

Letters to the 7 Churches

– Revelation 1

John, ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved’, was imprisoned by the Roman emperor Domitian (younger son of the emperor Vespasian) on the almost completely barren rocky island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Domitian started a ‘reign of terror’ against Christians (and others) in AD 81, after he had killed his elder brother Titus and seized the throne. Domitian died in AD 96, after which John is reported to have been released and lived to a good age in Ephesus, the key city and probable local capital of ‘Asia’, the Roman province in the west of present-day Turkey.

A little background may be useful to help us understand the situation . . .

In about AD 53, on his way back from his second recorded journey, Paul calls in at Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla and leaves them there, only stopping briefly (although they asked him to stay longer) and spending a short time reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews (**Acts 18:18-21**). Earlier on the same journey, the Holy Spirit had specifically forbidden Paul and Silas to ‘speak the word’ in Asia at that time (**Acts 16:6**).

Paul comes back alone, probably later the same year or early in AD 54, and spends more than two whole years there, initially for 3 months in the synagogue and then in the ‘school of Tyrannus’ – presumably a hired meeting place – with the result that the good news about Jesus spreads from Ephesus to the whole province of Asia! (**Acts 19**) Many or most of these 7 churches owe their existence at least partly to Paul.

Paul’s contact with the churches in Asia continues for many years, and he mentions them in his letter to Corinth (**1 Corinthians 16:19**). But something goes wrong in the relationship (is that what he refers to in **2 Corinthians 1:8** ?) and eventually it breaks down completely, by which time he is imprisoned – about AD 67 or 68 (**2 Timothy 1:15**). He is killed by Nero shortly after that.

It seems that John lived in Ephesus both before and after being exiled to Patmos, and was held in high regard by Christian believers in the province of Asia. So these 7 letters (and the whole book) came to them from someone they already knew and respected.

The ancient Anglo-Saxon theologian Bede (AD 673 - 735) wrote about John on Patmos: “It was fitting that when forbidden to go beyond certain bounds of the earth’s lands, he was permitted to penetrate the secrets of heaven.”

This chapter seems to have three levels of introduction, first to the whole book and then to the seven letters:–

Revelation 1:1-3 The simple description of what this book is, for whom it is written and the benefits and purpose of giving attention to what it says:–

1) This is a revelation, literally a 'removing of the covering', a 'dis-covering' of 'things which must soon take place', given by God the Father to the Lord Jesus Christ, so that he could in turn show it to his bond-servants (the word is *douloi*, literally, 'slaves').

2) He (Jesus) 'sent and signified' this to his 'bond-servant' John by a messenger (*angelos* doesn't just mean 'angel', as we shall see later).

3) John gives his account as an eye-witness of all the things shown to him, including the words spoken by God and the 'testimony' (or evidence given in a law court) of Jesus the Messiah.

4) Reading, hearing and especially keeping (i.e. following) the words of this prophecy bring their own reward – blessing, happiness, the same word that Jesus used in **Matthew 5:3-11**.

Revelation 1:4-7 John's own personal letter to his readers.

1) This is written in similar style to the opening words of many of Paul's letters; "Grace to you and peace . . ." is one of Paul's standard greetings. (This book was written several years after Paul's death.)

2) ". . . from him who is and who was and who is to come (or 'is coming', see **v.7**) and 'the seven spirits who are before his throne' ". 'He who is' is very close to the meaning of the ancient Hebrew name of God, written as YHWH and sometimes as Yahweh or Jehovah. See **Exodus 3:13-15**. Our Bibles consistently print this name as 'the LORD' throughout the Old Testament, following a Jewish tradition that the actual Name of God was too holy to be pronounced.¹

No, I don't claim to fully understand 'the seven spirits who are before the throne of God', but there are some hints in **Revelation 3:1, 4:5, 5:6** and **8:2** :–

In **3:1**, the Lord Jesus is referred to as 'He who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars'. From **1:20** we know that the seven stars are the 'angels' (i.e. messengers) of the seven churches. In **4:5** John sees 'seven lamps burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God.' In **5:6** he sees 'a lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God, sent out into all the earth' – the Lord Jesus again. In **8:2** John sees seven angels (messengers) who stand before God. Could these also be the same seven spirits? They are certainly not the same as the seven stars!

From these hints, we can see that the seven spirits belong to Jesus, they are involved in communication to the whole earth and they seem to be part of the majesty of God on his throne. They are distinct from Jesus himself, because John says this message is from 'him who is' (the Father), from the seven spirits **and** from Jesus Christ (**v.5**). Some people see a connection with **Isaiah 11:2**, where a prophecy about the Lord Jesus says that 'the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him' and then lists six specific qualities of the Holy Spirit which will characterise him.

No need for us to get too caught up with this! John is basically saying that this message comes from the Godhead in its entirety . . .

¹ See 'Who Are You Talking To?' from <https://www.justonecandle.uk/PDFs/WhoAreYouTalkingTo.pdf>

. . . and then goes on to extol Jesus specifically! It is really good to remember again that this is John writing, the disciple who was probably Jesus' closest friend in human terms. He no longer sees him in the same way . . .

John had already known that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, God's Anointed One. From the beginning of his account of Jesus' life on earth (**John 1:17**), right through to the end (**John 20:31**), he repeatedly highlights occasions when people acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as the expected Jewish Messiah. But an interesting point is that he almost certainly wrote what we call 'John's Gospel' **after** he was released from Patmos in AD 96, and so **after** his vision of 'Revelation'. ¹ The unique character of 'John's Gospel' will have been deeply affected by what he saw and heard.

Calling Jesus 'the faithful (i.e. trustworthy) witness' may seem like a bit of an understatement, but it is a starting point! Paul makes a similar reference in **1 Timothy 6:13**: "Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate." John moves on and calls Jesus 'the firstborn of the dead' (which has happened already) and 'the ruler of the kings of the earth', which he will be seen to be when he returns to establish his kingdom on this earth.

And personally, John writes, Jesus loves us (present tense) and released us from our sins by his blood (aorist tense – done once for all) and made us (aorist again) a kingdom and priests to God his Father. To him (Jesus) be the glory and the dominion (i.e. the rule) into all the ages!

'He is coming with the clouds', says John, quoting Daniel who foresaw the start of the kingdom of God on earth. ² John shares the same vision, writing that everyone will see him, including those who pierced him, and that 'all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him'. Ask ourselves: Why?

Revelation 1:8 stands on its own as a declaration from 'the Lord God', saying who he is: The Alpha and Omega (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) and (again) he 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.' See also **Revelation 21:6, 22:13** and **Isaiah 41:4**.

Revelation 1:9-20 John's Vision of the Son of Man

This is still an introduction to the seven letters, but here John describes how he was given the instructions to write and, even more importantly, describes the One who gave him the instructions, plus the beginning of an explanation . . .

He refers to the fact he was on Patmos 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' The emperor Domitian did not like what John was proclaiming! I like the fact that he styles himself as 'your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance in Jesus.' He was certainly regarded by others as a leader; he sees himself simply as a 'sharer together in fellowship'!

He hears a voice behind him, telling him to write what he sees and send it to

¹ Note from Commentary by A.R.Faussett (1871): "About the year AD 100, the bishops of Asia (the angels of the seven churches) came to John at Ephesus, bringing him copies of the three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and desired of him a statement of his apostolical judgment concerning them; whereupon he pronounced them authentic, genuine, and inspired, and at their request added his own Gospel to complete the fourfold aspect of the Gospel of Christ."

² See **Daniel 7:13-14, 22, Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62, Acts 1:9-11, 1 Thessalonians 4:17**

the seven named churches; not an ordinary voice but one that reminds him of the sound of a trumpet. He turns to 'see the voice' and sees 'one like a son of man' – in other words, someone in apparently human form and yet totally beyond normal human attributes. He is in no doubt about who this is; it's Jesus – and yet completely unlike the former carpenter of Nazareth with whom he travelled around Judea some 60 years earlier. What he, Peter and James had glimpsed on the mountain all those years before (**Matthew 17:1-8**), he now sees in even greater glory. He had begun to realise then who Jesus really was (**John 1:14**). Now he can **see** him as he really is!

This magnificent being is clothed from head to foot in a robe with a golden sash across it. His head, hands and feet are visible, but they are transformed: head and hair white like wool or snow; eyes like a flame of fire; face like intense sunlight; feet like red-hot polished bronze; voice now like the sound of a torrent of water. There is a sharp 2-edged sabre coming out of his mouth ¹ and he holds 7 stars in his right hand, and he is walking among 7 golden lampstands.

Not surprisingly, John falls at his feet as if he had died! But the glorified Jesus puts his right hand (the hand that just had 7 stars in it!) on John, tells him not to be afraid – and explains more about who he really is. He does not say 'Don't worry, I'm your old mate, Jesus of Nazareth' but rather takes John deeper into the reality of his eternal nature . . .

'I am the first and the last' – very similar to **v.8** !

'the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore' – only one person that could be, just in case John had any lingering doubts !

'I have the keys of death and of Hades (the place of departed souls)'. He now has the control over all human eternal destiny! (In **Matthew 16:18** he had already made it clear that his church would not be overpowered by 'the gates of Hades'.)

'Therefore', he says, 'write the things you have (already) seen, the things which are (the present situation) and the things which will take place after these things (future events, to be revealed to John in later chapters).' The 'therefore' means that the command to write is based on who Jesus is, his true eternal nature.

And he says, by way of explanation, those seven stars are the 'angels' (= messengers) of the 7 churches in Asia. The lampstands are the churches themselves, and the word is the same that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) for the 7-branched lampstand or 'menorah' in the Tabernacle and the Temple ².

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The scene is set. John as the messenger has been prepared and commissioned. Now, on with the letters themselves . . . !

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¹ **Hebrews 4:12** may give us a clue to the meaning of this!

² **Exodus 25:31-40, 1 Kings 7:48-49** and many other references, including **Zechariah ch.4** !