐγὼ πρῶτος καὶ ἐγὼ μετὰ ταῦτα, literally ‘I am first and I am after these things’; (2) Isa 41:4, ἐγὼ θεὸς πρῶτος, καὶ εἰς τὰ ἐπερχόμενα ἐγὼ εἰμι, ‘I, God, am first, and with regard to what is to come, I am He’; and (3) Isa 48:12, ἐγὼ εἰμι πρῶτος, καὶ ἐγὼ εἰμι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ‘I am first, and I am forever.’ The fact that the divine predicate ‘the first and the last’ occurs three times in Deutero-Isaiah suggests its importance in that composition, though the attempt of R. P. Merendino to organize Isa 40–48 around the theme of ‘the first and the last’ is overdone (*Der Erste und der Letzte: Eine Untersuchung von Jes 40–48*, VTSup 31 [Leiden: Brill, 1981]).” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 101.]

**μετὰ ταῦτα**, πλὴν ἐμοῦ οὐκ ἔστιν θεός.

**Isa. 41:4.** Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? **I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last.**

τίς ἐνήργησεν καὶ ἐποίησεν ταῦτα; ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὴν ὁ καλῶν αὐτὴν ἀπὸ γενεῶν ἀρχῆς, **ἐγὼ θεὸς πρῶτος, καὶ εἰς τὰ ἐπερχόμενα ἐγὼ εἰμι.**

**Isa. 48:12.** Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called: I am He; **I am the first, and I am the last.**

Ἄκουέ μου, Ἰακωβ καὶ Ἰσραὴλ ὃν ἐγὼ καλῶ· ἐγὼ εἰμι πρῶτος, **καὶ ἐγὼ εἰμι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα,**

This phrase will be repeated in 2:8, Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν, thus says the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life. Elements of this introductory vision in 1:9-20 will be repeated at each of the seven letters in reference to Christ. Additionally this phrase will be repeated in the epistolary *Conclusio* to the book of Revelation in 22:13, ἐγὼ τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος, **I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.** Combined with the other two declarations in 22:13, an even greater assertion of the sovereignty and eternal existence of Christ is made. For John’s readers living in Asia with the Greco-Roman religious traditions deeply embedded into life there, this expression would have had an echo in some of the poems of praise offered in the numerous temples dedicated to the gods Zeus and Apollo, but with a powerfully important different twist.<sup>15</sup> God is the one who exists forever, and not the pagan gods.

**b) καὶ ὁ ζῶν, and the Living One.** This second affirmation plays off the first one and also picks up on a common OT reference to God as the living God: **אלהים חַי, elōim ḥayyim, θεὸς ζῶν.**<sup>16</sup> The claim by this

<sup>15</sup>“Yet this formula is also found in Greek literature (van Unnik, *Het godspredikaat*, 74–76): Hesiod *Theog.* 34, σφᾶς δ’ αὐτὰς πρῶτον τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀεῖδειν, ‘But always to sing of themselves [i.e., the Muses] both first and last’ (the same is said of Zeus in *Theog.* 48). In *Theog.* 1.3, the elegist addresses Apollo: ἀλλ’ αἰεὶ πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον ἔν τε μέσοισιν ἀεῖσω, ‘but always will I hymn [you] first and last and in the middle.’ It is also found in *Hymni Homerici* 21, where it is said that to Apollo the odist ‘always sings first and last’ (πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀεῖδει); cf. 1.18. Yet these three references refer not to ‘First and Last’ as a divine predicate but to the honor paid to the Muses or Apollo by singing hymns to them at the beginning and end of their poems.” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 102.]

<sup>16</sup>“The verb ζῶν, meaning ‘to live (again),’ is used of Jesus only here and in 2:8, a statement that refers back to this predicate. In Jewish tradition, God is often designated **אלהים חַי, elōim ḥayyim**; LXX: θεὸς ζῶν, ‘the living God’ (Deut 5:26; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; Jer 10:10; 23:36; Dan 6:27 [Aram.: חַי אֱלֹהֵי לֵ. *elōhā, ḥayyā*]; LXX: θεὸς ζῶν). A parallel phrase, first found in Hosea, is **אל חי, el ḥay**, ‘living God’ (Hos 2:1 [Eng. 1:10]; Pss 42:3; 84:3; Josh 3:10). The phrase ‘the living God’ also occurs in early Jewish literature (Bel 14:5, 25; 3 Macc 6:28; Jub. 1:25; 21:4) and is frequently found in the NT (Matt 16:16; 26:63; John 6:57 [ὁ ζῶν πατήρ, ‘the liv-

Son of Man is the claim to be God. This stood in stark contrast to the phony claims made by ancient writers in regard to many of the Greco-Roman deities to be alive.

**c) καὶ ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοῦ<sup>17</sup> ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.** This third affirmation by the Son of Man to John flows out of Christ's death and resurrection, giving it a distinctly Christian orientation via the death-resurrection contrast. The second part of the antithetical affirmation, ἰδοῦ ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, is repeated four times in Revelation in reference to God: 4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7. But here it refers to Christ. In reference to God, this has parallels in the LXX Old Testament.<sup>18</sup>

**d) καὶ ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.** This final affir-

ing Father,' occurs only here in the NT]; Acts 14:15; Rom 9:26; 2 Cor 3:3; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Tim 4:10; Heb 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; Rev 7:2; 2 Clem 20:2; Hermas Vis. 2.3.2; 3.7.2; Sim. 6.2.2). The related phrase 'the living Lord' is comparatively rare and occurs only in LXX Esth 16:16; 2 Macc 7:33; 15:4. The predicate 'the Living One,' however, is not found in the OT, though it does begin to appear in early Judaism (Sir 18:1: ὁ ζῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, 'the One who lives forever'; 2 Apoc. Bar. 21:9, 10; Sib. Or. 3.763); a frequent OT oath formula is 'as the Lord lives' (Judg 8:19; Ruth 3:13; 1 Sam. 14:39; 2 Sam 15:21; 2 Kgs 2:2).

"In pagan religious literature, particularly the Greek magical papyri, the phrase 'the living god' occurs several times in various combinations: ὁ θεὸς ὁ ζῶν, 'the living god' (PGM IV.959; cf. the Christian magical papyri PGM 5a.11; 5b.25; 5c.5); ὁ μέγας ζῶν θεός, ὁ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, 'the great living god who is eternal' (PGM IV.1039); ὁ ζῶν θεός, 'the living god' (PGM XII.79); θεὸς ζῶν, 'the living god' (PGM IV.559; VII.823); ὀρκίζω σε κατὰ τοῦ παντοκράτορος θεοῦ ζῶντος ἀεὶ, 'I adjure you by the almighty god who lives forever' (PGM IV.1550–52).

"At the same time, Christ lives because he has been raised from the dead, a fact that is spelled out in the next clause in v 18."

[David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 102.]

<sup>17</sup>"The phrase καὶ ἰδοῦ, 'and behold,' is a Septuagintism that occurs twelve times in Revelation (1:18; 4:1, 2; 6:2, 5, 8; 7:9; 12:3; 14:1, 14; 19:11; 22:7); on ἰδοῦ, which occurs twenty-nine times, see Comment on 1:7a. Here it functions as a marker emphasizing the truth of the statement that immediately follows (Fiedler, Formel, 42)." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103.]

<sup>18</sup>"There are parallels to this phrase in the OT (Theod Dan 4:34, τῷ ζῶντι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, 'to the One who lives forever'; LXX Dan 6:27, θεὸς μένων καὶ ζῶν εἰς γενεὰς γενεῶν ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος, 'God who abides and lives from generation to generation, even for ever'; Theod Dan 6:27, θεὸς μένων καὶ ζῶν εἰς γενεὰς γενεῶν ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος, 'God who lives and abides for ever'; LXX Dan 12:7, ὡμοσε τὸν ζῶντα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα θεόν, 'he swore by the God who lives for ever') and in early Judaism (1 Enoch 5:1, 'He who lives for ever' [here the Greek text, expanded by a doublet (Knibb, Enoch 2:65), reads θεὸς ζῶν ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ οὕτως, καὶ ζῆ εἰς πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας, 'the living God made them thus and he lives for ever'])." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103.]

mation is climatic and is built on the preceding affirmations. This image is rather unusual in the ancient world and has a distinctive tone in this single use in Revelation.

Hades, of course, was a Greek god who controlled the underworld in Greek mythology, and thus much was written about him in ancient Greek and Latin literature. But he is never pictured as possessing keys to open doors and thus exercise control over those doors.<sup>19</sup>

The mention of Christ possessing keys calls to mind 3:7 where Christ possesses the key of David: ὁ ἔχων τὴν κλεῖν Δαυίδ.<sup>20</sup> The image there is further defined by ὁ ἀνοίγων καὶ οὐδεὶς κλείσει καὶ κλείων καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀνοίγει, **the One who opens and no one shuts, and who shuts and no one opens.** The basic point here is exclusive authority that no one else can usurp. This exclusive power to open and close has its roots in Isa. 22:22.<sup>21</sup> This idea is in the background to some extent in 1:18, where Christ's possession of the keys of death and Hades asserts exclusive authority over these realms and no one else can challenge that power.<sup>22</sup>

The precise meaning of death and Hades depends in part on the grammatical understanding of the Genitive case forms τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου.<sup>23</sup> If taken

<sup>19</sup>"Death is never described in ancient texts as possessing keys, and very few attribute keys to Hades (cf. Pausanias 5.20.3, where, in a brief ekphrasis ['description of a work of art'; cf. Form/Structure/Setting in Rev 17], Pausanias describes how Ploutos, often an alias of Hades, is shown holding the key that he has just used to lock up Hades [in *Orphic Hymns* 18.4, Ploutos is described as possessing 'the keys of the entire earth'])." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103.]

<sup>20</sup>Note also **Rev. 9:1b**, he was given **the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit**. καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἡ κλεῖς τοῦ φρέατος τῆς ἀβύσσου **Rev. 20:1**. Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand **the key to the bottomless pit** and a great chain. Καὶ εἶδον ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔχοντα τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου καὶ ἄλυσιν μεγάλην ἐπὶ τὴν χεῖρα αὐτοῦ.

<sup>21</sup>**Isa. 22:22**. I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; **he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.**

καὶ δώσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυίδ αὐτῷ, **καὶ ἄρξει, καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντιλέγων.**

<sup>22</sup>The other image of Christ possessing keys surfaces in **Matt. 16:19**, with a different emphasis:

I will give you **the keys of the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

δώσω σοι **τὰς κλεῖδας τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν**, καὶ ὃ ἐάν δήσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, καὶ ὃ ἐάν λύσης ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

<sup>23</sup>"The genitives τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου, 'of Death and of Hades,' could be either objective or possessive genitives (i.e., 'the keys to Death and Hades' [as above] or 'the keys belonging to Death and Hades'). If construed as objective genitives, Death and Hades must be understood spatially, as in Rev 20:13. But if understood as possessive genitives, they must be understood as person-



as personifications, Death and Hades, as in Rev. 6:8, then the possessive function is understood. But if taken as spatial designations as in Rev. 20:13, then they are objective Genitive case functions.

In general the underworld was not conceptualized as having doors in the ancient world.<sup>24</sup> One exception to that is in the *Odes of Solomon* 42:17 where the dead cry out wanting the door of death unlocked so they can exist death. Quite interestingly in the Roman province of Asia a popular legend developed concerning the Hellenistic goddess Hekate who supposedly possessed the keys to the gates of Hades.<sup>25</sup> But in the

ifications, as in Rev. 6:8. They must be objective genitives since Death is never described in ancient texts as possessing keys, and very few attribute keys to Hades (cf. Pausanias 5.20.3, where, in a brief ekphrasis [“description of a work of art”; cf. Form/Structure/Setting in Rev 17], Pausanias describes how Ploutos, often an alias of Hades, is shown holding the key that he has just used to lock up Hades [in Orphic Hymns 18.4, Ploutos is described as possessing ‘the keys of the entire earth’]). Later rabbinic sources mention keys that belong to God alone and are not entrusted to angels (Ginzberg, *Legends* 6:318–19; only a few of the references are mentioned in Bousset [1906] 197; Charles, 1:33). According to some sources, God retains three keys for himself that he does not entrust to an angel: the keys of rain, of childbirth, and of the revival of the dead (b. Ta’an 2a; Gen. Rab. 73.3; Deut. Rab. 7.6; Midr. Ps. 78.5). Tg. Neof. Gen 30:22 refers to four keys that God alone possesses: the key of rain, the key of provision, the key of graves (מפתח דקבריה; cf. Sokoloff, DJPA, 473), and the key of barrenness (a similar list is found in Tg. Yer. Deut 28:12). However, b. Sanh. 113a reports that the key of rain was given to Elisha, and Midr. Ps. 78.5 reports that the key of barrenness was given to Elisha and the key of resurrection to Elijah. The possessive genitive is often understood as implying the tradition of the *descensus ad inferos*, ‘(Christ’s) descent to Hell,’ for if the keys formerly belonged to the personified Death and Hades, they must have been forcibly taken from them (Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, 10–11; Bousset [1906] 198; for references to this conception in Coptic-Gnostic documents, see *Teach. Silv.* 104.114; 110.19–30; *Trim. Prot.* 36.4; *Testim. Truth* 32.24–33.8 [here the language of the harrowing of “Hades” is a metaphor for the world]). For a discussion of Death and Hades as personifications, see Comment on 6:8.” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 103-04.

<sup>24</sup>But note πύλαι ᾗδου, *gates of Hades*, in Matt. 19:18.

<sup>25</sup>“The image of Jesus as keybearer in Rev 1:18 appears to be derived from the popular Hellenistic conception of the goddess Hekate as keybearer. Hekate both originated in Asia Minor and was very popular there during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. She is the primary mythological figure associated with the possession of the keys to the gates of Hades. *Hekate trimorphos*, ‘having three forms or shapes,’ was given a cosmic significance connected with her threefold identity as Juno Licina, Trivia, and Luna (Catullus 34.9) or Selene/Luna (= moon) in heaven, Artemis/Diana on earth, and Persephone/Proserpina in Hades (cf. Hesiod Theog. 412–17, 427; Orph. Hymni 1.2; Servius Comm. in Verg. Aen. 4.511; Scholia in Aristophanem Plutum 594). In PGM IV.2836–37, after Hekate is explicitly identified with Mene, Artemis, Persephone, and Selene, we read, ‘Beginning anti end [ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος] are you, and you alone rule all. For all things are from you, and in you do all things,

Jewish heritage of John one does find related images that served to popularize the image of keys over death and Hell.<sup>26</sup> Out of this background, John’s image here

Eternal one, come to their end.’ The tendency to elevate important regional divinities like Hekate to the role of cosmic queen can be seen in the similar claim that Aphrodite controls the three cosmic zones of heaven, earth, and sea (Orphic Hymns 55.5; the du-Stil, ‘thou style’: καὶ κρατεῖς τρισσῶν μοιρῶν). The *Orphic Hymns* (probably written in Asia Minor during the second century A.D.) describe Hekate as ‘the keybearing mistress of the entire cosmos’ (1.7). Hekate is frequently given the epithet κλειδοῦχος, ‘keybearer’ (*Orph. frag.* 316; *Orphic Hymns* 1.7; cf. Kohl, RE 11[1921] 593–600). Persephone, with whom Hekate is often identified, is said to command the gates of Hades in the bowels of the earth (*Orphic Hymns* 29.4). Other divine beings are also thought to have custody of various keys. Pindar (Pyth. 8.1–4; cf. C. M. Bowra, Pindar [Oxford: Clarendon, 1964] 85) claims that the goddess Ἡσυχία, Quiet, ‘holds the last keys of counsel and war.’ Proteus holds the keys of the sea (*Orphic Hymns* 25.2), and Zeus holds the keys to joy and sorrow (*Orphic Hymns* 73.6). Parmenides describes the goddess Dike (‘Justice’) as holding κληιδας ἀμοιβους, ‘rewarding keys,’ because the keys that open and close both reward and punish (L. Taran, Parmenides [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965] 15). The Egyptian deity Anubis is frequently associated with keys; in PGM IV. 1466, Anubis is called ‘key-bearer and guardian,’ and in PGM IV.341–42 is called ‘the one who has the keys to Hades’ (cf. S. Morenz, “Anubis mit dem Schlüssel,” in *Religion und Geschichte des Alten Ägypten* [Cologne; Vienna: Böhlau, 1975] 510–20). The leontocephaline god of Mithraism (sometimes identified with Saturn or Aios) is sometimes depicted holding keys, but no text explains what this symbol means (CIMRM, 78, 103, 125, 168; cf. indices s.v. “Aion,” 1:333; 2:403); a brief discussion of this symbol is found in L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, EPRO 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 352–53. It is likely that the keys were thought to control access to the astrological or planetary gates through which souls descend to embodiment and ascend to salvation (H. M. Jackson, “The Meaning and Function of the Leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism,” *Numen* 32[1985] 17–45; Beck, *Planetary Gods*, 63). Another Mithraic figure, Cautes, is sometimes depicted holding up a key (CIMRM, 1110, 1163), perhaps symbolizing his ability to unlock the gates of heaven for rain.

“In both texts and iconography, keys symbolize the power held by the respective deities over various aspects of life. The angel Michael is described in *3 Apoc. Bar.* 11:2 as the holder of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Aeacus is also described as the keeper of the keys of Hades (*Apollodorus*, 3.12.6; CIG 3:933, no. 6298; G. Kaibel, *Epigrammatica Graeca* [Berlin, 1878] 262–63, no. 646; cf. Isocrates *Euagoras* 15). Elsewhere he is described as keeping the gate of Hades (Lucian Dial. mort. 6[20]. 1).” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 104-05.]

<sup>26</sup>“Targ. Pal. Deut. 28:11–12 asserts that God and no one else holds ‘the key of life and of the tombs,’ which John would not see as inconsistent with his depiction of Christ, since he views Christ as a divine being. *2 En.*42:1 refers to demonic ‘guardians of the keys of hell.’ *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 6:11–15 portrays a heavenly figure like that depicted in Rev. 1:13–15, who ‘is over the abyss and Hades,’ where ‘all the souls are imprisoned.’” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 215.]

clearly communicated the exclusive authority of Christ over death and Hell.

What did John mean by τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾗδου, of death and Hades? The difficulty of answering this question precisely is very high, because a variety of viewpoints existed in the Judaism of that world, and some of this diversity seems to have found some acceptance inside the New Testament. And this diversity is evidently present inside the book of Revelation itself.

The concept of death, θάνατος, in the Greek is rather clearly derived from the Old Testament idea of Sheol. Death is the cessation of life in the physical realm, but theologically it becomes more.<sup>27</sup> It stands as an enemy which Christ destroys by His own dying and resurrection.<sup>28</sup> All humanity enter into death, but will not remain permanently in death due to the resurrection. Whether temporary torments follow death and precede the resurrection was debated in first century Judaism, and the New Testament is not all that clear on

<sup>27</sup>“In the NT ἀποθνήσκειν (perf.: τέθηκα without ἀπο-) and τελευτᾶν are first and most often used for the process of dying (pres. ‘to be dying,’ aor. ‘to die,’ perf. ‘to be dead’), and θάνατος (once τελευτή, Mt. 2:15)60 means dying (e.g., Hb. 7:23) or being dead (e.g., Phil. 1:20). Death is the lot of all men,<sup>61</sup> being remote only from God and His world (1 Tm. 6:16; 1 C. 15:53 f.). It is a dreadful thing<sup>62</sup> which man fears<sup>63</sup> and which he will seek only in the most terrible circumstances (Rev. 9:6). It is never portrayed in heroic terms, and if Paul recognises that there may be heroic death and that this stands in some analogy to Christ’s death (R. 5:7), Christ’s death is not interpreted as a heroic achievement (→ 18), nor is the sacrifice of death which the apostle brings for others (2 C. 4:12), nor the faithfulness of martyrs unto death (Rev. 2:10; 12:11). For it is not suggested that the one who makes the offering neutralises death so far as he personally is concerned. It is characteristic that suicide is never treated as a problem.<sup>64</sup> Death is always the terrible thing which makes ζωὴ improper ζωὴ (→ ζωὴ, II, 863)65 and the work of Christ is to have destroyed death (2 Tm. 1:10; → 19). Death is the ἔσχατος ἐχθρός with whose definitive destruction the work of salvation is fully accomplished (1 C. 15:26; Rev. 20:14).” [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 3:14.]

<sup>28</sup>“No attempt is made to interpret death as a natural process and thus to neutralise it. Even where it is seen to be defeated by the resurrection and death and resurrection are described in terms of an analogy from nature (1 C. 15:36; Jn. 12:24), it is no more regarded as a natural process than is the resurrection. The process in view in the analogy is not to be regarded as a natural process in the sense of Greek science. The Whence? and Wherefore? of death can be understood mythologically with death as a demonic person (1 C. 15:26; Rev. 6:8; 20:13 f.) or the devil as the lord of death (Hb. 2:14; on both → ζωὴ, II, 858). But the point of these mythologoumena,<sup>66</sup> which are not aetiological, is to express the fact that death is opposed to life as the true being of God (→ ζωὴ, II, 863) and therewith also that sin and death belong together.” [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 3:15.]

this topic.<sup>29</sup>

The meaning of θάνατος varies across the pages of the book of Revelation. Sometimes what we would term physical death, or dying physically is clearly in view: 2:23; 9:6; 12:11; 21:4 (?). Death signals being in the realm of the dead, much like the Jewish Sheol: 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14. Often in these references death is also personified. Then there is the ‘second death’ (ὁ δεύτερος θάνατος), which points to the eternal punishment of the wicked: 20:6, 14; 21:8. Thus θάνατος can refer to the end of physical life, existing among the realm of the dead, or being banished to eternal torments. What we come up against is the rich diversity of understanding that dominated the ancient world, and that Jesus and the apostles addressed it more from the religious angle than from an anthropological perspective. Central to all of this is the core idea of separation: separation of life from the body; separation from God; separation from this world. Also critical to the New Testament is the destructive power that θάνατος exerts.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>“There is not complete unanimity in NT statements on the question how far death finds its true character in the fact that it destroys, and how far in the fact that it involves future torment. Sometimes traditional Jewish conceptions of the punishments of hell predominate (Mk. 9:48; Lk. 16:23 etc., → ᾗδης, γέεννα). In any case, however, it is accepted that God or Christ is the κριτὴς ζώντων καὶ νεκρῶν (→ ζωὴ, II, 862), that physical death is not the final end but is followed by the judgment (Hb. 9:27) and that physical death is thus either reversed by the resurrection or, if only the resurrection of the righteous is expected, it is followed by a period of torment in hell.<sup>72</sup> Pl. seems to have expected more than a resurrection of the righteous, for, though 1 C. 15:22–24; 1 Th. 4:15 ff. could be taken in that sense, it is refuted by R. 2:5–13, 16; 2 C. 5:10. On the intermediate state between death and the resurrection the NT gives us no explicit information. It is thought of as a sleep (→ n. 60) unless the various authors suggest other conceptions.<sup>73</sup> In any case physical death becomes quite definitively death through God’s judgment. Hence we sometimes find the expression δεύτερος θάνατος (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).<sup>74</sup> Implied are the torments of hell (Rev. 21:8: ἐν τῇ λίμνῃ τῇ καιομένῃ πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ). Where these are regarded as the true judgment of death, they are never depicted along the lines of Jewish or Orphic conceptions of the underworld. The true curse of death is always destruction, and φθορὰ καὶ ἀπώλεια characterise this end.<sup>75</sup>” [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 3:16–17.]

<sup>30</sup>“More important is the fact that the destructive power of death is thought to rule life even now and to rob it of its true quality (→, ζωὴ II, 863). The death which awaits us holds life in φόβος (Hb. 2:15; R. 8:15) and those to whom Jesus is sent are regarded as καθημένοι ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου (Mt. 4:16; Lk. 1:79 quoting Is. 9:1). Life is always a life ‘for’ (→ ζωὴ, II, 863)—whether for God or for death (R. 6:13–23). Only of the believer is it true that he lives and dies to the Lord (R. 14:7). But θάνατος finally reigns over what is carnal (R. 8:6), so that where there is no hope grounded in Christ the slogan is: φάγομεν καὶ πίωμεν, αὔριον γὰρ ἀποθνήσκομεν (1 C. 15:32). The uncertainty of the morrow makes all concern useless (Mt. 6:25–34). No one knows whether he will

In Rev. 1:18, θάνατος is focused on the realm of the dead, much in the pattern of Sheol (לִישׁ, šē'ōl) in ancient Israel.<sup>31</sup> The claim then becomes that Christ, in holding the keys over death, possesses absolute power and control over all who have died and entered into this realm of existence called θάνατος.

When then does ἄδης, Hades, signify?<sup>32</sup> Again,

be alive tomorrow (Lk. 12:16–21). Death stands not only behind hope and care but also behind the λύπη of the κόσμος (2 C. 7:10), and all the works of men are from the very first νεκρά (Hb. 9:14, → ζωή, II, 863). Thus men may be described in advance as νεκροί (Mt. 8:22 and par.). For they are sinners,<sup>76</sup> so that Pl. can say V 3, p 18 in R. 7:10: (ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς ἐντολῆς) ἡ ἀμαρτία ἀνέζησεν, ἐγὼ δὲ ἀπέθανον, and in 7:24 he can call his σῶμα a σῶμα τοῦ θανάτου. Again, in 1 Jn. 3:14 it can be said of the false Christian who has no love that he abides in death. Men are dead outside revelation (Jn. 5:21, 25).” [Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 17-18.

<sup>31</sup>“Several terms are used to denote the abode of the dead in the Hebrew Bible, and they often occur in parallelism to one another. The most common is šē'ōl. Both šē'ōl and māwet, ‘Death’ are often used in Hebrew to refer to the realm of death as well as to the personified chthonic power behind death and all that is associated with it. See MOT. Hebrew 'ereš is simply ‘earth’ yet, as with Ug 'arš and Akk eršetu, it too can designate the netherworld. The words šahat and bōr both refer to the abode of the dead as the ‘Pit.’ Hebrew 'ābaddōn is another poetic name for the underworld usually translated ‘Perdition’ or ‘(place of) Destruction.’” [Theodore J. Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the” In vol. 2, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 101.]

<sup>32</sup>ἄδης, ου, ὀ (w. var. spellings Hom.+)

**1. Orig. proper noun, god of the nether world, ‘Hades’, then the nether world, Hades as place of the dead, Ac 2:27, 31** (Ps 15:10; Eccl 9:10; PGM 1, 179; 16, 8; Philo, Mos. 1, 195; Jos., Bell. 1, 596, Ant. 6, 332). Of Jonah’s fish ἐκ τοῦ κατωτάτου ἄδου. In the depths, contrasted w. heaven ἕως (τοῦ) ἄδου **Mt 11:23; Lk 10:15** (PsSol 15:10; cp.; Is 14:11, 15); ἐν τῷ ἄδῃ **16:23**; ἐν Ἄιδου ApcPt Rainer. Accessible by gates (but the pl. is also used [e.g. Hom., X., Ael. Aristid. 47, 20 K.=23 p. 450 D.] when only one gate is meant), hence πύλαι ἄδου (II. 5, 646; Is 38:10; Wsd 16:13; 3 Macc 5:51; PsSol 16:2.—Lucian, Menipp. 6 the magicians can open τοῦ Ἄιδου τὰς πύλας and conduct people in and out safely) **Mt 16:18** (s. on πέτρα 1b and πύλη a); locked ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ἄδου **Rv 1:18** (the genitives are either obj. [Ps.-Apollod. 3, 12, 6, 10 Aeacus, the son of Zeus holds the κλεῖς τοῦ Ἄιδου; SEG VIII, 574, 3 (III A.D.) τῶ τὰς κλεῖδας ἔχοντι τῶν καθ’ Ἄιδου (restored)] or possess.; in the latter case death and Hades are personif.; s. 2). ὠδίνες τοῦ ἄδου (Ps 17:6) Pol 1:2; **Ac 2:24** v.l. (for θανάτου). εἰς ἄδου (sc. δόμους B-D-F §162, 8; Hom. et al.; Bar 3:11, 19; Tob 3:10; En 102:5; 103:7; Ar. 11, 3) **Ac 2:31** v.l.; I Cl 4:12; 51:4 (Just., D. 99, 3 ἐν ἄδου μένειν; Mel., Fgm. 8b, 44 τοῖς ἐν ἄδου νεκροῖς; Iambl., Vi. Pyth. 30, 179 ἐν ἄδου κείσθαι τὴν κρίσιν; Hierocles 14, 451 τὰ ἐν ἄδου κολαστήρια; Simplicius in Epict. p. 108, 14 punishments for sinners ἐν ἄδου).

**2. Hades personif.** (perh. derived fr. OT usage, cp. מוֹת , s. JHealey, Mot: DDD 1121–32), w. θάνατος (cp. Is 28:15; Job 38:17; Mel., P. 102, 782 ἐγὼ ... ὁ καταπατήσας τὸν αἴδη) **Rv 6:8; 20:13f; 1 Cor 15:55** v.l.—GBeer, D. bibl. Hades: HHoltzmann

across the pages of the New Testament ἄδης refers mostly to the realm of the dead as in the Hebrew Sheol (לִישׁ, šē'ōl): Lk. 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31. Or, it can rarely allude to a place of punishments for sin and function somewhat interchangeably with γέεννα, Hell: 1 Pet. 3:19.<sup>33</sup> In the four instances of ἄδης in Revelation (1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14) it signals the realm of the dead either as Sheol or in personification.<sup>34</sup> Thus the phrase used in 1:18 is more the sense of “keys of death which is Hades.”<sup>35</sup> The claim is clear: Jesus controls the realm of the dead and can ‘unlock’ the gates for those in Hades to come to life in order to face God in judgment. This will be ‘fleshed’ out in the subsequent pages of

Festschr. 1902, 1–30; ERohde, Psyche4 I 54ff; 309ff; ADieterich, Nekyia 1893; Bousset, Rel.3 285f; 293ff; Billerb. IV 1016–29; AHeidel, The Gilgamesh Epic and OT Parallels2, '49, 173–91; LSullivan, Theological Studies (Woodstock, Md.) 10, '49, 62ff; JBremmer, DDD 725f. S. also s.v. πνεῦμα 2 and 4c.—B. 1485. Frisk s.v. Ἄιδης. M-M. TW.

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 19.]

<sup>33</sup>“According to Jeremias (TDNT 1:147–49) Hades sometimes denotes the abode of both the godly and the wicked (Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; cf. Ant 18.14; JW 2.163). At other times (1 Pet 3:19; cf. JW 3.375) it appears to be a designation of the abode only of the ungodly, with the righteous residing in paradise or some similar environment (Luke 16:9; 23:43; cf. 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23; Heb 12:22; Rev 6:9; 7:9). Where Hades denotes the abode of all the dead, it is described as a temporary holding place until the resurrection, when Hades gives up its dead (Rev 20:13).” [Theodore J. Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the” In, in, vol. 2, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 104.]

<sup>34</sup>The NRSV only translates ἄδης in Revelation as Hades with the capital form signaling personification.

<sup>35</sup>“I have the keys of Death and Hades: keys are the symbol of authority, and by having been raised from death, the glorified Christ has the power over death and the world of the dead; he has the power to leave people in death or to open the gates of Hades (see Isa 38:10; Matt 16:18 [RSV footnote]) and let its inhabitants leave. This, of course, is a figure for the power to bring the dead to life. In some languages it will be possible to keep the symbol keys and say, for example, ‘I have the keys that give me the power to open the place where dead people are (the land of the dead) and bring them to life again.’ In cultures where keys do not exist, one may say ‘the things that open or close doors’ or ‘the power to open doors.’ *Death*: in languages where one cannot talk about ‘power over death,’ one may say ‘power to raise people from death’ or ‘power to cause dead people to be alive again.’ *Hades* (also 6:8; 20:13, 14) is the Greek equivalent of Sheol, the Hebrew word for the world of the dead, which was sometimes pictured as an underground city, whose locked gates prevented the dead from leaving. It should not be translated ‘hell,’ that is, the place of punishment, which in the New Testament is called ‘Gehenna.’ SPCL has joined the two terms, ‘I have the keys of the kingdom of death,’ which a translation may choose to imitate.” [Robert G. Bratcher and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on the Revelation to John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 33-34.]

Revelation.

**Second, following the reassurance (vv. 17-18), comes the demand made to John:** γράψον οὖν ἃ εἶδες καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα, **Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.** This is an expanded version of the previous command in verse eleven, which came from the Heavenly Voice:

ὁ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον καὶ πέμψον ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις, εἰς Ἔφεσον καὶ εἰς Σμύρναν καὶ εἰς Πέργαμον καὶ εἰς Θυάτειρα καὶ εἰς Σάρδεῖς καὶ εἰς Φιλαδέλφειαν καὶ εἰς Λαοδίκειαν.

Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

This second emphasis in v. 19 is built off the same core: γράψον ἃ εἶδες, **write what you saw**, with the one difference: ὁ βλέπεις, **what you see** (Present tense) now becomes ἃ εἶδες, **what you saw** (Aorist tense), which picks up on ὅσα εἶδεν, **as much as he saw**, in verse two. The shift in narrative perspective with the different tense forms of the same verb reflect whether John is describing the scene from the perspective of as he experiences it (present tense) or viewing it from the later writing down of what he saw (past time of Aorist tense). Such variation is stylistic and contains no hidden significance.<sup>36</sup>

As noted in the previous study covering verse 11, this was a divine command given to John to take the heavenly vision given to him by God in images and then turn that into written depictions. In subsequent reflection and recollection of what he had witnessed in the apocalyptic vision, John reached out to his Jewish religious heritage, especially the prophetic and apocalyptic sides, to find appropriate language and images that could accurately describe what he had seen.

<sup>36</sup>“The phrase ἃ εἶδες, ‘what you see,’ could refer to the vision that John saw in vv 12–20, yet since he is still ‘within’ this vision when he writes v 19, this seems both artificial and unlikely. ἃ εἶδες seems to refer to the first commission to write in v 11: ὁ βλέπεις γράψον, ‘write what you see.’ In v 19, John uses the aorist verb εἶδες primarily because he is adapting the tripartite prophecy formula (see below) and needs to refer to past time. Further, the neuter plural relative pronoun ἃ refers to the substance of his vision no less than the neuter singular relative pronoun ὁ; John uses ὁ instead of ὃ in v 19 because it conforms to the neuter plural definite article, which tends to be used in the tripartite prophecy formula. V 19, therefore, seems to constitute a kind of double entendre; the tenses conform to the necessity of referring to the past, present, and future in the tripartite prophecy formula, but the author is using εἶδες as an epistolary aorist; i.e., while the visions he was about to record were yet to be seen by him, from the standpoint of the reader they belong to the past. This sentence can therefore be understood ‘Write what you see, namely [taking καὶ as expegetical], the events of the present and of the future.’” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 105-06.]

Although the core admonition is the same, it is the details which vary between the two expressions of γράψον ἃ εἶδες. In verse eleven the simple command is extended with the instruction to send what has been written down to the seven churches, which are then named individually: πέμψον ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις.... This is the distinctive part of the first command to write.

In verse nineteen, however, some distinctive modifiers surface that are not found in the first instance of the command. They are attached as an explanatory definition of ἃ εἶδες: καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα, **both what is and what is going to happen after these things.**

What John saw in the visions is connected to the present and the immediate future at the time of the writing of the book. Thus what was being revealed to John for him to pass on to his readers in Asia provided affirmation of the present concerns of God for them and reassurance that He was moving in their behalf, and would continue moving for them.

What is covered by this expression καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα? The basic, correct answer is everything from chapter two through chapter twenty-two? Is it legitimate to divide out καὶ ἃ εἰσὶν referring to chapters two and three while καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα refers to chapters four through twenty-two? Absolutely not! Such is completely false interpretation.<sup>37</sup> First, we are dealing with apocalyptic visionary perspective. Concepts of time and forward movement often don’t work in this perspective like they do in human history. There will be logical progression, but this may or may not (mostly) imply progression temporally. Second, the present and the future in chapters 2 through 22 are mixed in together, rather than separated out into a nice package of present (chaps. 2-3) and fu-

<sup>37</sup>“In the main clause, John refers to just two subjects, i.e., ‘what you see, namely,’ (1) ‘the present’ and (2) ‘the imminent future.’” It has often been supposed that this passage, translated differently, provides the reader with an outline of Revelation. ‘What you saw’ supposedly deals with the vision he has just received (1:9–20), ‘what is’ covers the situation as it exists in each of the seven churches (chaps. 2–3), and ‘what is about to happen after these things’ deals with future, i.e., the eschatological events in Rev 4:1–22:5 (Swete, 21; Bousset [1906] 198; Charles, 1:33; Lohse, 22; Vielhauer, *Geschichte*, 496–97). Aside from the fact that this division reveals nothing of the structure of the extensive section in chaps. 4–22, it does not appreciate the fact that some of the ensuing visions in chaps. 4–22 deal with the past (e.g., Rev 12), just as sections of chaps. 2–3 focus on the future (Beasley-Murray, 68; Roloff, 45; Sweet, 19; Caird, 26: ‘a grotesque over-simplification’). Therefore it is best to take this verse as a modification by John of the widespread Hellenistic tripartite prophecy formula in which he appears to refer to the past, present, and future, but in actuality means to emphasize only the present and future (see below on ἃ εἶδες).” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 105.]

ture (chaps. 4-22). The content of these chapters make this abundantly clear. Any interpretive approach that splits them out into such a 'neat' package has obviously misunderstood the contents of these chapters.

Regarding the second half of this pair of explanatory expressions, καὶ ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα, the grammatical structure first asserts what will happen shortly after ἃ εἰσίν.<sup>38</sup> The certainty of these things (ἃ) taking place in the near future is highlighted by the NRSV translation "what is to take place," which is a major meaning of the verb μέλλω.<sup>39</sup>

The expression μετὰ ταῦτα shows up in 4:1 (ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα) and 9:12 (μετὰ ταῦτα) where they imply the next thing sequentially.<sup>40</sup> Also the larg-

<sup>38</sup>The verb μέλλω with an infinitive indicates greater certainty of occurrence, normally in the near future as opposed to a remote future. Hence the usual translation of "about to be." For examples in the NRSV inside Revelation see 3:16; 8:13; 10:4; 12:4; 17:8. Here μέλλω in the present tense verb form is used with the Aorist infinitive γενέσθαι which is rare. The Aorist infinitive projects an event taking place rather than a series of events over an extended period of time, which would require the present tense infinitive.

The aorist inf. is rare with μέλλω (ἀποκαλυφθῆναι, Ro. 8:18; Gal. 3:23, though ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι in 1 Pet. 5:1). So ἐμελλον ἀποθανεῖν (Rev. 3:2). Cf. Rev. 3:16; 12:4.

[A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Logos Bible Software, 1919), 857.]

### <sup>39</sup>2. to be inevitable, be destined, inevitable

**a. w. pres. inf. to denote an action that necessarily follows a divine decree is destined, must, will certainly** ... μ. πάσχειν he is destined to suffer **Mt 17:12; B 7:10; 12:2; cp. 6:7.** μ. σταυροῦσθαι must be crucified **12:1.** μ. παραδίδοσθαι **Mt 17:22; Lk 9:44; 16:5.** ἐμελλεν ἀποθνήσκειν **J 11:51; 12:33; 18:32.** ἐν σαρκί μ. φανεροῦσθαι **B 6:7, 9, 14.** Cp. **Mt 16:27; 20:22; Ro 4:24; 8:13; Rv 12:5.** οὐκέτι μέλλουσιν ... θεωρεῖν they should no more see ... **Ac 20:38.** τὰ μ. γίνεσθαι what must come to pass **26:22;** cp. **Rv 1:19.** διὰ τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν those who are to inherit salvation **Hb 1:14.** μέλλομεν θλίβεσθαι that we were to be afflicted **1 Th 3:4.**—**Mk 10:32; Lk 9:31; J 7:39; Hb 11:8.** ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἣ ἐμέλλε θηριομαχεῖν on the day on which Paul was to fight the wild animals **AcPI Ha 3, 9.** ὡς μελλούσης τῆς πόλεως αἰρεσθαι in expectation of the city's destruction **5, 16.** ἄνωθεν μέλλω σταυροῦσθαι I (Jesus) am about to be crucified once more **7, 39.**

**b. w. aor. inf. ἀποκαλυφθῆναι that is destined** (acc. to God's will) to be revealed **Gal 3:23.**

[William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 628.]

<sup>40</sup>"The phrase μετὰ ταῦτα, 'after this,' usually begins clauses, sentences, or units of text in Revelation; only here and in 4:1; 9:12 (see Notes there) is it used at the end of a sentence. The entire phrase ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα in 1:19 is in fact closely paralleled to the recurring phrase ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι [μετὰ ταῦτα/ἐν τάχει] (1:1; 4:1; 22:6). There is a relatively close linguistic parallel in LXX Isa 48:6, ἃ μέλλει γίνεσθαι (Swete, cxlii; Kraft, 49), where the MT reads simply נִרְצָה וְנִסְתָּר *unēsūrōt*, "and hidden things," though

er phrase ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα is paralleled by the almost identical phrases ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (what must happen quickly; 1:1), ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (what must happen next; 4:1); ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει (what must happen quickly; 22:6).<sup>41</sup>

All four expressions have their linguistic foundation in Isa. 48:6.

ἤκούσατε πάντα, καὶ ὑμεῖς οὐκ ἔγνωτε· ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀκουστά σοι ἐποίησα τὰ καινὰ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν, ἃ μέλλει γίνεσθαι, καὶ οὐκ εἶπας.

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, *hidden things* that you have not known.

The NRSV translation "hidden things" for ἃ μέλλει γίνεσθαι in the LXX is based more on the Hebrew text, נִרְצָה וְנִסְתָּר *unēsūrōt*, "and hidden things," than on the LXX. The LXX with its ἃ μέλλει γίνεσθαι interpreted the Hebrew to mean the things just beyond seeing but certainly going to be revealed to the prophet. Out of this OT conceptualization comes then the declaration to John that he is going to see the things not yet known but clearly going to be revealed to him.

**Third follows the interpretation** (v. 20): τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων οὓς εἶδες ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς· οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσίν καὶ αἱ λυχνίαί αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσίν.

As for the mystery of the seven stars that 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.

The grammatical structure is unusual with the first part not being constructed as a sentence, but more as a header.<sup>42</sup> Whether originally written this way or written as a later insertion, the role remains the same: to introduce the seven letters in chapters two and three.

The interpretive link established here clearly connects the apocalyptic Son of Man in vv. 13-16 to the one sending each of the seven letters with elements of this portrait typically reproduced as a part of each

the context certainly involves divine revelation. This indicates the redactional character of 4:1 (see Comment there)." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 106.]

<sup>41</sup>Also of importance is the similar phrase μετὰ τοῦτο, after this, in 7:1, 9; 11:11; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; 20:3. This phrase comes uniformly at the beginning of a sentence with either sequential or sometimes temporal significance. The sense is 'the very next thing to take place.'

<sup>42</sup>"The peculiar grammatical character of this verse clearly indicates that it is a gloss (Kraft, 49), though one that the author himself has inserted in order to link the commission vision of 1:9-20 to the proclamations to the seven churches in Rev 2-3. Malina argues that, since allegorical interpretation is essentially foreign to Revelation, v 20 is a later interpolation (Revelation, 75)." [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 106.]

letter *Praescriptio* (2:1 [7 stars in right hand, walking among the lampstands]; 2:8 [1st & last; dead / come to life]; 2:12 [sharp 2 edged sword]; 2:18 [flame of fire eyes; burnished bronze feet]; 3:1 [holds 7 spirits & stars]; 3:7 [holy, true one with key of David]; 3:14 [the Amen, faithful & true witness, source of God's creation].

**The header:** τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων οὓς εἶδες ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς, *the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands.*

The meaning of the seven stars and the seven lampstands is termed a μυστήριον, *mystery*.<sup>43</sup> This is

<sup>43</sup>“The term μυστήριον (the Aramaic term ܡܝܫܬܪܝܢ *mīšṭārīn*, ‘mystery,’ is a Persian loanword found in biblical Aramaic, not biblical Hebrew), literally ‘mystery,’ was a quasi-technical term in both prophetic and apocalyptic texts in early Judaism and early Christianity. The term occurs four times in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7). In the OT, a dream was sometimes a revelatory medium whose message was a ܡܝܫܬܪܝܢ, ‘mystery,’ requiring interpretation (Dan 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47 [2x]; 4:9 [MT: 4:6]). The biblical commentaries from Qumran indicate that the members of that community regarded OT prophecies (like dreams) as mysteries requiring interpretation (the transference of the techniques of dream interpretation to the exegesis of biblical texts is discussed by Finkel, *RevQ 4* [1960] 357–70). 1QpHab 7:4–5 (tr. M. Horgan, Pesharim, 16): ‘the interpretation [ܦܫܪܘܢ *pšrw*] of it concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets [ܚܝܢ ܕܒܪܝܢ *rzy dbry .bdyw hnb.ym*].’ In the *Qumran Pesharim* the Hebrew term ܡܝܫܬܪܝܢ *raz* occurs just three times (1QpHab 7:5, 8, 14). In Qumran, then, the term ܡܝܫܬܪܝܢ *raz*, ‘mystery,’ concerns things about the community and the situation in which they found themselves that were hidden in the prophetic writings and not fully known to the prophet. The ܦܫܪܘܢ *pešer*, ‘interpretation,’ which corresponded to the ܚܝܢ *raz*, ‘mystery,’ could not be understood by unaided human wisdom but was revealed by God to specially chosen human interpreters. The term μυστήριον is used as a mystery formula to introduce eschatological scenarios (Aune, *Prophecy*, 250–52, 333). μυστήριον occurs twice in the Greek text of 1 Enoch 103:1; 104:12 (the term also occurs in the Ethiopic text of 104:10, where there is a lacuna in the Greek text). In all three contexts the term is used to introduce an eschatological scenario: 103:1, ‘I understand this mystery [ἐπίσταμαι τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο]’; 104:12, ‘And again I know a second mystery [καὶ πάλιν γινώσκω μυστήριον δευτέρου]’; 104:10 (tr. Knibb, Enoch), ‘And now I know this mystery.’ In *Paral. Jer.* 9:29, Jeremiah’s prophetic visions are called ‘mysteries,’ i.e., the secret plans of God (Wis 2:22), on analogy with earthly kings who keep their counsels and intentions secret (Tob 12:7, 11; Jdt 2:2; 2 Macc 13:21): ‘Now Jeremiah transmitted all the mysteries which he saw [τὰ μυστήρια ἃ εἶδε] to Baruch.’ Paul uses μυστήριον (which refers both to the secret as well as its disclosure) to introduce an eschatological scenario in 1 Cor 15:51–52: ‘Behold! I tell you a mystery [μυστήριον].’ The mystery formula also occurs in Rom 11:25–26: ‘I want you to understand this mystery [μυστήριον] brethren.’ A close parallel is found in the eclectic pagan document *Corpus Hermeticum* 1.16 (called *Poimandres*): τοῦτο ἐστὶ τὸ κεκρυμμένον μυστήριον μέχρι τῆσδε τῆς ἡμέρας, ‘This is the mystery concealed until this day.’ In the NT, ‘the mystery of God hidden for ages but now revealed’ and close variations occur with some frequency (cf. 1 Cor 2:7; Rom 16:25–26; Eph 3:5, 9–10; Col 1:26–27; 2 Tim 1:9–10; Titus 1:2–3; 1 Pet 1:20; cf. Lührmann, *Paulus*, 113–17; N. A. Dahl,

not some esoteric knowledge hidden and thus made available only to a select few. Instead, this is understanding of the meaning to two images presented in an apocalyptic vision. This meaning is given to John who in turn is to communicate it to his readers.

In the background here probably lies Daniel 2:19 and 45, since close affinities with verse nineteen are possibly also present.<sup>44</sup>

**Dan. 2:19.** τότε τῷ Δανιηλ ἐν ὄραματι ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ νυκτὶ τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ βασιλέως ἐξεφάνθη εὐσήμως· τότε Δανιηλ εὐλόγησε τὸν κύριον τὸν ὑψιστοντ

Then *the mystery* was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

**Dan. 2:45b.** ὁ θεὸς ὁ μέγας ἐσήμανε τῷ βασιλεῖ τὰ ἐσόμμενα ἐπ’ ἐσχάτων τῶν ἡμερῶν, *καὶ ἀκριβὲς τὸ ὄραμα, καὶ πιστὴ ἡ τούτου κρίσις.*

The great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. *The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy.*

What Daniel was given to know was what God planned to do in exerting His rule over the earth. The dream is given in vv. 31–35 with the interpretation given in vv. 36–45a. Just as John was to do, Daniel was given understanding of what King Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed and also the religious meaning of that dream: vv. 25–30. The reason God gave this understanding to Daniel was for him to communicate this to the king: v. 30. John’s mission was easier: to communicate this understand-

“Formgeschichtliche Beobachtungen,” 3–9). Hatch (*Essays*, 59–62) points out that in the Christian apologists the term μυστήριον is used with such synonyms as σύμβολον, τύπος, and παραβολή, all meaning ‘symbol’ or ‘symbolic representation.’ Examples: (1) Justin I Apol. 27, the serpent in false religions is understood as a σύμβολον μέγα καὶ μυστήριον, ‘a great symbol and mystery.’ (2) Justin Dial. 40.1, τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ προβάτου ... τύπος ἦν τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ‘the mystery [i.e., ‘symbol’] of the lamb ... was a type of Christ.’ (3) Justin Dial. 68.6, τὸ εἰρημένον πρὸς Δαυεὶδ ὑπὸ θεοῦ ἐν μωστηρίῳ διὰ Ἡσαίου ... ἐξηγήθη, ‘What was spoken to David by God symbolically was explained through Isaiah’ (cf. Justin Dial. 44.2; 78.9).”

[David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 106–07.]

<sup>44</sup>“μυστήριον (‘the mystery’) occurs in the LXX versions of the Hebrew OT books only in Daniel (and 12 times in books of the Apocrypha). μυστήρια (‘mysteries’) precedes ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι (‘what must come to pass’) in Dan. 2:28 and 29, and τὸ μυστήριον follows in v 30. Brown sees a ‘connection’ between Rev. 1:20a and Daniel 2 because of the similarity of usage, and Swete sees an explicit allusion to the ‘mystery’ of Dan. 2:29 in v 20a, but neither sees an allusion to Dan. 2:28ff. in Rev. 1:19c.<sup>132</sup> The margin of Kilpatrick’s edition of the Greek NT is the only source indicating an allusion to Dan. 2:29ff. in both v 19c and v 20a. Since ‘mystery’ occurs with an eschatological sense only in Daniel, the appearance of the word in such a context in Rev. 1:20 confirms its link to Daniel.” [G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), 216–17.]

ing of the divine will to seven churches in Asia.

What we are dealing with here in v. 20 is the divine intention to clearly define the meaning of two key elements in the apocalyptic vision in vv. 13-16. The assumption is that John could clearly understand the other details of the vision of the Son of Man. But the meaning of the stars and the lampstands, οὓς εἶδες (which you saw), was less obvious.

**The interpretation:** οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσιν καὶ αἱ λυχνίαι αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσίν. *the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

Notice that the interpretive methodology followed here is simply: **this equals that**. It is not stated “this is like that” or “this looks like that.” Sometimes such interpretive approaches are labeled allegorical interpretation, but they are such only in a mild sense along the lines of Jesus’ interpretation of his parable of the tares (parable, Mt. 13:24-30; interpretation, 13:36-43) and Paul’s equating of Hagar with legalistic Judaism and Christianity with Sarah in Gal. 4:21-5:1. Central here is the fact that the same person making the comparison provides his own interpretation of his intended meaning of the comparison.

In no way does this equal the extremes of allegorical interpretation found among the Greeks with Homer’s works, or the later church fathers’ approach to the biblical texts. In both instances centuries later, interpreters were attaching their own arbitrary meanings to the symbols and comparisons made in the previously written source texts.

Here in Rev. 1:20 the risen Christ did the exact same thing that the historical Jesus had done with the parable of the tares. Our later interpretive challenge is to be sure we understand correctly Christ’s interpretation of the symbols. Of the two interpretations made by Christ the second one is rather easy to understand, while the first one poses serious challenges to correct understanding.

**Interpretation one:** οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσιν, *the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.* This alludes back to the element in the vision of vv. 12-16 at verse sixteen: καὶ ἔχων ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ ἀστέρας ἑπτὰ, *and*

*holding in His right hand seven stars.* In the natural, ‘this world,’ meaning of the term is to refer to a luminous body in the sky.<sup>45</sup> Seven such heavenly bodies usual-

ly specified seven planets seen as stars in the sky.<sup>46</sup> These typically in ancient cultures were the Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Venus, and Saturn although understood in differing sequential listings of importance.<sup>47</sup>

But in this image in vv. 12-16, the risen Christ asserts in v. 20 that ἀστέρας ἑπτὰ, *seven stars* (v. 16) equals ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν, *angels of the seven churches* (v. 20). Modern readers are very much inclined to then ask: What is the logical connection between an ἀστήρ, *star*, and an ἄγγελος, ‘angel’? This largely grows out of a post-enlightenment assumption of some sort of logical connection existing between two items which are linked in some manner or another. The problem with this connection in v. 20 is that it flows out of the ancient allegorical patterns, not a modern western mind set. In that ancient way of interpreting texts such connections more often than not are purely arbitrary and have little or no logical connection whatsoever. The connection is made by the ancient interpreter more on the basis of his perception of a point of functional commonality, rather than some logical connection.

In this background lies a world view, eine Weltanschauung, that is utterly different from ours. As the graphic below illustrates, the canopy across the earth that we

**star, single star, planet**” [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 145.]

<sup>46</sup>“According to ancient sidereal lore, seven stars could represent (1) the seven planets, (2) Ursus Major (a constellation with seven stars), or (3) the Pleiades (another constellation of seven stars).” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 97.]

<sup>47</sup>“In antiquity, the ‘seven stars’ are often used to represent the seven ‘planets’ (Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Venus, and Saturn). Though these seven planets were almost universally accepted in the Hellenistic and Roman world, there were three different planetary orders (Beck, *Planetary Gods*, 1–11): (a) The order based on distance from the earth has two variants (because the positions of Venus, Mercury, and the Sun cannot be determined relative to each other): (i) the older ‘Egyptian’ order: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury, Sun, and Moon, and (ii) the later ‘Chaldean’ order, which came to dominate late Hellenistic astronomy (note the position of the Sun in the center): Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon. (b) The astrological, horoscopic order (probably originally based on distance, though priority was given to the Sun and Moon for other reasons): Sun, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury. (c) The Mithraic ‘grade’ order: Saturn, Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury. In some of the depictions of Mithras slaying the bull, the presence of seven stars in the field symbolizes the seven planets (Vermaseren, *Mithraica III*, 9 [plate IV], 12 [plate XII], 37; Vermaseren, *CIM- RM*, 1127B, 1206, 1216, 1727, 2244, 2354, 2359). Clement Alex. (Strom. 5.6) compares the menorah in the Jewish temple with the planets (see Comment on 1:12) and compares the light in the middle and in the highest position with the sun, following the ‘Chaldean’ order.” [David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 97.]

<sup>45</sup>“A luminous body (other than the sun) visible in the sky,

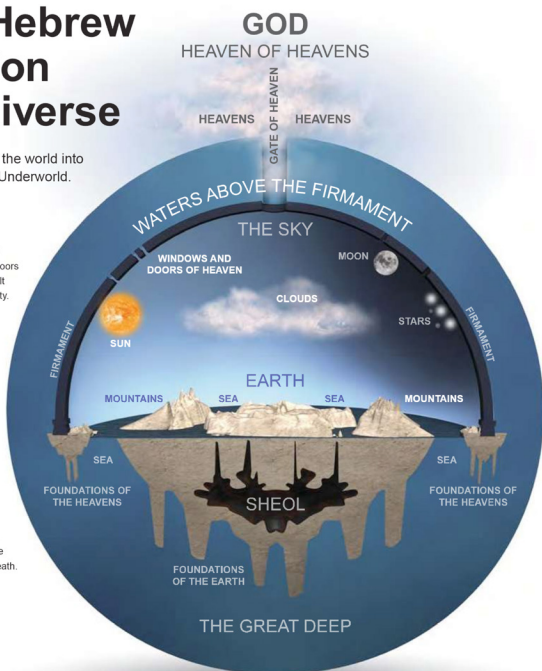
# Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

The ancient Israelites divided the world into Heaven, Earth, Sea, and the Underworld.

They viewed the sky as a vault resting on foundations—perhaps mountains—with doors and windows that let in the rain. God dwelt above the sky, hidden in cloud and majesty.

The world was viewed as a disk floating on the waters, secured or moored by pillars. The earth was the only known domain—the realm beyond it was considered unknowable.

The Underworld (Sheol) was a watery or dusty prison from which no one returned. Regarded as a physical place beneath the earth, it could be reached only through death.



GRAPHIC BY KARBEL MULTIMEDIA, COPYRIGHT 2012 LOGOS BIBLE SOFTWARE

call sky was seen as a boundary line between this world and the dwelling place of God on the opposite side of this canopy. In this way of viewing the created world, the stars served as windows into that place where God dwells. They shined simply because they were reflecting the glory of the Almighty. One should note clearly that this was the view of the Israelite people.

Among the Greeks and the majority of the rest of the ancient world, the stars represented individual gods who exerted power and influence over those on earth. Thus they were viewed as deities. Most of the English names for the planets are actually derived from Latin words specifying common names for these deities.

If any logical connection between ἀστέρας ἑπτὰ, **seven stars** (v. 16) and ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν, **angels of the seven churches** (v. 20), it must be understood against this ancient world backdrop.

But before exploring this possibility, another challenge must be addressed. It centers in the word ἄγγελος, that literally means ‘messenger.’<sup>48</sup> Inside the NT ἄγγελος often specified a human messenger: Lk. 7:24, 9:52; Jas. 2:25, particularly God’s prophets (Mt. 11:10; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 7:27). Also the term ἄγγελος specifies a supernatural messenger, i.e., an angel, in most

<sup>48</sup>This Greek word ἄγγελος is derived from a word group that denotes the idea of commissioned delivery of a message. This personal noun ἄγγελος specifies the individual commissioned to deliver the message. The abstract noun ἀγγελία specifies the message to be delivered. The verb ἀγγέλλω, along with a number of compound forms -- ἀν-, ἀπ-, δι-, ἐξ-, κατ-, προκαταγγέλλω -- specify the giving of the authorized message. The two most popular terms inside early Christian usage are compound derivatives from the root ἀγγελ- stem: ἐπαγγελ- (ἐπαγγελμα, **promise**) and εὐαγγελ- (εὐαγγέλιον, **Gospel**; εὐαγγελίζω, **I preach**).

of the 175 NT uses. Inside the book of Revelation the term ἄγγελος is used some 69 times in either the singular or plural forms. In chapters four through twenty-two the meaning of ἄγγελος is clearly defined by context as a supernatural messenger sent from God. Three exceptions to this surface. In 9:11 Satan is defined as an ἄγγελος and in 12:7, 9 his followers are referred to as ἄγγελοι, **angels**.

This leaves us with eight references in chapters two and three also including this one in 1:20. The question becomes: Who are the ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν, the ‘angels’ of the seven churches? Are they angels sent by God to watch over each of the seven churches? This is a commonly understood view, but it doesn’t make sense. As we will see in the studies of these seven letters in chapters two and three, each letter is addressed to one of these ἄγγελοι with the standardized Hebrew/Aramaic letter *Adscriptio* formula: Τῷ ἀγγέλω τῆς ἐν... ἐκκλησίας γράψων, **To the angel of the church in \_\_\_ write**. Cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14. Why would God use John to instruct an angel to deliver a specific message to a Christian congregation located in the province of Asia? If such is the case, it is completely unique in the biblical history of how God communicates with people on this planet.

David Aune (WBC) wisely reminds us of several contextual factors to include in the process of coming to an interpretive conclusion about who these ἄγγελοι are:

Before reviewing the various interpretations that scholars have proposed, let us first consider some specific implications of relevant portions of the text of Revelation that must be taken into account in any solution to the identity and function of these seven ἄγγελοι. **(1)** *Each of the seven proclamations addresses the “angel” of each church directly as an individual entity complete with second person singular pronouns and verb forms.* A close reading of the seven proclamations in Rev 2–3 clearly suggests that this is a literary fiction, which the author is simply not able to maintain consistently. Sometimes the address shifts to the second person plural, a shift that occurs when a particular group within the church is addressed. Three examples will suffice: (a) “Do not fear what you will suffer [μέλλεις πάσχειν; second person singular finite verb]; behold the devil will cast some of you [ἐξ ὑμῶν; plural pronoun] into jail” (2:10). (b) “But I have against you [σου; singular pronoun] that you have [ἔχεις; second person singular verb] there those who hold [κρατοῦντας; plural substantival participle] the teaching of Balaam” (2:14; same construction in v 15). (c) “I know where you dwell [κατοικεῖς; second person singular verb] where the throne of Satan is ... Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you [παρ’ ὑμῖν; plural pronoun]. **(2)** *The ἄγγελος of each church is addressed as if he is the church; i.e., each one functions as the alter ego of each congregation.* The angel-church can be commended for acceptable behavior (2:2–3, 6) but rebuked for unaccept-



able behavior (2:4–5). While the first command given to the author to write a revelatory book specifies that he sent it to the seven churches, with no mention of the fictive angelic recipients (1:11), and the message of each proclamation is clearly said to be spoken by the Spirit ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις, “to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), the addressee of each of the proclamations is the ἄγγελος to which that message is directed (2:1, 7, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), suggesting the equivalency of churches and angels. **(3)** *Several important characteristics of these ἄγγελοι are evident in Rev 1:20:* **(a)** The fact that the first occurrence of ἄγγελοι in 1:20 is anarthrous indicates that the author did not assume that his audience was familiar with these figures (e.g., they cannot be identical with the seven archangels of 8:2 or the seven bowl angels of 15:6). That these ἄγγελοι were created by the author is in part confirmed by the fact that there are no parallels in the literature of early Judaism or early Christianity that provide insight into how these figures should be interpreted. **(b)** Since the seven stars are interpreted as the angels of the seven churches, and the seven menorahs as the seven churches, it appears that the angels and the churches are not identical. **(c)** The seven angels appear to constitute a particular group, alongside other groups of seven angels in Revelation, i.e., the seven archangels who function as trumpet angels (8:2) and the seven bowl angels (15:6). The first mention of these last two groups is articular, suggesting that the author assumed that they were known to his audience. **(4)** *The seven ἄγγελοι, either individually or collectively, are not mentioned elsewhere in Revelation (though note other groups of seven angels in 8:2; 15:6).* **(5)** *All references to these ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν occur in the final edition or version of Revelation.* **(6)** *There is no indication that these ἄγγελοι are present in heaven.* **(7)** *The phenomenon of addressing a group as if it were an individual and using second person singular verb forms and pronouns is a widespread literary phenomenon (address to the daughter of Zion in Zeph 3:14–20; speech to Tyre in Ezek 27), though in Hos 9:16; 14:1–3, Israel is initially addressed in singular pronouns and verb forms, which then switch to plural forms. In early Christian epistolary literature, which is usually addressed to particular churches, the verbs and pronouns are always second person plural in form (this also occurs in prophetic speeches, e.g., Zeph 2:1–5).* **(8)** *Early Christian letters are characteristically addressed to churches of a particular geographical location, and only exceptionally to individuals or to groups who were part of those communities.*<sup>49</sup>

What we are thus looking at with these eight references to ἄγγελοι is something different than what either ἄγγελος, *angel*, or ἄγγελοι, *angels*, will mean in the remainder of the book of Revelation. It doesn't seem likely that ἄγγελος, *angel*, is equated with ἐκκλησία, *church*, even though a very close inner connection between the two is made obvious in these two chapters. For example, when John is instructed to write a let-

ter to the ἄγγελος of each church (e.g., 2:1), the risen Christ addresses technically the ἄγγελος with words like οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου..., *I know your works* [2nd singular reference grammatically going back to τῷ ἄγγέλῳ]..., but clearly He is describing what is characteristic of the entire congregation (cf. Aune's point 2 above). The ἄγγελος of each church is so identified with the church that the two seem almost interchangeable. But other signals clearly suggest that they are not two ways of referring to each church.

Over the centuries of study of this issue three categories of interpretive understand have emerged: the ἄγγελοι are 1) supernatural beings, 2) human beings as spiritual leaders of the churches, or 3) heavenly bodies. Numerous variations of each of these categories surface in the literature.<sup>50</sup> As Aune correctly notes

<sup>50</sup>**(1)** The first category, *supernatural beings*, can be subdivided into three further possibilities: (a) guardian angels who guide and protect each congregation, (b) personified heavenly counterparts to the earthly Christian communities, (c) visionary counterparts of the community prophets.

**(a)** The term ἄγγελος is used in various texts (primarily Jewish apocalypses) to refer to heavenly representatives of earthly nations, and by extension this has suggested to many scholars that the ἄγγελοι in question refer to the angelic guardians or representatives of the earthly churches (W. J. Harrington, *Apocalypse*, 80–81; Beasley-Murray, 68–70; Karrer, *Brief*, 185–86). One of the earliest traces of this conception is found in LXX Deut 32:8: ‘he [God] established the boundaries of the nations according to the number of the angels of God [ἀγγέλων θεοῦ].’ The same view may also be reflected in Sir 17:17: ‘He appointed a ruler for every nation, but Israel is the Lord’s own portion.’ Michael is the champion or the prince of the nation of Israel (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; cf. 1 Enoch 20:5). This conception appears to be transferred to the Christian church in Hermas, *Sim.* 8.3.3, where Michael is referred to as ‘the one who has power over this people and governs them.’ Daniel also refers to angelic patrons, or ‘princes,’ of Persia (Dan 10:13, 20) and the prince of Greece (Dan 10:20). This conception of guardian angels, which can guide and protect nations (Bousset-Gressmann, *Religion des Judentums*, 324–25; Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 87–107), may be related to the notion of heavenly guardians or guides for individuals; i.e., individuals can also have angelic patrons (Str-B 1:781–83; 2:707–8; 3:437–40). The earliest references to guardian angels who protect individuals are found in Jubilees and Tobit. Jub. 35:17 refers to ‘the guardian of Jacob’ as being stronger than ‘the guardian of Esau.’ Raphael, one of the seven archangels (Tob 12:14), was sent from heaven to protect Tobias and heal Tobit (Tob 2:16–17; 5:4–5a). Gabriel, the angel who appeared to Daniel, was the guardian angel of Darius the Mede (Dan 11:1). Guardian angels are mentioned just twice in the NT (Matt 18:10; Acts 12:15; two other passages sometimes cited, 1 Cor 11:10; Heb 1:14, are irrelevant). The various means and occasions whereby good angels protect people from destruction are discussed in *Pirqe R. El.* 15 (for another reference to angels who protect individuals see *Acts of Paul* 7). Many early Christian thinkers regarded the angels of the seven churches as the heavenly guardians of the churches (Gregory Naz., *Or.* 42; Origen *Hom.* on Luke 23; Basil *Comm.* on Isa. 1.46; Hippolytus *De ant.* 59; Eusebius *Comm.* on Ps. 47, 50; Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 192 n. 6). In what may

<sup>49</sup>David E. Aune, vol. 52A, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 109–10.

be a Christian development of the Jewish conception of the angels of the nations, *Asc. Isa.* 3:15 refers to the descent of ‘the angel of the church which is in the heavens.’ Wink thinks that the angels of the churches represent the corporate character or Gestalt of each Christian community but is reluctant to speak of the possible metaphysical reality of such figures (*Unmasking the Powers*, 70–78), and so his view merges with those who see the angels of the communities as heavenly counterparts to the earthly congregations.

(b) The term could also refer to heavenly or spiritual counterparts of earthly communities (Ramsay, *Letters*, 69–70; Bousset [1906] 201; Charles, 1:34–35; Lohmeyer, 20; Holtz, *Christologie*, 113–16; Satake, *Gemeindeordnung*, 150–55; Ford, 386–87; Beasley-Murray, 69–70; Sweet, 73). The suggestion that the Persian *fravashis* are a parallel phenomenon (first suggested in Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible* 4:991, and picked up by Swete, 22, has been elaborated by Beasley-Murray [69] into the ‘heavenly counterparts of earthly individuals and communities’) is a phenomenological parallel providing little enlightenment (see G. Gnoli, ‘Fravashis,’ *EncRel* 5:413–14). The *fravashis*, ‘spirits of the just,’ originated as spirits of the dead (Söderblom, *RHR* 39 [1899] 229–60, 373–418) who were a combination of ancestral spirits, guardian spirits, and transcendental doubles of the soul. A different, more proximate background for the conception of heavenly counterparts to earthly communities is *Asc. Isa.* 3:15, which contains an enigmatic reference to ‘the angel of the church which is in heaven,’ by which is meant the angelic representative of the celestial Church, the heavenly counterpart to the earthly Church. The origins of this conception are problematic.

(c) The term has also been construed to mean the visionary, counterpart of such a community prophet (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 145–46; Enroth, *NTS* 36 [1990] 604).

(2) *The ἄγγελοι as human beings.* This category can be further subdivided into three different possibilities: (a) Human messengers or emissaries, (b) Christian prophets, perhaps members of a prophetic guild represented in each of the seven communities, perhaps prophetic messengers sent by John from Patmos to each of the churches (Spitta, 38–39; Kraft, 50–52; Talbert, 17), or (c) the bishops or leaders of each of the seven communities (Grotius, *Annotationes* 8:251; Zahn, 1:209–17; Str-B 3:790–92; Müller, 101; Hughes, *Revelation* 30–31; for a survey of this view, see Satake, *Gemeindeordnung*, 151–55). It is of course also possible to maintain that the ἄγγελοι of the seven churches represent the local leadership of the communities without specifying a specific type of leader (H. W. Günther, *Der Nah- und Enderwartungshorizont in der Apokalypse des heiligen Johannes* [Würzburg: Echter, 1980] 151–52).

(a) ἄγγελος can be a designation for a human messenger or emissary. In the LXX, ἄγγελος is occasionally used of human emissaries of God. According to Mal 2:7, the Jewish priest is regarded as a מלאך יהוה צבאות מלאך *mal·ak YHWH šēbā·ōt* (LXX: ἄγγελος κυρίου παντοκράτορος), ‘a messenger of the Lord Sabaoth.’ Hecataeus of Abdera (late fourth century A.D.), quoted in Diodorus Siculus 40.3.5–6, speaks of the Israelite high priest ‘as a messenger [ἄγγελος] to them of God’s commandments; at their assemblies and other gatherings, they say, he proclaims the commandments of God’ (Walton, *HTR* 48 [1955] 255–57).

(b) Since the term ἄγγελος is used of human messengers of God (see above), then it is arguable that the ἄγγελοι of Rev 2–3 are Christian prophets, perhaps even members of a prophetic guild. The term ἄγγελος means ‘messenger,’ whether human or divine. Josephus observed that the Jews had received the holiest of their

laws ‘through messengers [δὲ ἄγγέλων] from God’ (*Ant.* 15.136); here he could be referring to angels (see Jub. 1:27–29; 2:1; 5:6, 13; Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2; Hermas *Sim.* 8.3.3), though W. D. Davies has argued that prophets are intended (*HTR* 47 [1954] 135–40). Hag 1:13 refers to ‘Haggai the messenger of the Lord [MT: הַגַּי מַלְאֲכַי *mal·ak YHWH*; LXX: ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου].’ The term is also used of a prophetic messenger in LXX Mal 1:1; 3:1. The term ἄγγελος is frequently used to translate the Hebrew מַלְאֲכַי *mal·āk*, ‘messenger’ (see Isa 42:26; Hag 1:12–13 [Ἀγγαῖος ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου, ‘Haggai the messenger of the Lord’]; 2 Chr 36:15–16. In the Midrash *Wayyiqra Rabba* (ed. M. Margolies [*Jerusalem*, 1953] 3), R. Yohanan states that ‘the prophets were called מַלְאֲכַי [*ml·kym*, i.e., ἄγγελοι].’ Josephus regarded himself as a prophet (Aune, *Prophecy*, 139–44, 153) but speaks of himself as a ‘messenger’ (*J. W.* 3.392, ἐγὼ δ’ ἄγγελος ἦκω σοι, ‘I, a messenger, have come to you’). In a disputed passage (*Ant.* 15.136), Josephus says, ‘we have learned the noblest of our doctrines and the holiest of our laws from the messengers sent by God [δὲ ἄγγέλων παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ].’ Epictetus stated that ‘the true Cynic must know that he is a messenger [ἄγγελος] sent from Zeus to people’ (*Discourses* 3.22.23). Several scholars have argued that the ἄγγελος mentioned here are prophets, not angels (Hill, *New Testament Prophecy*, 30). The *Abot R. Nat.* 34 contains a list of synonyms for ‘prophet’ (Golden, *Fathers*, 34): ‘By ten names were prophets called, to wit: ambassador, trusted, servant [עבד *bd*], messenger [שליח *šliḥ*], visionary, watchman, seer, dreamer, prophet, man of God’ (מלאך *ml·k* is noteworthy for its absence). Lülldorff (BZ 36 [1992] 104–8) argues convincingly that the ἄγγελοι of 1 Tim 3:16 (cf. 5:21) is used for human messengers of God, the apostles who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus.

(c) Some commentators assert that each ἄγγελος to which a proclamation is directed is a human being, either a bishop or presiding officer of the church addressed. According to Billerbeck (Str-B 3:790–91; cf. Lülldorff, BZ 36 [1992] 106; Ysebaert, *Amtsterminologie*, 22), since the ἄγγελοι of the seven churches are the recipients of letters, it is presupposed that they are on earth, and that they should be understood as humans rather than angels. Some have found a parallel in the שְׁלִיחַ שְׁבִיר *šliḥ šbūr*, ‘synagogue messenger’ (Lightfoot, *Horae Hebraicae* 2:90–95; Str-B 3:790–92), though such a subordinate position cannot seriously be proposed for the role of the ἄγγελος in each of the seven churches. This view founders on the identification of the seven stars with the angels of the seven churches in 1:20, for it is highly unlikely that such emissaries could represent each community so exclusively (Hemer, *Letters*, 33), so those who hold this view must deny that the ἄγγελοι of 1:20 are the angels of the seven churches (Zahn, *Introduction* 3:413, appeals to the absence of the article with ἄγγελοι; but see Note 1:20.b.). Since the ἄγγελοι of each church receives blame and condemnation as well as praise, proponents of this view argue that it is ludicrous to suppose that these are good angels sent by God (Zahn, 1:211).

Each of the seven proclamations concludes with the stereotypical proclamation formula ‘Let the one with ears hear what the Spirit announces to the churches.’ This formula means that each of the seven proclamations is intended to be read by all the congregations. It also indicates that the Spirit is addressing the churches; i.e., even though each proclamation is addressed to the angel of that congregation, it is clearly addressed to each church, so that the angels must be understood as surrogates for the churches.

(3) *Heavenly bodies.* Some scholars have proposed that the seven stars (= angels) represent the (seven) stars of Ursa Minor or

the precise meaning of ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν is extremely difficult to determine with certainty.

Here are the certainties emerging from the context of 1:20 with chapters two and three. **1)** These ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν are clearly functioning as divinely commissioned messengers to each of the seven churches individually. **2)** They are so closely connected to each church that the ἄγγελος, *angel*, and the ἐκκλησία, *church*, are almost interchangeable. The one point at the end of each letter prevents making them synonyms of each other: Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις, *the one possessing ears, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches*. Although formulaic in structure, the point is made that it is God's Spirit who speaks the content of each letter to the churches, and not the ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν. **3)** The secular background of οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες, the seven stars, points us in the direction of supernatural agents acting in close connection to the churches. But these οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες are also ἄγγελοι so closely connected to the churches that they receive accusation and blame for spiritual failure along with the churches in each of the letters. **4)** We should not lose sight of this material depicting apocalyptic reality rather than regular historical reality.<sup>51</sup>

Thus it seems to me that in some way these ἄγγελοι represent a bridge from the normal world of these seven churches to the apocalyptic reality being described here. As ἄγγελοι they become channels of divine communication to the members of each of the seven churches. In somewhat typical apocalyptic depiction the risen Christ will instruct John to write down in letter format the message that these ἄγγελοι are to then deliver to each church. The end product of this document, called Revelation, becomes that message both individually and collectively to these seven churches. And it stands as the vehicle through which the Holy Spirit then speaks to each church member with willingness to hear what He is saying.

Is there clear, simple logic in this very complex

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the Pleiades (Bousset [1906] 196; Kraft, 46). 1 Enoch 18:1.3–16; 21:1–6 mention seven fallen stars, which represent angels (on the star = angel equation, see Comment on 9:1). 2 Enoch 30:2–3 (cf. 27:3, MS J) mentions seven stars created by God: the sun, moon, and five planets, i.e., the most important and influential of the heavenly bodies, a view held by Wojciechowski (BN 45 [1988] 48–50), who proposes a correlation between each of the seven proclamations and the symbolism or properties attributed by the ancients to the sun, moon, and five planets.

[David E. Aune, vol. 52A, Revelation 1–5, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 110–12.]

<sup>51</sup>A fifth certainty is that any commentator who dogmatically says the angels clearly mean this or that reveals that he doesn't know what he is talking about. And thus he should be disregarded as having any legitimate understanding of this text.

picture? Absolutely not! In large part, because we are dealing with apocalyptic reality while we still function in historical reality. Our comprehension is therefore going to be severely limited.

But what we can grasp is that God set up a definite line of communication between Heaven and each of the churches. It was effective and through its implementation His Word came through with powerful impact on the members of the churches. From this comes hope and reassurance of God's presence and compassion for His people suffering oppression on earth.

**Interpretation two:** καὶ αἱ λυχνίαι αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσὶν, *and the seven lampstands are the seven churches*.

This interpretive link of αἱ λυχνίαι, *the lampstands*, being αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι, *the seven churches*, is simple and clear.<sup>52</sup> These lampstands are for holding light, and the number seven most likely is modeled after the Jewish menorah, which symbolized the full light of God to the Jewish people (cf. Zech. 4). But now for the risen Christ the lampstands which possess the full light of God are the seven churches targeted by this document.



In each of the letters the churches discover a rather stern accountability from God for how they handled that divine light, granted to them, in both their belief and practices. This tone of divine accountability imposed on the people of God is generally signaled by just the genre of apocalyptic vision coming out of the OT prophetic visions. But this implicit tone here becomes detailedly explicit in the seven letters of chapters two and three. And even more explicit in the resumption of the vision beginning in chapter four all the way through chapter twenty-two.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

What can we learn from this third segment of the apocalyptic vision of John? Numerous things!

**First**, never forget that the full presence of God is absolutely overwhelming to us mortals. When John saw the apocalyptic image of the Son of Man he fainted dead away. The presence of the divine was that over-

<sup>52</sup>One grammar issue present here relates to the modification of αἱ ἑπτὰ, seven, in the statement αἱ λυχνίαι αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσὶν. The literal sense of this statement is “*the seven lampstands are seven churches*.” This anarthrous construction for the second ἑπτὰ highlights the ‘lamp holding’ responsibility of the seven churches while obviously alluding back to ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις in verse 11. Some copyists were troubled by the sequence αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ, *the seven seven*, and thus either dropped one of the numbers or shifted sequencing around to avoid these two numbers appearing side by side. While not the highest quality of Greek writing, John clearly follows standard patterns for adjective modification in the listing of both numbers.

powering to him. When we are tempted to treat God's presence superficially or like God is our guest at a party, that signals unquestionably that God is not present. If He were, the atmosphere would instantly change in the direction of John's experience.

**Second**, this encounter with God by John reminds us that God's presence is an objective reality not defined by whether or not we 'feel like He is present.' Clearly the scriptural perspective is that God is present everywhere and at all times. On special occasions He chooses to disclose greater levels of His presence to selected individuals. The determination of that presence has nothing whatsoever to do with our feelings. Our emotions of 'overwhelmedness' flow out of our conscious awareness of Him being present where we are. And consistently when such theophanies as this vision of John take place, the individuals are literally 'knocked off their feet' by the power of that presence. Feelings come into the picture at the point of one's utter sense of unworthiness to stand in such presence of a God.

**Third**, only God can determine when He will disclose Himself in such overpowering manner. There is absolutely nothing that any human being can do to coerce God into revealing Himself in this way. One slips over into heresy to even think that he or she can command God to show Himself in these heightened ways.

The huge danger here in modern church life is the phony attempt to use music and other worship activities in order to whip up the emotions of people so that they 'feel the presence of God.' If one carefully studies the pattern of these theophany kinds of visions of God's presence, not once do the humans present 'celebrate' the presence of God. Awe and silence are the uniform reactions. In tabernacle and subsequently in temple worship God's people celebrated the actions of God in their behalf, but not His presence. Heightened disclosure of God's presence was too frightening and fearful for celebration to be appropriate.<sup>53</sup>

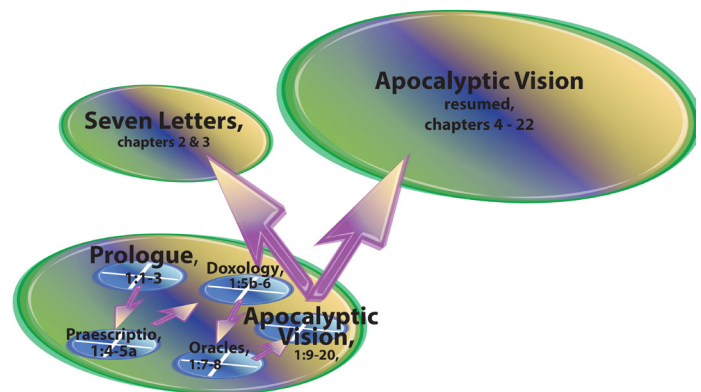
<sup>53</sup>It is interesting to compare the reaction of the Jerusalem church to the divine punishment of death imposed on Ananias and Sapphira for their deception in Acts 5:11, *καὶ ἐγένετο φόβος μέγας ἐφ' ὅλην τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀκούοντας ταῦτα*, **And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things**. In this momentary display of the heightened presence of God in the church, the people were frightened by God's display of overwhelming power.

And this unusual display of divine presence continued for some time which created an interesting dynamic, described by Luke in Acts 5:13-14, *13 τῶν δὲ λοιπῶν οὐδεὶς ἐτόλμα κολλᾶσθαι αὐτοῖς, ἀλλ' ἐμεγάλυνεν αὐτοὺς ὁ λαός. 14 μᾶλλον δὲ προσετίθεντο πιστεύοντες τῷ κυρίῳ, πλήθη ἀνδρῶν τε καὶ γυναικῶν, 13 None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. 14 Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women*. Outsiders were fearful of joining the Christians because of this overpowering presence of

**Fourth**, when God moves in unusual display of His power and presence, it is because He has a job for individuals to do. Divine commands to the individual or individuals in these visionary experiences are normative. Also, on occasion words of encouragement, especially the almost formulaic expression, *μὴ φοβοῦ*, **stop being afraid**, are found as well. God does not disclose Himself at this level to individuals without a specific objective in mind. Central to this objective is 'mission,' rather than encouragement. The latter can be given, but the former is always uppermost.

Finally, with this final study on chapter one, a brief review of the contents of Revelation in the first chapter are in order. The chart below summarizes the function of the contents in chapter one to the remainder of the book.

### Role of Revelation Chapter One to the Remainder of the Document



In a very unusual manner John stitches together several pieces of introductory material for a variety of ancient genres: apocalypse, letters, prophetic oracles, apocalyptic vision. He begins with a formal Prologue that names the document of Revelation as an apocalypse (vv. 1-3). With further defining of his intended meaning of Ἀποκάλυψις in these verses, he then inserts a standard Greek letter Praescriptio in 1:4-5a following the typical Pauline letter Praescriptio. A doxology (vv. 5b-6) and a pair of Prophetic Oracles (vv. 7-8) follow it to form a unit of introductory materials. Then lastly he returns to the apocalypse form with an introductory Apocalyptic Vision (vv. 9-20), which will then launch the contents of the rest of the book. The epistolary element re-surfaces in chapters two and three, but not in the tradition of the Greek letter. Instead, the ancient Hebrew / Aramaic letter form is followed as more reflective of letters within an apocalyptic pattern

At first, this cafeteria mixture of forms and patterns seems odd. But with more careful study, one begins to realize the skilled painter of written portraits that John becomes in alerting us in advance of his intentions for the book. He is an apocalyptic painter *extraordinaire!*

God. Yet at the same time the convicting power of God's presence pulled them into the church in large numbers in spite of their fears.