

How did the early Messianic believers
understand....

Using the
Bible to
Interpret
the Bible

The Revelation Of Jesus Christ To John

Jeffrey J. Harrison

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----Book Excerpt----

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST TO JOHN

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*To God
Who opened my eyes to see,
My professors in Israel
Who sharpened my vision,
And my wife, Karen,
Whose heart stopped with mine
at everything I saw*

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Preface

Everyone wants to know the future. But only one book has been right in its predictions over and over again through the centuries. That book is the Bible. Its prophecies have been fulfilled in amazing detail hundreds and hundreds of times.

But looking back at fulfilled prophecy is quite different than looking forward to the future. While most agree about Bible prophecies that have already been fulfilled, there is very little agreement about prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled. Is there any way to sort out all these different teachings and make sense of what the Bible says about the future?

Yes, by using the method of the early Messianic believers in Jesus: using the Bible to interpret the Bible. That's the simple and yet incredibly powerful message of this book. It's a method of interpreting prophecy that everyone can learn and use, and that avoids the common error of claiming to know too much too soon.

This teaching started as a popular Bible seminar presented to thousands of students and in scores of churches and Bible colleges in the U.S., Canada, Taiwan, and the Philippines. This book is a written version of that seminar, with lots of fascinating details that were left out of the seminar because of the lack of time.

Pastor Harrison's seminar ministry grew out of his studies with some of the top Israeli archeologists and other leading scholars in Jerusalem, together with his experience teaching study-tours in Israel. He claims no privileged knowledge of the future, but keeps to the Biblical text in the original languages, Jewish culture and religion, and well-known facts of history and Church history. The message that emerges is a challenging one, confirming the views of the earliest Church, and encouraging Christians to persevere in these difficult times.

For more information about Pastor Harrison, visit his *To the Ends of the Earth Ministries* web site at www.totheends.com

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Introduction

We have a challenging task ahead of us. Revelation is one of the most complex writings in all of human history, by far the most challenging book in the Bible. How can we understand it? How can we choose from the dozens of different ways this book has been interpreted over the years? Most of the methods popular today were invented long after Revelation was written, in cultures foreign to that of the early Jewish believers in Jesus. They reflect Gentile ways of thinking about what is essentially a Jewish writing.¹ But to understand Revelation correctly, we must consider its original cultural setting.

In the time that Revelation was written, and long after, Jewish religious teachers often approached difficult passages in the Bible by comparing Scripture with Scripture.² In a Jewish culture and society that was steeped in the Bible, this is not surprising. Everything in life was held up to and examined in the light of God's Word.

The first readers of Revelation would have done the same thing. If we follow their lead—using the Bible to interpret the Bible—we'll find that the Book of Revelation is no longer a mysterious book filled with incomprehensible images, but a fully Biblical teaching meant to be understood by those who know their Bibles well.

This method of interpretation results in a different understanding of the future than can be found in many popular prophecy books. But as you will see, it's an understanding that comes straight out of the Bible itself, and closely matches the views of the earliest Christians in ways that others do not. So let's begin...

Do you know where your interpretation of prophecy comes from?

The Book of Revelation has been the subject of wild speculation almost since the day it was written. In the 2nd century AD, when people were still alive who knew the apostles, one group became convinced the New Jerusalem was about to come down on a hill outside their city—in western Turkey!³ It never happened, of course. But over the centuries, many have reported seeing the New Jerusalem high

¹ Revelation is the best known example of a whole genre of literature, apocalyptic literature, that originated among the Jewish people.

² Rabbi Hillel, in the generation just before Jesus, taught seven rules of Biblical interpretation. Three of these call for comparing Scripture with Scripture (Tos. Sanh. 7:11).

³ The Montanists.

up in the clouds.⁴ Others saw huge crosses in the sky,⁵ or the horsemen of the apocalypse, or huge scrolls unfolding across the heavens. Whether these things were from God or not, I don't know. But the events some thought would follow from these things didn't happen.

Also back in the 2nd century, a pastor became convinced by reading Revelation that he had discovered the exact day of Jesus' return. He led his church members out into the desert to meet the Lord. Nothing happened. When their supplies ran out, they had to be rescued by the government.⁶ This kind of thing, too, has happened over and over again. In 1988, many sold all their belongings and went out to the hills to wait for the coming of the Lord. This was because of a book called *88 Reasons Why Christ Will Come Back In 1988*.⁷ Others were convinced it would happen in the year 2000, when all the world's computers were supposed to stop working. In the Philippines, some dug caves in the mountains to hide from the fire from heaven.⁸ But none of these things happened. Why? There was obviously something wrong with the way they were interpreting the book of Revelation.

The excitement of the early centuries died down in the time of the **Imperial Church**, when Christianity became the official church of the Roman Empire, beginning in the 4th century AD. A new approach became popular: instead of taking Revelation literally, everyone began to look for deep "spiritual" meanings in it. The earliest commentary that has come down to us is written from this point of view.⁹ For example, when Rev. 1:13 says that Jesus' robe is tied around the breasts with a golden sash, this commentary says that his two breasts represent the two testaments, the Old and the New, and the golden sash represents the choir of the saints. What is the evidence for this interpretation? The writer doesn't give any, because there is no support for this interpretation anywhere in the Bible. But more and more people simply started to read into Revelation whatever came into their minds. This method continues in many places today. It's known as the **allegorical** or **idealist** method of interpretation.

The millennium of Revelation 20—the one thousand years' reign of Messiah on earth—was eagerly expected by the earliest Church. But in the time of the Imperial Church, it fell out of favor, and is still rejected by many traditional churches

⁴ Tertullian reported a walled city seen in the clouds above Judea every day for 40 days (3rd cent., *Against Marcion* 3.24). The participants in the People's Crusade (the popular part of the First Crusade to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims) saw the same vision as they made their way toward Jerusalem (in the 11th cent.). Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1970), p. 26.

⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem wrote to the emperor about a luminous cross that was seen in the sky above Jerusalem (*Letter to Constantius* 6).

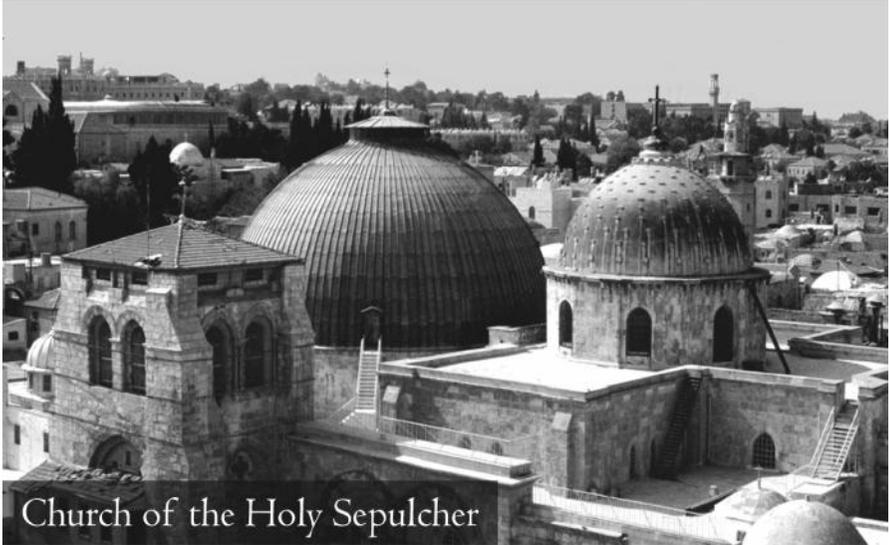
⁶ Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* 4:18. Henry Chadwick, "The Early Christian Community," in John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1990), 48, 49.

⁷ By Harold Whisenant, 1988.

⁸ In Quezon Province.

⁹ Victorinus of Pettau, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, late 3rd cent.

today.¹⁰ Why? Because an earthly reign of Messiah was considered too physical, and therefore “unspiritual” — as well as being “too Jewish.”¹¹ Anti-Semitism was well established in the Church by the 4th century.¹² So Revelation 20 was reinterpreted as representing the present Church age.¹³ This is now, they said, the millennial kingdom. The return of Christ, they taught, would take place after the millennium, a view known as **postmillennialism**.



Unfortunately for that view, many more than a thousand years have passed, and Jesus has not yet come.¹⁴ But one thousand years ago, they didn't know that. So when the year turned to AD 1000, many were expecting the return of Christ. Or to be more precise, they were expecting first the coming of Antichrist for the battle of Gog and Magog (which takes place at the end of the millennium in Rev. 20:8).

When, in 1009, the mad caliph El-Hakim had the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem smashed with pickaxes, many thought the Antichrist would soon follow.¹⁵ It didn't happen. But a new Muslim empire¹⁶ brought even more attacks

¹⁰ These include the Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, and many of the older Protestant churches. They often refer to belief in a future millennium as the heresy of chiliasm.

¹¹ Some rejected the entire book of Revelation because of its teaching about the millennium, attributing it to the Jewish heretic Cerinthus (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28, 7.25).

¹² For more on this topic, see our seminar, *The Jewish Roots of Christianity*.

¹³ Following the teaching of Augustine, 5th cent.

¹⁴ Because of this, modern postmillennialists place the beginning of the millennium much later, or interpret this “present millennium” symbolically, and not as the measure of a length of time. This latter view is similar to **amillennialism**, the belief that there will be “no millennium” in the future, but rather that the millennium is now.

¹⁵ The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built on the traditional location of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

¹⁶ The Seljuq Turks, who conquered Jerusalem in 1073.

against churches and Christian pilgrims. This led to the **Crusades** (1095-1272), a series of armed military campaigns to take back the Holy Land from the Muslims. The Crusaders saw this as an endtimes battle between good and evil. But because they had confused the cross and the sword, thousands died needlessly, including the thousands of Jews, Muslims, and even Eastern Christians that were massacred by the Crusaders.

When it soon became clear that this was not yet the end, the excitement about the endtimes didn't die out. Maybe, they thought, we made a mistake. Instead of being at the end of the millennium, maybe we're at the beginning of it! The monk **Joachim of Fiore** (1132-1202) was convinced that a new age of the Spirit was about to break out in exactly 1260 AD. Nothing happened. But these ideas led to more endtimes excitement in Europe.

The Protestant **Reformers** took advantage of this when they interpreted the harlot riding the beast in Revelation 17 to be Rome and the pope. They weren't the first to do so. Many Catholics had already held this view for many years. This brought back into fashion a more historical understanding of Revelation. This is known as the **historicist** method of interpretation. Their followers tried to find every event in all of history in the pages of Revelation. But since they couldn't agree on the details, many began to question their method.

This led to the **futurists**, in the early 1800's, who rejected the whole idea of historical fulfillment. Instead, they pushed almost all of Revelation into the future. One of these groups, the Adventist movement, claimed that Christ would return in 1844.¹⁷ Nothing happened. But many other groups followed them in setting dates. These included cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who claimed Jesus would come back in 1916.¹⁸ Once again, people were reading whatever they wanted into Revelation.

One of the futurist groups, the **Darbyites**, introduced the teaching of **Dispensationalism**. This is based on the idea that God works in different ages of history in different ways. Today the dispensational view is quite popular in conservative churches. If you've heard about the "rapture," "tribulation saints," the "seven-year tribulation period," and being "left behind," you've probably been taught dispensationalism.

But several of the original teachings of dispensationalism have been challenged by recent events, like the restoration of Israel and the rebirth of Jewish Christianity (or Messianic Judaism as it's known today). The dispensationalists were not expecting Israel to be restored, or any other prophecies to be fulfilled, until after the catching away of the Church in the resurrection. Maybe you've heard this teaching yourself. The rapture, they used to say, is the next prophecy to be fulfilled. But today we see the reborn nation of Israel in the front page of the news almost every week—a fulfilled prophecy before the rapture. The dispensationalists also taught (as some

¹⁷ The largest Adventist group today is the Seventh Day Adventists.

¹⁸ In 1914, the Iglesia ni Kristo cult started in the Philippines, teaching that its founder, Manalo, is one of the angels of Revelation.

still do today) a separate way of salvation for the Jews. But this has been challenged by the many Messianic Jews who are being saved right now by faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.

The prophecy books of modern dispensationalists have been rewritten, of course, to account for modern Israel. But the weaknesses of the underlying system are becoming more and more obvious with each passing year. Many pastors in denominations that teach it have said to me privately that they no longer accept the dispensational point of view. These pastors are not alone. Thousands of others agree with them. Another change is beginning to take place in the endtimes thinking of the Church.¹⁹



But will whatever new interpretation comes along next be any better than all these others? One prophecy book says one thing; another prophecy book says something completely different. One pastor preaches one thing, another pastor preaches the opposite. They can't all be right.

There's got to be a better way. 2 Peter 1:20,21 says: "*No prophecy of Scripture is of one's own [private] interpretation, for prophecy was never brought forth by the will of man, rather men brought forth by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*"²⁰ This verse warns us that it's not okay to read whatever you want into prophecy. There is only one correct interpretation: God's interpretation. But how can we discover this one correct interpretation?

¹⁹ For more information about the many problems with dispensationalism, do a web search on "errors of dispensationalism."

²⁰ Supporting New Testament verses are translated by the author from the Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition (1993) found in Bibleworks 7 (2007).

Relationship of prophecy to its fulfillment

One of the biggest dangers in interpreting prophecy is that we want to know too much too soon. We want to know all the details about who, what, when, where, and why long before it happens. But is it possible to know the details of the fulfillment of prophecy in advance?

Some prophecy is very much like history written in advance. Chapter 11 of the book of Daniel gives all kinds of details—in correct historical order—about the Greek rulers of Israel just before the time of Jesus.²¹ But even here names are missing. Dates are missing. Place names are missing. So it's really not the same as reading a history book about the same period of time.

If you were living back in the days the prophecy was given, it wouldn't be clear at all. Dan. 11:7 says of a queen and her husband, *"From a shoot from her roots [from a line of descent from her family] one will arise in his place."*²² Who is this? Is it her son, or nephew, her grandson, or her brother's grandson? And this assumes you know who the queen is to begin with. In fact, there would be no way to know who the prophet is talking about until after all these things had happened. Dan. 11 is one of the most detailed prophecies in all of Scripture, yet even it couldn't be completely understood until it was fulfilled!

The prophecies about Jesus seem so clear today. But his own disciples didn't realize they were fulfilling prophecy until after it happened. John is careful to tell us: *"These things his disciples did not realize at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about him and they did these things to him"* (John 12:16).

It wasn't that they didn't know the prophetic Scripture. Many people in Jesus' day were fascinated with the prophecies of the Bible. The **Essenes** out in the desert were marking prophetic verses in their Dead Sea Bible scrolls.²³ Others were copying lists of prophecies and memorizing them. Yet when Jesus stood right in front of their eyes, most of them missed it. Why? Because of their private interpretations about what would happen. The Pharisees had one interpretation of who the Messiah would be and what he would do, the Essenes had another, the Zealots had another. But when the fulfillment turned out to be different than their interpretation, they missed it! We've got to look out for the same thing.

To us, the prophecies about Jesus seem so clear. But they weren't clear at the time Jesus came. Many didn't understand that the Messiah would be God, or that he

²¹ The Ptolemies and Seleucids (332-167 BC).

²² *"A shoot from her roots"* refers to the ability of some trees (like the olive tree) to send up shoots from their roots. If the main tree is chopped down, one of these shoots can grow up and replace it. Supporting Old Testament verses are translated by the author from the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph of the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, Fourth Corrected Edition (1990) found in *Bibleworks 7* (2007).

²³ They marked Messianic verses with an X-shaped symbol, the old Hebrew (paleo-Hebrew) *tav*, a symbol associated with the Messiah and later by Christians with the sign of the cross.

had to die, or that his ministry would extend to the Gentiles—even though all of these were clearly stated in prophecy. They were so unexpected, so revolutionary, that people couldn't understand the prophecies correctly until after they were fulfilled. We've got to look out for the same thing. There are many today so convinced they've got it all figured out in advance that they're going to completely miss the fulfillment when it's happening all around them. Why? Because the future is always different than we imagine.

How can we avoid these problems of the past? First, we need to humble ourselves before the Lord and recognize that human pride and human wisdom cannot determine the things that God has established by his own will. *“For my thoughts are not your[#]24 thoughts, and your[#] ways are not my ways,” declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your[#] ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8,9).*

Second, we need to admit that it's impossible to know the details of how a prophecy will be fulfilled until after it happens! That's just how prophecy works. Only God knows exactly what will happen. As he says: *“Who is like me? Let him announce and declare it, and let him tell it to me in order since I made the people of ancient times. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and when they will come. Do not tremble and do not be afraid. Have I not proclaimed it to you^{*25} since that time and declared it?” (Isa. 44:7,8).*

But anyone else that claims to know everything that is going to happen, doesn't. It's as simple as that. Matthew 24:36 says: *“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of the heavens nor the Son, but the Father alone.”* If the Son of God doesn't know the time, neither do you, or I, or the prophecy teacher on television. Acts 1:7 clearly says: *“It is not for you[#] to know intervals of time or dates that the Father has set by his own authority.”* That should settle it for every Christian.

The simple truth is that no one (except God) knows the details in advance. Sorry. That's just the way it is. We will not know the exact historical sequence in advance, no matter what a movie or book or prophecy teacher says. I don't say this to deny the gift of prophecy in the Church, but only to point out that much of what goes by the name of prophecy isn't. Instead, it's spiritual-sounding attempts to guess how prophecy will be fulfilled. And as you can see after a few weeks or months or years, it never happens that way.

True prophecy, to be effective, doesn't need all the details. It is still perfectly able to prepare us for the things to come. True prophecy confronts us with the majesty and the power of God, to humble us in God's sight. True prophecy calls us to repentance, to change in preparation for the Lord's coming. True prophecy comes not to frighten us, but to free us from worry, so we will know that whatever horrible things happen on this earth, God will be with us and bring us through them.

²⁴ The pound sign (#) indicates a second person plural (you plural) in the original language.

²⁵ An asterisk (*) indicates a second person singular (you singular) in the original language.

So what do we do with this desire in our hearts to have absolute certainty about all the details of what God will do in advance? That's part of what this seminar is for: to give you absolute certainty that you cannot know all the details in advance, not you or I or the best selling prophecy writer in the world. The most accurate and detailed explanation we will ever get is located right there in the pages of your Bible. If somebody claims to give you more detail or more specifics than what the Bible itself says about an unfulfilled prophecy, don't go out and sell everything! Pray about it, and wait to see if it's really true or not. (It's usually not.)

But this doesn't mean we can know nothing about the future. The Bible says a great deal about what will happen. It even gives us specific instructions about what to do when certain prophetic events take place. This is why Jesus told us over and over again to *"watch"* and *"be ready"* (Matt. 24:42, 25:13; Mark 13:33, 13:35, 13:37; Luke 21:36; Matt. 24:44, Matt. 25:10, Luke 12:40). We are to give prayerful attention to history as it unfolds, looking for the fulfillment of prophecy, so that when we see it, we'll know—just as Daniel did in Babylon, studying the prophecies of Jeremiah and comparing them with his own time (Dan. 9:2: *"I...considered in the scrolls...the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet"*).

On the morning of the day of Pentecost, Peter didn't know what was coming later that day. Jesus had only told them to wait—he didn't say how long. But when the fire of the Holy Spirit fell, he recognized it immediately and could say: *"This is what was spoken by the prophet..."* (Acts 2:16).

Jesus told the early Messianic believers in Jerusalem, *"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.... flee"* (Luke 21:20,21). This was fulfilled forty years later. Jerusalem was surrounded by Roman troops. When they saw this, the believers obeyed Jesus and fled the city. If they hadn't, they would have been destroyed in the fighting. This practical obedience to prophecy saved their lives!

There are many instructions like this in prophecy that remain to be fulfilled. In Luke 17:31,32, Jesus says that when the resurrection of the righteous comes, don't turn back (*"He who is on the housetop and his things are in the house, let him not go down to get them; and the one who is in the field, in the same way let him not return for the things that are behind. Remember Lot's wife"*). Just keep going straight ahead, or you might not get out! Remember what happened to Lot's wife!

The Book of Revelation includes many warnings like these. We must come out of mystery Babylon so as not to receive her judgments. We must avoid taking the mark of the beast. We must prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord, so we will not be cast out in disgrace. These are specific prophetic instructions that we must obey at the right time. Our job is to understand prophecy as accurately as we can, so when the time comes and we see the fulfillment, we'll be able to say, as Peter did, *"This is what was spoken by the prophet..."* (Acts 2:16).

Literal Interpretation

One issue that often comes up today is whether prophecy should be understood "literally." Literalism is an important issue when we're talking about the historical

sections of the Bible. But when we extend it into the area of prophecy, it creates some odd results. Do we really expect to see huge multi-headed dragons on earth in the last days? If we say we take prophecy literally, this is what it says in Rev. 12 and 13—that huge Godzilla-like creatures will stalk the earth. Of course, even the most extreme literalists rarely go this far. But this question impacts almost every section of prophecy. Will Jesus appear with a literal metal sword sticking out of his mouth, as it says in Rev. 1:16? When Jesus said *“the stones will cry out”* (Luke 19:40) did he mean it literally? When Isaiah says the trees of the field will clap their hands, does he mean it literally (Isa. 55:12)? Of course not. This is poetic imagery, which has a deep and rich history in the Middle East. Rather than arguing about how to fit prophecy into modern Western forms of thought like literalism, what we should ask is: How did the writer and his original readers understand it? How did the early Messianic believers understand prophecy? Or to put it another way, what is prophecy? How does prophecy work?

A good example is Joseph’s dream about the sheaves of grain in the field bowing down to him (Gen. 37:5-7). Is the dream about literal sheaves? No. But his brothers understood it immediately: *“Will you* really reign over us?”* (vs. 8). It was a prophecy of Joseph’s reign in Egypt. In Joseph’s second dream, the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed down to him (vs. 9). Was this literal? No. But his father understood immediately: *“His father rebuked him and said to him...‘Will I and your* mother and your* brothers really come to prostrate ourselves on the ground before you*?’”* (vs. 10). Jesus said of John the Baptist *“He is Elijah who was to come”* (Matt. 11:14). Was John literally Elijah? Not at all. Yet John in his ministry represented the true fulfillment of prophecy. Numbers 24:17 prophesies a star rising out of Jacob. Is it a real star? No. It’s talking about the Messiah. Is Jesus really a physical root belonging to Jesse (the *“root of Jesse”* of Isa. 11:10 and Rom. 15:12)? Is Jesus literally the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16)? If you take a prophecy literally, but God means it some other way, you will miss it when it is fulfilled.

We must learn to understand prophecy the way it was originally intended to be understood: as a series of pictures and warnings to prepare us for the future, and to alert us when that future has arrived.

The Parallel Method of Interpretation

But how do we know if we’ve got it right? How do we know we’re understanding a prophecy God’s way, and not just according to our own imagination and private interpretation?

This is not just a question about prophecy, but about the whole Bible. How do we know we’ve got it right? There are principles to be followed: Read it in context, both the immediate context and the context of the whole of Scripture. Understand the cultural and historical background. If you don’t know anything about Jewish society and culture, you will misunderstand some things. And as any course in Bible interpretation (or hermeneutics) will teach you, the strongest method to interpret the Bible is to compare it with other parts of the Bible: let the Bible interpret the Bible. Let God interpret his Word himself. If there’s a section you’re unclear about, see if you can find another section of the Bible to clear it up. I like to

call this the **Parallel Method** of interpreting the Bible: putting the Bible alongside the Bible to understand what it says.

God made this easy for us by putting lots of duplicate material in Scripture. Genesis 1 parallels Genesis 2 and 3. Deuteronomy parallels Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. 1 Chronicles parallels 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel. 2 Chronicles parallels 1 Kings and 2 Kings. The four gospels are parallels. The book of Acts parallels parts of Paul's letters. And so on.

Why so many parallels? God must have known we'd need it! As the Bible itself teaches, everything should be confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15, Matt. 18:16, 2 Cor. 13:1, etc.) Two pictures of the same object give us more information about it. That's why we have two eyes: to get a sense of depth in what we see. That's why we have two ears: to get a sense of direction, which we can't get from just one. Using the Bible to interpret the Bible gives us stereo vision into God's Word. It's the strongest method of Bible interpretation there is. Why? Because it lets God interpret his Word for us.

The importance of this duplicate material or parallelism can be seen even in the detailed structure of Hebrew prophecy. It's hard to see in translation, but the prophetic sections of the Old Testament are all written as poetry.²⁶ Hebrew poetry is based not on rhyme, but on restatement. So line A, for example, will be followed by line B, which most often says the same thing in other words; and the same with the next two lines, and so on.²⁷ This means that Biblical prophecy is full of parallels, even line by line!

This parallelism reflects the pattern of Hebrew thinking. Greek or Western thinking is analytical (propositional or linear): it likes to break things down into logical components, and then arrange them in a nice, ordered sequence. But Hebrew thinking likes to bring together analogous ideas or statements and look for greater meaning by comparing them to one another. In other words, parallel thinking is at the heart of Hebrew thinking!²⁸

Types of Parallels

Sometimes the parallel or connection between two sections of the Bible is very clear. I call this a **direct parallel**. For example in Matthew, Jesus identifies John the Baptist saying, *"This is the one spoken of by Isaiah the prophet saying, 'The voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare# the way of the Lord'"* (Matt. 3:3). In this kind of parallel, the Bible clearly lays the prophecy (Isaiah 40:3) alongside its fulfillment for us. This is very handy. It provides us with God's authoritative interpretation of the meaning of that original prophecy. That is the interpretation of the prophecy.

²⁶ This is indicated in some translations by indenting the text differently than in the prose sections.

²⁷ This is not the only pattern used in Hebrew poetry, but is by far the most common.

²⁸ This is the type of reasoning you can see, for example, in the Mishnah and the Talmud, the two great repositories of the thinking of the rabbis.

It's something objective we can all agree on, without any possibility of personal interpretation.

But sometimes the connection is not as obvious. Many times, Scripture only alludes to or gives a "hint" to another Scripture. I like to call this a **hint parallel**. It's not always a direct quote. But it's enough to remind someone who knows the Bible of another verse somewhere in the Bible. For example, Jesus delivered the new law of the kingdom "*on the mountain*" (Matt. 5:1, the Sermon on the Mount). Why is this detail included? It's a hint to Moses getting the law on Mt. Sinai. It hints to us that Jesus is the prophet like Moses of Deut. 18:15. The shining of Jesus' face on the Mt. of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2) is a hint to the shining face of Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exo. 34:30)—another hint that Jesus is the prophet like Moses. This is also what the rabbis did in their teaching. They often quoted only a few words of a verse and expected their students to know the rest. The Bible does the same thing.

These hints are everywhere in the New Testament. Unfortunately, many of us today don't catch the hints. But Jewish believers were much quicker to catch the hint. Jesus' disciples knew the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) even before they became his followers. Many had memorized large portions of prophecy. In those days, it was common to memorize whole books of the Bible—and not the short ones, but the long ones like Isaiah and Deuteronomy. How many of us have done that? So when they came to the fullness of faith in Jesus after his resurrection, they naturally understood his life and message by comparing them to these same Old Testament Scriptures.²⁹

The same is true of the book of Revelation. When the early Jewish believers in Jesus read its prophecies, they automatically compared the images found there with the prophecies of the Old Testament. And when they did, they found a treasure trove! Because every one of the images of Revelation, and sometimes even small parts of its images, are "hints" to other prophecies.

The book of Revelation not only assumes we understand this technique of hinting, it also assumes that we are familiar with the Old Testament prophecies it hints to. Unfortunately, most Christians today aren't. We need some help in comparing the prophecies of Revelation with the rest of the Bible. That's what this seminar is intended to do: to help you start connecting the prophecies in a way that came naturally to the early Messianic believers.

How does it work? Here's an example. Revelation describes Jesus with the words: "*His eyes were like a flame of fire, and his feet similar to bronze made red hot in a furnace*" (Rev. 1:14,15). To most of us today, this sounds spiritual and dramatic, but nothing more. But to those who know the Old Testament well, it's a hint to the radiant man of Daniel 10:6: "*His eyes were like torches of fire...and his feet as the appearance of polished bronze*" (Dan. 10:6; Vision of the radiant man). Look how close those two descriptions are. This is no accident. It's an intentional hint. Here too, the Bible lays the prophecy alongside its fulfillment for us. Revelation tells us that Jesus is the radiant man of Daniel. This is God's authoritative interpretation of Daniel's

²⁹ As Jesus himself taught them to do after his resurrection (Luke 24:44-48).

original prophecy. It's something objective we can all agree on, without engaging in personal interpretation.

Some Examples of the Parallel Method

Now that I've introduced the parallel method of interpretation, let's try it out on some more examples. As you can see in the passage in Daniel printed above, a solid underline under the words of a verse shows an exact or nearly exact match with the words in Revelation. A dashed underline (see Zech. 5:2,3 below) shows what is clearly the same idea, although expressed in slightly different words.³⁰

One of the most important images in the Book of Revelation is the scroll with the seven seals. But nowhere in Revelation does it tell us what this scroll is, or what's written on it. Yet it's one of the most important images in the whole book. How can we find out what it means? By comparing scripture with scripture. Let's look at the verse it's mentioned in, Rev. 5:1: *"And I saw in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals."*

In Bible days, you normally wrote only on one side of a scroll—the smooth side. The other, rough side was left blank. A scroll written on both sides was something unusual. That's the "hint" that's supposed to remind us of something. If you look in a concordance, you will find that a scroll written on both sides is mentioned in



Scroll Written on One Side

only two other places in the Bible, in Ezekiel and Zechariah. Ezekiel says (in Eze. 2:9,10): *"And I saw and look!—a hand was sent out to me, and look!—in it a scroll of writing.... And it was written front and back; and written in it were lamentations and moaning and*

wailing." By laying the scriptures beside each other like this, you can easily see that the situation in Ezekiel is very similar to the situation in Revelation.³¹ This is a close parallel. In both, the scroll is held in a supernatural hand. In both, the scroll is written on front and back. But Ezekiel adds something that does not appear in Revelation: a description of what is written in the scroll! And what is written there? *"Lamentations and moaning and wailing."*

³⁰ The double underlines and dotted underlines that occasionally appear in Bible quotes, as well as the underlines in the commentary, are used for emphasis and do not indicate parallels. Underlines in the commentary are preserved from the original seminar lecture notes.

³¹ This should be done by reading the whole section in both places, and not just the individual verses printed here to save space.

If you read through this section of Ezekiel, you will see that this scroll contains the prophecies that Ezekiel was supposed to speak to the people. They were prophecies of judgment and destruction. The close parallel between Ezekiel and Revelation is no coincidence. It's an intentional hint that allows us to identify the scroll written on the front and the back: it's the scroll of God's judgment.

Can we find any evidence to confirm this? (Let everything be established by two or three witnesses.) Yes, in Zechariah 5:2,3: "I see a scroll.... This is the curse that is going out over the face of all the earth; for according to what it says on this side, everyone who steals will be purged away, and according to what it says on that side, everyone who swears will be purged away.... It will enter the house of the thief and the house of the one who swears in my name in order to deceive...and it will destroy it, and its wood, and its stones..." Here, there are not as many underlines, which means it's not as strong a parallel as Ezekiel. But the basic idea is still here: the scroll written on the front and on the back is the scroll of God's judgment.

Interpreting a verse like this by jumping around in Scripture may seem a strange way to interpret the Bible. But that was how the ancient rabbis did it. They didn't read the books of the Bible in isolation from one another, but read the entire Bible as a unit, inspired by the hand of God. The Bible was the key to everything in life, and every letter and every stroke had a divine purpose. Jesus agreed: "*A single iota³² or a single stroke will certainly not pass away from the Law until all comes to pass*" (Matt. 5:18).

So now we have a strong Biblical identification of the scroll in Revelation: It's the scroll of God's judgment which, when it is released, will bring judgment on the world. This helps us understand why the opening of the seals in Revelation is so dramatic, and why bad things start to happen as soon as they are opened (Rev. 6 and following).

The Woman Clothed with the Sun

Here's another example: Who is the woman of Revelation 12? Is she Mary, as some say, or Israel, as others say, or the Church as still others say? What parallel can we find for this image? She appears in Rev. 12:1: "*And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars...*"

Here again, a simple check with a concordance will produce Genesis 37. It's one of the dreams of Joseph we just talked about, in which he saw the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. "[Joseph] dreamed again another dream... The sun and the moon and eleven stars were prostrating themselves before me.... And his father [Israel] rebuked him and said to him,...'Will I and your* mother and your* brothers really come to prostrate ourselves on the ground before you?'" (Gen. 37:9,10). Jacob understood right away that this was a prophecy about their family—the original core group of the nation of Israel—bowing down to Joseph. Yes, there are slight differences between the two: for example, in Revelation there is no bowing. And

³² The smallest letter of the alphabet, corresponding to the Hebrew *yod* ().

there are twelve stars instead of eleven, since in Revelation Joseph himself is included. But that's the nature of a hint parallel. It's not exactly the same. But all the essential elements – the keys – are there. The woman of Revelation, who wears the sun, moon, and stars, is a picture of Israel, often described in prophecy as a woman, and as the wife of God.

Can we find any more evidence to confirm this identification? In Revelation, the twelve stars make a crown. This is a hint to Zechariah 9:16: *“And the LORD their God will save them [Israel] in that day as the flock of his people, for they will be as the precious stones of a crown, sparkling on his land.”* Zechariah describes Israel as the jewels in a crown, just like Revelation does. Putting these “hints” together with others we’ll study later, we can clearly identify the woman: she is the nation of Israel.

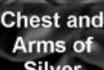
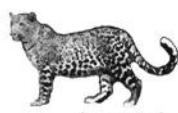
The Structure of Prophecy

There is one last issue we must mention before jumping directly into the book of Revelation: When a prophet gives a series of prophecies, in what order will they be fulfilled? Will they always be fulfilled in the order they are written: A, B, C, D, E, F...? Or might their fulfillment overlap: A, D, B, E, C, F...? The only way to answer this question is to look at sections of prophecy that have already been fulfilled.

The Book of Daniel has five major prophetic cycles (see the diagram below): The Great Statue, the Four Beasts, the Ram and the Goat, the Seventy Weeks, the Radiant Man. Each of these is a prophecy of the same general historical facts: that the Babylonian Empire would be followed by the Persian Empire, then the Greek empire, and then the Roman Empire when the Messiah would appear. In each of these five prophetic cycles, the same basic historical sequence is repeated, but each time using different images. For example, in the vision of the Statue, the four empires are represented as four parts of a statue. In the vision of the Beasts, the four empires are represented as four different animals. In the vision of the Ram and the Goat, only three of the empires are mentioned, but using different animals than in the Vision of the Beasts (Persia appears as a ram, Greece as a goat, and Rome as a small horn that grows to be very great). In each of these prophecies, the images are unique, but the same basic message shines through and is repeated over and over again.³³

³³ The parallel nature of Daniel’s prophecies was recognized in the 3rd cent. AD by Hippolytus, who in his treatise *Christ and Antichrist* employs the parallel method to understand the prophecies of Daniel: “Now if we set Daniel’s own visions also side by side with this [the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel], we will have one exposition to give of the two together, and will show how concordant with each other they are...” (20, ANF 5:432). Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the early Church fathers are from the Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF) and the Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) in the Early Church Fathers series, ed. Alexander Roberts and Philip Schaff, *The Master Christian Library*, version 8, CD-ROM (Rio, WI: Ages Software, 2000).

PROPHETIC CYCLES IN DANIEL

	THE GREAT STATUE 2:31-45	THE FOUR BEASTS 7:3-27	RAM AND GOAT 8:3-25	70 WEEKS 9:24-27	RADIANT MAN 11:2-12:3	
Babylon		 Head of Gold	 Lion			
Persia		 Chest and Arms of Silver	 Bear	 Ram	7 weeks	4 Kings
Greece		 Loins of Bronze	 Leopard	 Goat	62 weeks	King of the South King of the North
Rome		 Legs of Iron	 Beast	 Little Horn	1 week	The Kittim
Ten Kings		 Feet and Toes of Iron and Clay	 Little Horn	 Sanctuary thrown down, sacrifice removed	 Desolation of Jerusalem and the Temple	Time of Tribulation
Messianic Kingdom	 Stone	 Ten Kings	 Son of Man	Destruction of the one making desolate	The Resurrection	

3D art by David C. Harrison

The book of Isaiah is also made up of cycles, although they are much more complex than Daniel's. Most of these begin in his own day, then talk about the near future, then the distant future, then jump back to his own day again. One of these cycles appears in Isa. 52-56. In 52:4-5, he mentions the Assyrian oppression of his own day and the following Babylonian oppression, then he jumps to the ministry of the Suffering Servant (Messiah) in 52:6-53:12, then to the Christian Church (the barren woman) in 54:1-3, then to the restoration of Israel in 54:4-10, and to the restoration of Jerusalem (the New Jerusalem) in 54:11-17. After that he rejoices in the Eternal Covenant for a while in 55:1-56:8 before jumping back to his own time in 56:9 and following. Then he starts another cycle. There are many of these cycles, giving the same basic teaching over and over again.

These different cycles overlap, as in Daniel, and were not given in the order that they would be fulfilled. The rabbis had a saying for this: 'There is no before or after in the Bible.'³⁴ Things will not necessarily be fulfilled in the order they are written.

These same repeating prophetic cycles, with different imagery but the same basic message, can be found in all the Biblical prophets—except for the shortest prophetic books (like Obadiah), in which there is only room for a single cycle.

This is another example of parallel thinking. Rather than give us just one detailed statement of what's coming in the future, each prophet gives us several prophetic cycles. We are intended to get the big picture by comparing them to one another.

What about Revelation? Since all the other major books of prophecy in the Bible are made up of overlapping cycles, this leads us to suspect that the same might be true in Revelation, too. And in fact, as we will see, there is already strong evidence from fulfilled sections of Revelation that it, too, is made up of overlapping cycles.

REVIEW OF THE INTRODUCTION: We started by asking how we can sort out all the different interpretations of the book of Revelation. The answer we found is to let the Bible interpret the Bible. This method came naturally to the early Messianic believers. They would have turned immediately to the Bible to find the meaning of the visions of Revelation.

³⁴ bPes. 6b.

The First Prophecy

The Radiant Man and the Seven Golden Lampstands

(The First Vision Sequence)

Let's turn now to the book of Revelation.¹ The verses in bold print preceded by verse numbers are the book of Revelation. Parallel verses from other parts of the Bible are written in italics. At the end of each of these parallel verses is a short description in parentheses. This is to help you remember the context in which each verse appears. Remember, it's not only the verse itself that's important, but its context that makes it a strong parallel.

Preface (1:1-3)

1:1-2: *This is a revelation of Jesus² Christ,³ which God gave him to make known to his servants the things that must happen soon; and which he [Jesus] imparted, sending it by means of his messenger⁴ to his servant, John,⁵ [2] who has testified to everything he saw of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.*

In this introduction, John lays out the exact transmission of this message to us: from God to Jesus to his angelic messenger⁶ to John, and then to us. Why was it sent? So we will know what is going to happen: not when it will happen, but what

¹ The translation of Revelation used here is a literal rendering by the author from the original Greek using *The Greek New Testament* of the United Bible Societies Third Edition (Corrected), ed. Kurt Aland et al., 1983.

² The English name "Jesus" comes from the Greek *Iesous*, the name used for Jesus in the original New Testament writings. This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*.

³ "Christ" (*Christos* in Greek) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah" (*Mashiach*). Both mean "the anointed one."

⁴ Though often translated "angel," the Greek word used here and in many other places in Revelation means "messenger." Whether or not it's referring to an angelic messenger or some other kind of messenger must be determined from the context. Here it is clearly an angelic messenger.

⁵ The authorship of Revelation by the apostle John was a well-established fact among the earliest Christian writers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria. Only much later was this questioned by those who rejected the book's teaching about the millennium. For more on this topic, see our Jewish Roots of Christianity Seminar.

⁶ The idea of personal (or guardian) angels also appears in Psa. 91:11, Matt. 18:10, and Acts 12:15.

will happen. It's a revelation "of *Jesus Christ*," which in Greek has a double meaning: not only is it a revelation from Jesus, it's also a revelation about Jesus.

1:3: Blessed is the *one* reading and those hearing the words of the prophecy and paying attention to the things written in it, for the time is near.

This verse assumes that Revelation would be read in a meeting in which one person is reading and the others are listening. Not everyone knew how to read in those days, and few had their own copy of the Bible. This verse tells us not only to read the book, but to 'pay attention' to what it says, a word in the original that also means to obey. There are instructions in this book that we must follow at the right time. The book of Revelation is not just foretelling future events, it's an instruction book for spiritual survival in these last days.

Greeting (1:4-8)

1:4,5a: John, to the seven churches in Asia: Grace to you^{#7} and peace from the *one* who is and who was and who is coming, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, [5] and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead and the ruler of the kingdoms of the earth.

"Grace to you and peace" was a common greeting among the early believers. But usually it went something like this: "*Grace to you[#] and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Rom. 1:7; also 1 Cor. 1:3, 1 Pet. 1:2, etc.). But here, the usual wording has been changed. Instead of "*from God our Father*," we hear, "*from the one who is and who was and who is coming*." This mysterious "one" is associated with a throne a few words later when it says "*before his throne*" (Rev. 1:4).

Who is this mysterious "one" that rules from a throne? Here is our first chance to use the parallel method. Rather than just trying to come up with a good guess, we turn to the Bible for the answer. Where is a similar "one" mentioned in the Bible? For the early Messianic believers, like John, the answer was easy. In one of the most famous passages of the Old Testament, at the burning bush, God introduces himself to Moses, saying, "I am the one who is" ("*And God spoke to Moses, saying, 'I am the one who is'*" Exo. 3:14 LXX; The burning bush). In the ancient Greek translation known as the *Septuagint* (indicated by "LXX" after the verse reference), these are exactly the same Greek words that appear here in Revelation.⁸ This is strong evidence that Revelation is hinting to this specific verse in Exodus.

⁷ The pound sign (#) indicates a second person plural (you plural) in the original Greek; an asterisk (*) is used for the singular (you singular).

⁸ The Septuagint was the Bible of Greek-speaking Jews in the centuries before Jesus (beginning in the 3rd cent. BC). This was the Old Testament of the early Greek-speaking Gentile Church. It was frequently used by the apostles when quoting the Bible in the New Testament. Since John's original readers would have opened the Septuagint to check his Scriptural allusions, it's appropriate for us to use it, too, to understand his prophecy. Where "LXX" does not appear after a verse from the Old Testament, the quote is from the Hebrew Bible (the Masoretic Text used in most modern Bible translations, noted in a couple of places for clarity as "MT"). In most places, the Septuagint and the Masoretic Text readings are the same. But many of the differences have now been shown to derive from an earlier Hebrew textual tradition (thanks to the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries). What this means is that there is

But this mysterious one is also described as the one “*who was.*” This is similar to the first verse of the gospel of John (“*In the beginning was...God*” John 1:1; The pre-existence of the Word with God). And what about the one “*who is coming*”? This last part is often confusing to Christians. We think only of Jesus as the coming one. But the Bible teaches in many places, including Revelation, that the Father himself is also coming to judge the earth (“*For he is coming to judge the earth*” Psalm 96:13, 98:9; God the righteous judge).



Lampstand

This one seated on the throne is a key image in Revelation. It appears over and over again, so it's important that we understand it correctly right from the start. Many Christians are confused by it, because historically we (in the West) have been weak in our understanding of the Father God. We often replace him or confuse him with Jesus, the Son. But there was no misunderstanding among the early Jewish believers. God the Father, the one seated on the throne, was the focus of worship. As Jesus taught us to pray, “*Our Father...*” (Matt. 6:9). We pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus. The Father is the one from whom Jesus came and to whom he returned. And the reason Jesus came was to restore us to the Father. We must never lose sight of these foundational truths.

But the greeting comes not only from the one seated on the throne: it also comes from the “*seven spirits that are before*” the throne. What are they? The seven spirits don't act like angels: They never participate in the worship that takes place around them. So what are they?

Revelation gives us a hint in chapter 4, where seven torches appear, shining before the throne of God: “*And seven torches of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God*” (Rev. 4:5). Here the seven spirits appear as torches. Since the heavenly throne room is the reality of which the Temple in Jerusalem was a copy (“*For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a copy of the true one, but rather into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us*” Heb. 9:24; also 8:5), these “*seven torches*” are the heavenly equivalent of the golden lampstand in the Temple.

now more reason than ever to consider what the Septuagint has to say. Its name derives from the legend that it was translated by seventy Jewish scholars (*Septuaginta* means seventy in Latin). This also accounts for the common abbreviation that we use here, “LXX,” which represents seventy in Roman numerals. Passages from the Septuagint are translated by the author from the Greek text *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs, Württembergische Bibelanstalt/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, which appears in Bibleworks 7 (2007).

This seven-branched lampstand is described throughout the Bible as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, as in Zech. 4:2-6: *“A lampstand...and its seven lamps on it... What are these things?... Not by strength and not by power, but rather by my Spirit, says the LORD”* (Zech. 4:2-6; Encouragement for Zerubbabel).

The seven-fold nature of the Spirit was understood in Jesus’ day to be taught in a well known Messianic passage of Isaiah, Isaiah 11:2: *“The Spirit of [1] the Lord will rest on him, a Spirit of [2] wisdom and [3] discernment, a Spirit of [4] counsel and [5] might, a Spirit of [6] understanding and [7] the fear of the LORD”* (Isa. 11:2; The seven-fold Holy Spirit). But in spite of its seven branches, the lampstand is also described as a single light: *“The lampstand of the light”* (in Exo. 35:14, also Num. 4:9). This, like the three-in-one concept of the Trinity, represents the complexity and incomprehensibility of the divine nature, in this case, the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

So putting all of this together, the “seven spirits” are seven torches (in Rev. 4:5), which represent the seven-branched lampstand in the Temple, a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The seven spirits are John’s mysterious way of identifying the Holy Spirit.

There is also a third element in John’s blessing, but this one is much easier to understand: *“Jesus Christ.”* The hints given here are much more familiar to us. He is described as the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kingdoms of the earth. You can probably think of verses these titles hint to yourself. Jesus’ disciples would have thought of the famous Messianic Psalm 89, which calls the Messiah: *“a faithful witness in the cloud”* (Psa. 89:37 LXX; The throne of the Messiah; also John 8:28). Paul spoke of Jesus as the first-born of the dead in Colossians: *“Who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead”* (Col. 1:18; Christ the head of the Church). Revelation combines this with another section of Psalm 89: *“I will make him a first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth”* (Psa. 89:27; Reign of the Messiah). This is a good example of how almost every word in Revelation is a hint to some other part of the Bible.

But notice that John does not say Jesus will rule over the kingdoms of the earth. He says he is now the ruler over the earth. This was the teaching of all the apostles: that Jesus began to reign as Messiah when he ascended into heaven and began to sit *“at the right hand of God”* (Col. 3:1, Eph. 1:20). This reign, they said, will continue until all his enemies have been put *“under his feet”* (Psa. 110:1, 1 Cor. 15:25), including the final enemy: death (1 Cor. 15:23-26).⁹

⁹ This process of bringing everything into submission to the Messiah is an important theme of Revelation. It does not take place all at once, but one step at a time. The first to submit are the believers, the Church. As John says in the next verse, vs. 6, Jesus has *“made us into a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.”* This is past tense: we who are believers have already submitted to the Messiah. Later, even non-believers will be brought into submission to his reign.

1:5b,6: To the *one who loves us and freed us from our sins with his blood*—[6] and made us *into a kingdom, priests to his God and Father—to him be the glory and the power for all the ages to come. Amen.*

This word of praise is also filled with familiar hints: Ephesians 5 says, “*The Messiah also loved us and gave himself up for us*” (Eph. 5:2; also John 15:12).¹⁰ Ephesians 1 says: “*In whom we have redemption through his blood, that is, the forgiveness of sins*” (Eph. 1:7; also Matt. 26:28). 1 Peter says, “*You[#] are...a royal priesthood, a holy nation*” (1 Pet. 2:9; The body of Messiah).

1:7: *Look!—he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the land will beat their breasts [in mourning] over him. Yes. Amen.*

Here John hints to the teaching, already familiar from the gospels, that Jesus is the one coming on the clouds, the Son of Man of Dan. 7: “*Look!—with the clouds of the heavens, one like a son of man was coming*” (Dan. 7:13; also Matt. 24:30, Exo. 34:5). But he combines this with Zechariah 12: “*They will look to me, whom they pierced, and they will beat their breasts [in mourning] over him [MT]...and the land will beat their breasts [in mourning], tribe by tribe [LXX]*” (Zech. 12:10,12; The second coming of Messiah).

The combination of these two verses can also be seen in Jesus’ end-time teaching in Matthew: “*The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the land will beat their breasts [in mourning], and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Matt. 24:30; Endtime teaching of Jesus). But who are these mourning when he appears? Many think this is talking about all the people on earth mourning when Jesus appears. But this is in direct contradiction to the teaching of Revelation that says, as we will see later, that the Gentile nations will harden their hearts and will not repent when Jesus appears—they will even make war against him (Rev. 19:19).

So who are these tribes that are repenting? Since we know that both John and Jesus are hinting to Zechariah 12, we can turn to that prophecy to get more information. “*I will pour out on the house of David and on the one living in Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.... The family of the house of Nathan...the family of the house of Levi...the family of the Shimeites*” (Zech. 12:10,12,13; The second coming of Messiah). The tribes that repent at Jesus’ return are not all the tribes on earth, but the tribes of the land of Israel. This is the correct translation in both Matthew and Revelation: “all the tribes of the land”—the land of Israel (not “of the earth”).¹¹

This hope for the national repentance of Israel is shared by Paul in Romans 11 when he agrees that “all Israel” will be saved (Rom. 11:26). It is also shared by the modern Messianic Jews in Israel today. This passage of Revelation and its parallel

¹⁰ Quotes from the book of Ephesians are from the author’s “To The Ephesians: A literal translation from the Greek with notes” (2001) available online at www.totheends.com/ephesiansi.html or for download as a booklet at www.totheends.com/ephesians.pdf

¹¹ The Greek word used here can mean either land or earth. The correct meaning can only be determined from the context which here, by reference to Zechariah, points to the land of Israel.

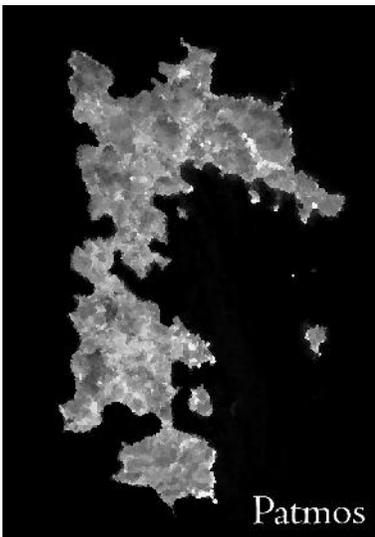
in Zechariah reveal God's deep desire to capture the heart of Israel to himself, in which the Bible says he will finally succeed. John, who is himself Jewish, expresses his deep yearning for this national repentance of Israel by concluding: "Yes. Amen."

1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "the one who is and who was and who is coming, the ruler over all."

Here John shifts the focus back to the one by whose authority all these things take place: God the Father himself, described with the same words used before in Revelation 1:4: "The one who is and who was and who is coming." He is the source, the beginning of all things, the *Alpha*;¹² as well as the goal, the end, of all things, the *Omega*.¹³ This is similar to Isaiah 48: "I am he, I am the first, I am also the last" (Isa. 48:12; Appeal to Israel to obey; also Isa. 41:4). The end of the verse may be a hint to Amos 4: "The Lord God, the ruler over all, is his name" (Amos 4:13 LXX; Warning of judgment). He alone, the one seated on the throne, rules over all. And he is coming to finish and to judge his work on the earth.

The Voice like a Trumpet (1:9-11)

1:9: I, John, your[#] brother and sharer in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.



Here John explains the circumstances of his imprisonment in which he received this revelation. But he also gives us insight into his understanding of this present age we live in. He shares with us, he says, in the kingdom—the kingdom of Messiah, mentioned before in vs. 6—in which we are already living as believers in Jesus (Revelation 1:6: "and made us into a kingdom"). But this is also a time of tribulation, in which we need perseverance, since the present kingdom of Messiah has not been accepted by most of the world.

This present tribulation of the saints is a common teaching of the disciples: in Acts 14, Paul says, "It is necessary that we enter into the kingdom of God through many tribulations" (Acts 14:22; Paul's message to new believers). In Matthew, Jesus says, "This one will be saved:

the one who has persevered to the end" (Matt. 24:13; Endtime teaching of Jesus). In

¹² *Alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet. It looks just like our letter A (see illustration).

¹³ *Omega* is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. It looks like an O with two feet (see illustration).

John, Jesus says, “*In the world you[#] have tribulation; but be courageous, I have conquered the world*” (John 16:33). In Thessalonians, Paul says, “*That no one might be disturbed by these tribulations, for you[#] yourselves know that we are destined for this*” (1 Thess. 3:3).

Many disagreements have been caused by different teachings about tribulation. But a simple word study (on *thlipsis*, the Greek word for tribulation) shows that there are two different kinds of tribulation. One is the tribulation of the church which, as John says, we are experiencing now (for which *thlipsis* is used thirty-three times in the New Testament); the other is the tribulation of unbelievers when Jesus comes again (for which *thlipsis* is used two times in the New Testament). If we can simply remember that there are two different kinds of tribulation mentioned in the Bible, it will solve many problems.¹⁴

1:10: I was in *the Spirit* on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet

Being “in the Spirit” is mentioned frequently in the Bible, usually associated with the manifestation of spiritual gifts. The experience of receiving revelations is one of these gifts, mentioned in 1 Cor. 14:6,26,30; 2 Cor. 12:1; and Eph. 3:3. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that if someone in a meeting has a revelation, the others who are speaking should stop and listen to it: (“*But if to another that is seated something may be revealed, let the first be silent*”; 1 Cor. 14:30). Apparently this was something quite rare and unusual, as John’s revelation certainly was.

A “voice like a trumpet” was a familiar image to the Jewish people from the book of Exodus. On the day that God descended on Mt. Sinai, they heard the loud “voice” of what sounded like a ram’s horn trumpet: “*The very loud voice of a ram’s horn trumpet*” (Exo. 19:16; Mt. Sinai; also 19:19).¹⁵ This trumpet announced to the people that they were about to meet their God. The connection of the voice of an angel and the sound of a trumpet also appears in Paul’s description of the Second Coming: “*For the Lord himself with a shout, with the voice of a chief messenger [an archangel], and with the sound of a trumpet of God will descend from heaven...*” (1 Thess. 4:16). This is the first time John hears the voice of the angel sent by Jesus with the message from the Father.

1:11: saying, “That which you^{*16} see, write in a scroll and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

¹⁴ Five additional occurrences of *thlipsis* in connection with the “great tribulation” will be considered later. The frequent use of *thlipsis* to refer to our present tribulation is hidden in some translations by the use of other English words (such as “affliction”). This has led some to suppose that tribulation will only come at some time in the future. But this is quite different than the New Testament teaching about tribulation, as we will see.

¹⁵ In English, we would say the “noise” or “sound” of a trumpet, and so many translators translate it this way. But the basic meaning of the Hebrew word here (*gol*) is “voice.”

¹⁶ An asterisk (*) indicates a second person singular (you singular) in the original Greek; a pound sign (#) indicates a plural (you plural).

The angel commands him to write the vision he is about to see to seven churches in what is today western Turkey (mentioned earlier in Rev. 1:4: *“To the seven churches in Asia”*).¹⁷ This is similar to the command given to Jeremiah, *“Write all the words that I spoke to you* in a scroll”* (Jer. 30:2; The restoration of Israel and Judah), or to Habakkuk: *“Write the vision”* (Hab. 2:2; God is coming to judge the wicked).



But why these specific churches? John spent the last years of his life living at Ephesus.¹⁸ From Ephesus, these churches were all within an easy travelling distance. They may have been a preaching circuit that John travelled regularly.¹⁹ Certainly they were churches with which he had regular personal contact before he was imprisoned on Patmos.

The Radiant Man (1:12-1:20)

1:12: And I turned around to see the voice that was speaking with me; and when I turned, I saw seven lampstands of gold,

When John turns around to see who is speaking to him, he says *“I saw.”* This is the beginning of the first vision brought to him by the angel. The imagery in this vision comes from the Jewish Temple. Seven lampstands recalls the days of Solomon, when there were ten of them in the holy place of the Temple (*“He made the ten lampstands of gold...and he set in the sanctuary five on the right and five on the left”* 2 Chron. 4:7; Solomon’s Temple). Each of these lampstands had seven branches. At the top of each branch was a small oil lamp.

1:13: and in the middle of the lampstands *one* resembling a son of man dressed in a tunic extending to his feet and with a golden sash tied around his chest.

¹⁷ “Asia” was the name of a Roman province in today’s western Turkey. The name later drifted eastward to be used for what we know today as the continent of Asia.

¹⁸ The tradition of John living in Ephesus is recorded by Irenaeus in the second century (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1, 2.22.5). A large church, now in ruins, was built over the supposed place of John’s burial just outside of Ephesus (the Basilica of St. John, 6th cent.; an expansion of an earlier 4th cent. chapel).

¹⁹ The letters to the churches in Rev. 2 & 3 are ordered according to their location in just such a circuit beginning with Ephesus, going north to Pergamum, then circling around to the east, with the last stop at Laodicea, not far from the starting point at Ephesus (see map above).

The focus of the vision is the mysterious “son of man” who appears among the lampstands. The “Son of Man” was a title well known to Jesus’ disciples. He had used it frequently in his teachings. It is a hint, not to the Messiah’s humanity, as some teach, but to his divinity. As Daniel prophesied: “Look! – with the clouds of the heavens, one like a son of man” (Dan. 7:13; Vision of the Son of Man). Ordinary men do not appear in the clouds of heaven! The title “Son of Man” was one of the ways Jesus hinted that he was more than human, as in Matt. 16: “For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels” (Matt. 16:27; The second coming of Jesus; also 24:30).

This son of man appears wearing the clothes of a priest on active duty in the Temple.²⁰ Ordinary tunics were tied around the waist. But for a priest who was actually ministering in the Temple, his tunic was tied around the chest.

As mentioned in the introduction, this is a hint to visions in the Old Testament. In Daniel 10, the prophet saw “A lone man dressed in linen and with gold of Uphaz tied around his waist” (Dan. 10:5; Vision of the radiant man). Ezekiel saw a similar man: “And one man...dressed in a tunic extending to his feet, and a sapphire sash around his waist” (Eze. 9:2 LXX; Vision of the destruction of Jerusalem). Except for the place the tunic is tied (“his chest”), every other word in Rev. 1:13 matches one or the other of these two verses. This should come as no surprise: the visions in Daniel and Ezekiel are both famous appearances of a Messiah-like figure that we will encounter again; a Messiah that has now begun his priestly ministry.

1:14-15: But his head and hair were white like white wool, like snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire, [15] and his feet similar to bronze made red hot in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters.

This priestly son of man is described with an unusually white head and hair, like wool or snow. The only other place in the Bible that wool and snow are used to describe someone is Dan. 7, just before the vision of the son of man: “His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head as clean wool” (Dan. 7:9; Vision of the Ancient of Days). The close

similarity between these two verses is strong evidence that Revelation is purposely hinting to Daniel 7. But the verse in Daniel is a description of the Ancient of Days, God the Father, seated on his throne. Why would an image associated with the Father be applied in Revelation to the Son of Man? This **transfer of imagery** is the



²⁰ The Mishnah, a rabbinical writing from the 2nd cent. AD, says that the priests wore a tunic, undergarment, turban, and sash (Yoma 7:5).

way Revelation illustrates what today we call the doctrine of the Trinity: Describing the Son with the characteristics of the Father is a way to show their shared divinity. But rather than using Greek-style philosophical definitions, Revelation uses Biblical imagery.

The meaning of the white color is shown in Isaiah chapter 1: *“If your# sins are as scarlet, they will be white like snow...like wool”* (Isa. 1:18; God calls Israel to repentance). The white hair and head are a picture of the sinless purity of the Father and the Son.

Revelation also describes this priestly figure as having eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet glowing like red-hot bronze. This is another hint to Daniel’s vision of the radiant man: *“His eyes were like torches of fire...and his feet as the appearance of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a crowd”* (Dan. 10:6; Vision of the radiant man). Taken together with the hint in vs. 13, this makes Daniel 10 a strong parallel to John’s radiant man. Both share many unmistakable “keys”: eyes like fire, feet like bronze, a loud voice, a belt of gold. Another strong parallel is Ezekiel’s vision of a radiant man: *“From his waist and below an appearance of fire...like the appearance of shining metal”* (Eze. 8:2; Vision of the destruction of Jerusalem; also Eze. 1:27). But this is more than shared imagery. By identifying the radiant man of Revelation with the radiant man of Daniel and Ezekiel, Revelation is interpreting these Old Testament prophecies for us. No longer do we need to guess who the radiant man of the Old Testament is: here we have objective Biblical proof that he is the Messiah. So not only can we use the Bible to interpret Revelation: we can also use Revelation to interpret the Bible! This is a big help in understanding the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Plus, it’s not private interpretation: it’s the authoritative interpretation of Scripture itself.

But we can go even further: Why is the Son of Man described here in such fiery imagery? Just as in Daniel and Ezekiel, he has come to announce calamity, war, and destruction. As Isaiah said in talking about the destruction of Assyria: *“The light of Israel will be a fire and its holy one a flame, and it will burn and consume its thorn bushes and its thorns”* (Isa. 10:17; The judgment of Assyria).

The description of Jesus’ voice as being like the sound of many waters is a hint to Ezekiel 43, where the radiant man appears again: *“And his voice was like the sound of many waters”* (Eze. 43:2; The glory of God in the Temple). In fact, this is more than a hint: it’s a direct parallel, quoted word for word in Revelation.

1:16: And he had in his right hand seven stars and coming out of his mouth a sharp, two-edged sword. And his face was like the sun shines when it is very bright.

The divine nature of this priestly Son of Man is also shown by the seven stars he holds in his hand. Who else but God can hold stars in his hands? As God says through Isaiah, *“My right hand spread out the heavens”* (Isa. 48:13; The majesty of God). Or as David says in Psalm 8: *“For I see your* heavens, the works of your* fingers”* (Psa. 8:3; The majesty of the starry heavens).

The sharp, two-edged sword coming out of his mouth hints to one of Isaiah's prophecies of the Servant of the Lord: *"The LORD called me from the womb, from the inward parts of my mother he named me. And he makes my mouth like a sharp sword"* (Isa. 49:1-2; The Messianic Servant of the Lord).²¹ This Messianic prophecy goes on to describe the ministry of Messiah: *"It is of little account for you* to be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and bring back the preserved ones of Israel [Jewish believers in Jesus]; I will also make you* a light of the nations [the Gentiles] to be my salvation [yeshuah] to the end of the earth.... Kings will see and princes will arise, and they will prostrate themselves [in worship] because of the LORD, the holy one of Israel who is faithful and has chosen you*"* (Isa. 49:6,7). Here not only the ministry, but even the Hebrew name of Jesus (*Yeshua*) is hinted at in a prophecy given hundreds of years before his birth. Here, too, is one of the dozens of places where the Gentile church is prophesied (*"a light of the nations"* can also be translated *"a light of the Gentiles"*).²²

Revelation's hint to Isaiah 49 gives us an authoritative, Biblical interpretation of Isaiah's Servant of the Lord: he is the divine Son of Man. It also gives us the meaning of the image: the sword represents the word of God. The two edges are a hint to Hebrews 4:12: *"For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword"* (Heb. 4:12; You cannot hide from the Word of God).

This is similar to Luke 2, Simeon's prophecy to Mary about Jesus: *"This one is destined for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel...and a sword will pierce your* own soul, that the reasonings of many hearts may be revealed"* (Luke 2:34,35). As Jesus said in John 12: *"The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has one who judges him; the word that I spoke that will judge him at the last day"* (John 12:48).

If the clues given so far are not enough, John includes one more hint that cannot be mistaken: the face of the Son of Man shines like the sun. The only other place in the Bible where it mentions a face shining like the sun is at the transfiguration of Jesus: *"And his face shone like the sun"* (Matt. 17:2; The Transfiguration; also Exo. 34:29). If you didn't know it before, you do now: This priestly Son of Man, the radiant messenger of Daniel and Ezekiel, the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah, is Jesus!

1:17: And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead; and he placed his right hand on me, saying: "Don't be afraid. I am the first and the last,

Just as he did at the Transfiguration, John falls to the ground, where he experiences the comforting touch and encouraging word of Jesus: *"And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terribly frightened. And Jesus came to them, and when he touched them he said, 'Get up, and don't be afraid'"* (Matt. 17:6,7; The Transfiguration). But not only is this a strong parallel to the Transfiguration, it's also a strong parallel to Daniel's radiant man: *"When I heard...his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, and my face was to the ground. And – look! – a hand touched me..."*

²¹ The Septuagint (LXX) of Isa. 49:2 uses the same Greek word for sword that appears in Rev. 1:16: *romphaia*, a long spear-like sword.

²² The Hebrew word *goyim* can mean either "nations" in general or "the non-Jewish nations" in particular, in other words, the Gentiles.

Then *he said to me, "Don't be afraid"* (Dan. 10:9,10,12). There are many shared keys: falling down as if dead, the touch of his hand, and the words "*Don't be afraid.*"²³

Jesus identifies himself to the prophet at his feet as the "*first and the last.*" This is very similar to the description of the Father as the Alpha and the Omega in vs. 8 (Rev. 1:8: "*I am the Alpha and the Omega*"). The exact words of Jesus can be found in Isaiah 44:6: "*So said [1] the LORD [YHWH] the king of Israel, and [2] his kinsman-redeemer the LORD [YHWH] of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last,' and there is no God except me*" (Isa. 44:6). The strange thing about this verse in Isaiah is that it mentions two Lords, both with the name *Yahweh* (YHWH) in Hebrew, the personal name of God in the Old Testament.²⁴ The first is called the King of Israel, the second is called the Lord of hosts, and he is the kinsman-redeemer of the first one. This is a beautiful description of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The Lord, the king of Israel, is Jesus; and the Lord of hosts, who acts as his redeemer by rescuing him from death, is the Father. Yet both are one God ("*there is no God except me*")! When Jesus quotes this verse in John's vision, he is identifying himself as God by referring to this verse in Isaiah!²⁵

1:18: and [I am] the living one, and I was dead and—look!—I am alive for all the ages to come; and I have the keys of death and of Hades [the grave].

Jesus goes on to describe himself to John as the "*living one,*" a reference to his resurrection from the dead. As the angel said at the tomb, "*Why are you[#] looking for the living one among the dead?*" (Luke 24:5). By his death and resurrection, Jesus has gained authority over death. As it says in Hebrews 2: "*That through death he might destroy the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil*" (Heb. 2:14). That power has now been taken away from the devil. Jesus holds the keys of death and of Hades.

Hades (sometimes translated "the grave") appears several times in Revelation. This is the Greek name for the underworld of the dead. In Hebrew, it is called *Sheol*. Here the spirits of the dead live a shadowy existence, waiting for the resurrection. It is important not to confuse this with *Gehenna* (the Lake of Fire), which is the place of eternal physical punishment after the final judgment. Hades

²³ Since Daniel's vision is such a strong parallel, it's worthwhile to consider not just the imagery of that vision, but its purpose: Daniel's radiant man came to deliver a long prophecy of future events, extending from Daniel's own time up until the time of the end (Dan. 10-12). Now, the same figure appears again, to confirm and extend that earlier vision.

²⁴ LORD in capital letters indicates the Hebrew YHWH, sometimes pronounced *Yahweh*.

²⁵ One of the best known examples of the appearance of these two Lords is in Gen. 19:24, in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It says: "*And the LORD [YHWH] rained on Sodom and on Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD [YHWH] from the heavens.*" The first Lord is one of the three "men" that had been speaking with Abraham, whom Abraham tries to convince to spare Sodom from destruction. The second is the Lord in heaven who sends sulfur and fire to destroy the city. Two Lords with the same name, who are one God. The many passages like this in the Bible are the foundation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—as is this verse in Revelation, which transfers the attributes of the Father to the Son. Both are the first and the last, because they are one God.

is just a temporary spiritual holding area that will eventually be destroyed, as we will see later (in Rev. 20:14).²⁶

The “*keys of death and of Hades*” are similar to the “*keys of the kingdom*” that Jesus gave to the church in Matt. 16: “*I will give you* the keys of the kingdom of the heavens*” (Matt. 16:19; also 18:18). But the keys of death and Hades he kept for himself. Through his control of the keys of death and Hades, Jesus can ensure that his promise is fulfilled, that “*the gates of Hades will not defeat [my Church]*” (Matt. 16:18). At the right time, he will use that key to break his people out of Hades forever.

1:19: Write therefore the things you* have seen, both the things that are and the things that are about to happen after these things.

This instruction to John makes it clear that Revelation is a series of visions (“*the things you have seen*”), beginning with the present one (“*the things that are*”) and followed by other visions that come later (“*the things that are about to happen after these things*”). In fact, this phrase, “*the things that are about to happen after these things,*” provides the clue to separating Revelation into its separate vision sequences. At the beginning of each of these, John says, “*After these things I saw...*” (Rev. 4:1, 7:1, 18:1, 19:1) or a similar phrase, as in Revelation 1:11 (“*That which you* see, write in a scroll*”), Rev. 10:11 (“*prophesy again*”), or Rev. 12:1, 15:1 (“*And a great sign appeared...*”).

1:20: The mystery of the seven stars that you* saw on my right hand and the seven lampstands of gold is this: The seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are seven churches.

Here Jesus explains the “*mystery*” or true meaning behind two of the elements in the vision. This is very important, because it’s a clue to the interpretation of Revelation itself. This verse tells us that a literal interpretation is not always the right approach to understanding

Revelation. There are deeper, Biblical meanings we must be looking for. The literal or surface meaning may not be the right meaning at all!²⁷



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²⁶ Unfortunately, Hades (or Sheol) and Gehenna are often translated into English with the same word (“hell”), even though these two very different places are never confused in the original languages.

²⁷ This doesn’t mean we can make up any interpretation we like. These deeper meanings must be taught by the Bible’s own hints to other passages in the Bible.

Jesus' explanation that "*the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches*" does not in itself tell us who these messengers are. The Biblical word "messenger" (*angelos* in Greek) can refer either to a human messenger, a spirit-being messenger (what today we call an angel), or God himself acting as a messenger. Which of these applies here can only be decided from the context.

Many believe Jesus meant that the seven stars are angelic messengers, which is how "*messengers*" is often translated here ("*angels*"). There is good Biblical support for connecting stars and angels. Job speaks of stars and angelic messengers together at the Creation: "*With the morning stars singing in unity, and when all the sons of God [the angels] shouted for joy*" (Job 38:7). In John's day, it was the common belief that each of the stars actually was an angel, or was controlled by an angel. Not only the Jews believed this, everyone else did, too, including the pagan Romans. But if everyone at that time already identified stars and angels, why does Jesus call this a mystery? And what would the 'angel of a church' refer to? There's no mention of angels assigned to churches elsewhere in the Bible.

Later, in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus exhorts and rebukes these same seven messengers for accomplishments and weaknesses that sound distinctly human. "*You* have abandoned your* first love...repent*" (Rev. 2:4,5; To the messenger of the church at Ephesus). "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you* the crown of life*" (Rev. 2:10; To the messenger of the church at Smyrna).²⁸ Angels cannot repent, nor can they die. So these are clearly not angels that Jesus is talking to. So who are they?

Messages are usually delivered to churches not by angels, but by people: the pastors or preachers of the individual churches. Referring to preachers as stars would certainly be a mystery. And there are strong Biblical parallels. Daniel associates stars with people, God's earthly messengers ("*And those who turn the many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and ever*" Dan. 12:3; Prophecy of the endtime). So does Paul in Phil. 2:15: "*among whom you* shine as stars in the world.*"²⁹

If these messengers are human, that explains why they appear in Jesus' right hand: "*If I walk in the midst of distress...you* save me with your* right hand*" (Psa. 138:7); "*If I lift up wings at dawn, if I dwell in the farthest part of the sea, even there your* hand will lead me, and your* right hand will take hold of me*" (Psa. 139:9,10); "*You* cause me to know...an abundance of gladness with your presence, delight in your right hand forever*" (Psa. 16:11; also Psa. 17:7, 48:10, 63:8). These verses refer not to God's care for angels, but for human beings.

²⁸ English readers often assume that the letters to the churches in Rev. 2 and 3 are addressed to the different congregations as a whole (interpreting "you" as a "you" plural). But in the original language, Jesus is most often talking only to the messenger of the church ("you" singular, indicated by an asterisk [*]).

²⁹ Compare the beautiful midrashic teaching: "Just as heaven is lined with rows of stars, so the Garden of Eden is lined with rows of the righteous who shine like the stars" (Aggadat Shir Ha-Shirim 13:55 quoted in "Garden of Eden," *Encyclopedia Judaica, CD ROM Edition, ver. 1.0, Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1997*). *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden) is the rabbinical term for paradise, the dwelling of the righteous after death.

But the strongest argument of all comes from the word “mystery.” This word is not used in the Bible to refer to angels, but often refers in the New Testament to the Church: the mystery hidden in previous ages, but now revealed in the Spirit (“...By revelation the mystery was made known to me...which was not made known in other generations to the sons of men as it has now been revealed in the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets, which is that the Gentiles [together with Jewish believers in Jesus] are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow sharers in the promise that is in Christ Jesus,” Eph. 3:3,5-6; The mystery of the gospel; also Col. 1:26,27). Angels are not included in this mystery (“...things which now have been proclaimed to you[#] through those who preached the gospel to you[#]...things into which angels long to look,” 1 Pet. 1:12). The stars in Jesus’ right hand are a picture of human messengers, the pastors or leaders of the churches, whom Jesus cares for and provides for.³⁰

The seven lampstands Jesus interprets directly as the seven churches, also an image of earthly ministry. Here, too, there are many beautiful parallels. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “You[#] are the light of the world.... Nor do they light a lamp and place it under a bucket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all those in the house” (Matt. 5:14,15; The Sermon on the Mount). In the parable of the virgins, Jesus says, “Then the kingdom of the heavens will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom” (Matt. 25:1; Parable of the ten virgins). Perhaps the most dramatic realization of this image was at the descent of the Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost, when flames like fire appeared on the disciples: “And separate flames, like fire, appeared to them, and stayed on each one of them” (Acts 2:3; The descent of the Holy Spirit). For a short time, they looked literally like a huge lampstand, burning with the oil of the Holy Spirit.³¹

We can now understand much more clearly John’s vision of the Son of Man walking among the lampstands. Rather than an odd jumble of incomprehensible images, we have discovered a beautiful and fully Biblical picture of Jesus, in the fullness of his heavenly power, carrying out his priestly ministry among the churches. Through Revelation’s many hints to other parts of the Bible, it has given us deeper insight into these other verses, and insight into the way the apostles preached Messiah from the Old Testament.

Although this interpretation of the first vision of Revelation is not new, we have arrived at it in a much more dependable and consistent way: letting Scripture interpret Scripture. Now that we have laid the groundwork and learned this new method, in the next session we will put it to the test with the much more dramatic and difficult visions that occur later in the Book of Revelation.

³⁰ Before the time of Revelation, the leadership of each church was a group of elders, just like in Jewish synagogues. Their primary job was to manage the church, though some were also involved in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). Spiritual leadership could also come from others who were not elders. But shortly after the book of Revelation was written, a new type of leader appeared in Gentile Christian congregations known as a bishop (or overseer), with authority over the elders. He was both a congregational and a spiritual leader. Though “bishop” later came to imply regional authority, this was a local position, just like the head pastor of a modern congregation. The messengers of the book of Revelation are an early example of this new form of leadership.

³¹ Also Prov. 20:27, “The breath [the living spirit] of a man is a lamp of the LORD”; and Psa. 18:28, “For you cause my lamp to shine.”

REVIEW OF CHAPTER 1: In the first vision sequence we have seen a beautiful prophetic picture of Jesus ministering among the churches – the present reality of church life that Christians experience today, just as they have all through Christian history. We also saw embedded in that vision many beautiful teachings about Jesus, the prophecies he fulfills, and his relationship with the Father. Instead of being puzzled by strange and hard-to-understand images, we saw that by applying the parallel method – laying Scripture alongside of Scripture – all these prophetic pictures immediately opened up to reveal their true message.

The Heavenly Throne and the Lamb

(The Second Vision Sequence)

Revelation 2 and 3 are not part of our live Revelation seminar because of the constraints of time. They also have less need of the parallel method to be understood clearly. But in this printed version, for the sake of completeness, we have included them as Appendix III. If your interest is to study the whole of Revelation, please turn to that section now. If your primary interest is in the “Bible interpreting Bible” method, please continue with chapter 4 below.

The Throne Area (4:1-11)

4:1: After these things I saw — and look! — an open door into heaven, and the first voice that I heard, that sounded like a trumpet speaking with me, was saying, “Come up here, and I will show you* what must happen after these things.”

The phrase “After these things I saw...” alerts us that this is a new vision. We leave behind the first vision of Jesus ministering to the churches to enter into heaven itself. This second vision, like the first one, is also announced by the trumpet-like voice of the messenger sent to John (previously mentioned in Rev. 1:10: “I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet”). The idea of a door open into heaven is very common in Jewish apocalyptic visions. A parallel in the Bible is the beginning of Ezekiel’s first vision: “The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezekiel 1:1; The vision of the chariot of God). Jesus refers to the doors of heaven when he talks about the coming of the Son of Man in Matthew 24: “When you# see all these things, know that he is near, at the doors” (Matt. 24:33; also Psa. 78:23). John’s visionary ascent is similar to Paul’s experience in 2 Cor. 12: “I know a man in Christ who...was snatched up to the third heaven.... into paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2,4).

4:2: Immediately I was in the Spirit. And look! — a throne was set in heaven, and on the throne someone was sitting.

As in his first vision, John says he was “in the Spirit” (Rev. 1:10: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”). This is similar to Ezekiel’s experience: “And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me...in a vision in the Spirit of God” (Eze. 11:24; Ezekiel returns from his vision of Jerusalem).

The first thing John sees is a throne, with someone sitting on it: that very important image of the Father God we talked about earlier (Rev. 1:4: “The seven spirits that are before his throne”). Several prophets had visions of the throne of God. Isaiah says “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the edges of his robe were filling

the Temple" (Isa. 6:1; Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry). The prophet Micaiah said: "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of the heavens standing before him" (1 Kings 22:19; Micaiah's prophecy; also Eze. 1:26, 10:1; Dan. 7:9; God's throne is mentioned frequently in Psalms).¹

4:3: And the one sitting was similar in appearance to a precious stone, to jasper and sardis, and a rainbow was around the throne, which [throne] was similar in appearance to an emerald.

This description of the Father as a stone may at first sound odd. But stone or rock is a common image of God in the Bible. David uses it many times in the Psalms: "My God, my rock, I seek refuge in him" (Psa. 18:2). Moses, in Deuteronomy, says: "You* forget the rock that gave birth to you*, and you* ignore the God who writhed in labor with you" (Deut. 32:18; The song of Moses). Why is God described as a rock in the Bible? Because rock is strong, it's almost indestructible. In a desert land like Israel, you see it everywhere around you: one huge rock—the bedrock that holds up the world. The rabbis also taught that rock was always ritually pure. There is nothing you could do to it to make it impure—just like God.

What about the rainbow around the throne? The rainbow is a sign of covenant from the days of Noah. God gave the rainbow as a sign that he would never again flood the entire earth (Gen. 9:11-15). Ezekiel saw a rainbow above the throne of God in his vision of the Radiant Man: "Above the expanse...like a stone of sapphire in appearance, was the likeness of a throne.... And there was a brightness around him [the one sitting on the throne]. As the appearance of the rainbow that is in a cloud on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brightness all around" (Eze. 1:26-28; Vision of the chariot of God; also Eze. 10:1).

4:4: And around the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and on these thrones twenty-four elders were sitting, clothed in white garments, and on their heads were golden crowns.

Daniel also saw thrones around the throne of the Father: "I continued seeing [in the vision] until thrones were set up and the Ancient of Days took his seat" (Dan. 7:9; Vision of the Ancient of Days). These additional thrones were for a heavenly court, which sat for judgment: "The court sat and the scrolls were opened" (Dan. 7:10; Vision of the Ancient of Days).

In a similar image, Isaiah mentions the Lord ruling in Jerusalem before his elders: "For the LORD of hosts will reign on Mt. Zion and in Jerusalem, and in front of his elders there will be glory" (Isa. 24:23; God's judgment of the earth). This is the picture of a king with his court. In ancient times, a king and his court were the highest legal court of appeals in a country.²

¹ Throne visions are an entire genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature. They can be found not only in the Bible, but also in extra-Biblical writings such as 1 and 2 Enoch, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Testament of Levi), *The Ascension of Isaiah*, and many others.

² This is the origin of our use of the English word "court" to mean a place of legal judgment.

In ancient Israel, the place where the elders sat was the place of judgment, often in the gates of a city (Deut. 21:19, 22:15, 25:7, Josh. 20:4). The elders sitting around the throne in John's vision is therefore a picture of the heavenly court, seated for judgment.

In John's vision, the elders of the court are clothed in white garments, a symbol of the victory of believers over the world. Rev. 3 says: "*The one conquering will in the same way be clothed in white garments, and I will certainly not wipe his name out of the Book of Life*" (Rev. 3:5; also 3:18). Their crowns are also a symbol of victory. Rev. 2 says: "*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (Rev. 2:10; also 3:11). This tells us that these elders are human believers that have died in victory over the world.³

This is also how the Jewish rabbis interpreted Dan. 7: "In the future to come the Holy One, blessed be he, will sit, and the angels will provide thrones for the great men of Israel, and they will be seated on them. And the Holy One, blessed be he, will sit with the elders like an *Av Beth Din* [the president of a court]. And they will judge the peoples of the world" (*Tanchuma, Kedoshim* 1).⁴

But these elders are not only judges. Later they worship God as priests and Levites, with harps and golden bowls of incense ("*The twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb, having each a lyre and golden bowls filled with incense.... And they sing a new song,*" Rev. 5:8). This priestly court would remind John's Jewish readers of the *Sanhedrin* council, the highest court of the Jews, which in Jesus' day was made up mostly of priests and Levites.⁵ This is the council that questioned Jesus and delivered him to Pilate (Matt. 26:59-27:2), and before whom Peter and John (Acts

³ Some teach that the twenty-four elders include New Testament saints. But in both Daniel and Revelation, the court sits before the Son of Man is presented to receive his kingdom (Dan. 7:13,14; Rev. 5:6-14), an event that the Bible says took place at Jesus' ascension. As Jesus said to the earthly Sanhedrin council, "*From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power [that is, the right hand of God]....*" (Matt. 26:64; Jesus speaks to the high priest). Or as Peter put it on the day of Pentecost: "*For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet [Psa. 110:1]'*" (Acts 2:34-36). Paul taught: "*For he delivered us [past tense] from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son*" (Col. 1:13). This was also John's understanding. Earlier in Revelation he said that Jesus has already "*made us into a kingdom*" (Rev. 1:6), a kingdom John says he shares right now with us: "*I, John, your brother and sharer in...the kingdom...in Jesus*" (Rev. 1:9; also Matt. 16:28; Luke 24:26; Acts 8:5, 14:22; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20, 15:24; Col. 4:11). Since Jesus received his kingdom at his ascension, this implies that the twenty-four elders, seated before he appears, are Old Testament saints. New Testament saints get their chance later, in Rev. 17 and 20.

⁴ www.tsel.org/torah/tanhuma/kedoshim.html (16 May 2012).

⁵ This Sanhedrin was also known as the Council of the Elders (Luke 22:66). It was sometimes referred to as the Great Sanhedrin to distinguish it from lesser councils of the same name. (The name "Sanhedrin" occurs several times in the Greek New Testament, but is often translated simply as "council.") At the time of John's vision (which was after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70), the old priestly Sanhedrin had been replaced by a new Sanhedrin under the control of the Pharisees. But even then, Priests and Levites continued to play an important role in the courts, especially in the courts of twenty-three (Sanh. 4:2); see below.

4:15, also 5:34) and later Paul appeared (Acts 23:1-9). But this is a righteous, heavenly version of that earthly council.

Although the earthly Sanhedrin had seventy-one members,⁶ the minimum required for certain types of trial (a quorum) was twenty-three (Sanh. 1:6, Tos. Hag. 2:9).⁷ This was the minimum number required in any court judging crimes for which the penalty was death (Sanh. 1:4). So the number that appears here in Revelation (twenty-four elders plus God for a total of twenty-five) would be considered competent to judge serious crimes.⁸

But why twenty-four elders? Why not some other number? The number twenty-four was associated with priests and Levites because they were divided into twenty-four courses or divisions for service in the Temple (1 Chron. 24:1-19; Luke 1:8).⁹ The twenty-four elders of Revelation are the heavenly reality reflected in this earthly system of worship.¹⁰

But the number and the identity of these elders is not nearly as important as what they have come to do. They have gathered with God the Father to render judgment on an extremely important matter, for which the penalty is death.

4:5: And from the throne come lightning and voices and thunder. And seven torches of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God.

⁶ The seventy of Biblical tradition (Num. 11:16) plus a president (originally Moses), who at various times in the past was the king, the high priest, or the *nasi* (the Jewish patriarch).

⁷ This was certainly true in the time of John, if not before.

⁸ Twenty-five seated for judgment also maintains the odd number required in the Sanhedrin to avoid a split court (Sanh. 1:6)

⁹ Normally only one course at a time would serve in the Temple, but all twenty-four courses served together during the pilgrim festivals of Passover (*Pesach*), Pentecost (*Shavuoth*), and Tabernacles (*Sukkoth*). The twenty-four courses included not only priests and Levites, but ordinary Israelites as well (the *ma'amadot*), some of whom would go up to the Temple in their appointed times to act as witnesses of the week's sacrifices (Taan. 4:2). The Israelites of that week's course that did not go up to Jerusalem would gather together in synagogues to pray and to read the Creation account in the book of Genesis (Taan. 4:3). Later, Revelation describes the twenty-four elders worshipping God by proclaiming him as the Creator: "Worthy are you*, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you* created all things; and because of your* will, they came to be and they were created" (Rev. 4:11).

¹⁰ Some have suggested that the twenty-four elders represent the traditional twenty-four books of the Old Testament according to the rabbinical way of counting the books: (1) Genesis, (2) Exodus, (3) Leviticus, (4) Numbers, (5) Deuteronomy, (6) Joshua, (7) Judges, (8) Samuel (1st and 2nd Samuel counted as one book), (9) Kings (1st and 2nd Kings counted as one book), (10) Isaiah, (11) Jeremiah, (12) Ezekiel, (13) The Minor Prophets (all counted together as one book), (14) Psalms, (15) Job, (16) Proverbs, (17) Ruth, (18) Song of Songs, (19) Ecclesiastes, (20) Lamentations, (21) Esther, (22) Daniel, (23) Ezra & Nehemiah (counted as one book), and (24) Chronicles (1st and 2nd Chronicles counted as one book). But this number was fixed only after the time of the New Testament. Josephus, who was a contemporary of John, counted twenty-two books (*Against Apion* 1:38), as did Jerome long after (4th cent., *Prologue to the Books of the Kings*).

The noises and lightning coming from the throne are a hint back to Mt. Sinai, when God appeared to Israel: “There were *voices and lightning flashes and a huge cloud on the mountain*” (Exo. 19:16; God reveals himself at Mt. Sinai; also Job 37:4).

The seven torches, like a huge lampstand before the throne, are the seven spirits we met earlier, a symbol of the Holy Spirit (“And from *the seven spirits that are before his throne*,” Rev. 1:4; also 3:1). Torches also appeared at Mt. Sinai: “All the people seeing the voices and the *torches* and the sound of the ram’s horn trumpet and the mountain smoking...trembled and they stood at a distance” (Exo. 20:18; God reveals himself at Mt. Sinai).¹¹

Even earlier, in the time of Abraham, a torch (torches in the LXX) appeared when Abraham “cut a covenant”¹² with the Lord: “And look!...*torches of fire that went through between these cut pieces [of the sacrificial animals]*” (Gen. 15:17 LXX; God cuts a covenant with Abraham).

4:6a: And before the throne was something like a sea of glass similar to crystal.

Moses and the children of Israel didn’t just see clouds and lightning at Mt. Sinai: Moses took Aaron and his two sons as well as seventy elders up the mountain to see God: “And they saw the God of Israel; and beneath his feet there was something like tile work made of *sapphire*, and it was like the heavens themselves in *clarity*” (Exo. 24:10). The words used here are different than in Revelation. But from a distance, a pavement of clear sapphire tiles would probably look pretty similar to a frozen sea of crystalline glass. This same strange pavement also appears in Ezekiel: “There was the likeness...of an expanse, like the fearsome *gleam of ice*.... Above the expanse...was the likeness of a *throne*” (Ezekiel 1:22,26). Here again, the words used are different, but the descriptions are similar.

The “*expanse*” mentioned by Ezekiel is the same Hebrew word, *raqiah*, used for the firmament made on the second day of creation: “And God said, ‘Let there be an *expanse* [raqiah] in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters’.... And God called the expanse [raqiah] the heavens” (Gen. 1:6,8; The Creation). This expanse or firmament was understood to be something solid that separated the heavens from the earth, on which Ezekiel says the throne of God rested.

Even though Exodus, Ezekiel, and Revelation use different words to describe it, it’s clear they’re all talking about the same thing: a huge, crystalline pavement on which the throne of God rests.

This heavenly sea was represented in the Temple of Solomon by the *Bronze Sea*: a huge bronze basin filled with water, ten cubits in diameter (5 m, 15 ft.) and five cubits high (2.5 m, 7.5 ft.), that stood before the sanctuary, held up by twelve metal

¹¹ The pillar of fire and cloud that went before Israel in the desert might also be described as a huge torch.

¹² Covenants are described as being “cut” in the original Hebrew because the ancient practice of making covenants involved cutting animals in two, as in the story about Abraham’s covenant with God in Gen. 15.

oxen (1 Kings 7:23-26).¹³ The priests washed their hands and feet in the water of the Bronze Sea before entering the Temple (as with the Bronze Laver in the time of the Tabernacle, Exo. 30:18-21).¹⁴



Animal-type Angels

4:6b-8: And in the center before the throne and around the throne were four living beings covered with eyes, front and back. [7] And the first living being was similar to a lion, and the second living being was similar to a calf, and the third living being had the face of a man, and the fourth living being was similar to a flying eagle. [8] And the four living beings, having each one of them six wings apiece, are covered over and under with eyes. And they have no rest, saying day and night: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, ruler over all, who was and who is and who is coming."

Surrounding the throne were four strange creatures the Bible calls living beings. They're certainly not human. And

they're certainly not what we're used to thinking of as angels. Most of us, when we think of angels, think of women with wings in flowing robes, or perhaps of fat baby angels. But these do not appear in Scripture.¹⁵ Women angels and fat baby angels are pagan ideas brought into Christianity. In the Bible, angels appear as men (without wings) when they appear on earth, or as ferocious, animalistic beings with wings when they appear in heaven. This animalistic view of angels was shared with the other nations around Israel in ancient times.

Ezekiel saw the same four living beings in his vision of the Radiant Man: "*And in its midst the likeness of four living beings.... And the likeness of their faces: the face of a man, and the face of a lion to the right for the four of them, and the face of an ox on the left*

¹³ The surface of the Bronze Sea was above the height of a man's head, a symbol of its location up above, in heaven. The oxen beneath the Sea correspond to the cherubim beneath the icy pavement of Eze. 1:22,26.

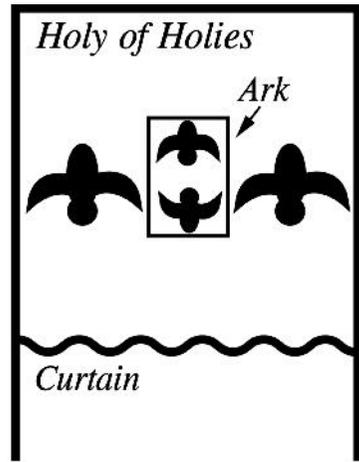
¹⁴ This symbol of heavenly water and ritual cleansing is reflected in the later Jewish ritual bath (*mikvah*) also used for ritual cleansing. The *mikvah* was to be filled with "living" water, which in addition to water from rivers and springs included water "from heaven"—rainwater channeled directly into the ritual bath. The practice of Jewish ritual immersion is the origin of Christian baptism.

¹⁵ With the exception of Zech. 5:9, where female angels with wings appear in connection with pagan idolatry.

for the four of them, and the face of an eagle for the four of them... The likeness of the living beings was...like coals of fire" (Eze. 1:5,10,13; Vision of the Chariot of God; also 10:14).

Ezekiel's four beings appear to have four faces each, while John's have only a single face. But the four animals represented are the same. And like Ezekiel, John's beings are covered with eyes: "And all of their body and their backs and their hands and their wings...were covered with eyes all around" (Eze. 10:12; Vision of the chariot in Jerusalem; also 1:18). Isaiah also saw them in his vision of the throne: "Seraphs [burning ones] were standing above him, each one having six wings.... And this one called to that one and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:2,3; Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry).

These are the heavenly realities of which the Temple in Jerusalem was a model.¹⁶ What represented the four living beings in the earthly Temple? If you remember carefully, in Solomon's Temple there were four angels surrounding the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies: two, from Moses, were on the lid of the ark ("And he made two cherubs of gold...at the two ends of the place of atonement,¹⁷" Exo. 37:7-9), and two, from Solomon, stood on either side of the ark ("And he made in the inner sanctuary two cherubs of oleaster¹⁸ wood; their height was ten cubits.... Overlaid...with gold," 1 Kings 6:23,28). But you have to erase your traditional image of these angels as beautiful ladies. They were wild-looking animal-like creatures with wings, exactly as described by Ezekiel and John.¹⁹



Angels in the
Holy of Holies

¹⁶ The heavenly Temple imagery here and throughout Revelation would have been especially poignant in the time of John's writing (about 95 AD) because of the recent destruction of the earthly Temple (in 70 AD).

¹⁷ The place of atonement (*kapporeth* in Hebrew) was the golden lid of the ark of the covenant. Though often translated "mercy seat," it was not a place for sitting. "Seat" has here the sense "place of" (as in 'the heart is the seat of the emotions').

¹⁸ Wild olive.

¹⁹ You also have to erase the traditional image of the ark sitting in the holy place sideways (with the wide side facing out), which would put two angels on the left and two angels on the right side of the Holy of Holies. When the ark was put in the Temple, the poles stuck out from the Holy of Holies into the Holy Place (1 Kings 8:8). This means the ark sat in the Holy of Holies the long way (with the narrow side facing out) as pictured in the diagram above. As a result, the four angels surrounded the center of the ark, from above which God had spoken to Moses (Num. 7:89), exactly as the living beings surround the throne in Revelation. If you were standing in the Holy of Holies just in front of the curtain, as the high priest did on the Day of Atonement, you would see directly in front of you the back of one of the smaller angels on the ark, with the other facing out at you from behind, and the two larger angels standing on either side of the ark on the left and on the right. The angel whose back was directly in front of you was in the position of the heavenly covering cherub mentioned in Ezekiel 28:14: "You* were the anointed covering cherub" (Eze. 28:14; Prophecy against the king of

4:9-11: And when the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the one sitting on the throne, the one living for all the ages to come, [10] the twenty-four elders fall down before the one sitting on the throne and worship the one living for all the ages to come, and throw their crowns before the throne, saying, [11] “Worthy are you*, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you* created all things; and because of your* will, they came to be and they were created.”

The living beings lead the worship before the throne, which is joined by the elders, just as the elders did that went up the mountain with Moses: “Come up to the LORD, you...and seventy of the elders of Israel; and you will prostrate yourselves [in worship]” (Exo. 24:1; Moses and the elders go up to God). Prostration (‘falling down’ in Rev. 4:10) was a position of prayer also used in the Temple in Jesus’ day. Every day, during the morning and afternoon sacrifices, the people would prostrate themselves before the Lord. It’s a symbol of submission—as is the throwing down of their crowns by the elders (the same crowns mentioned earlier in Rev. 4:4: “And on their heads were golden crowns”).²⁰



Stone
Seals

John identifies the object of their worship twice as “the one living for all the ages to come.” This is very similar to the description of Jesus in Rev. 1:17,18: “I am...the living one...I am alive for all the ages to come.” Here is another example of the attributes of the Son being shared with the Father, John’s way of describing what we call the Trinity.

The Scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14)

5:1: And I saw in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals.

Here is the scroll we talked about in the Introduction: the scroll written on both sides, the scroll of God’s judgment. This is the reason the court of twenty-four elders has been gathered: to pronounce the verdict written on the scroll in God’s hand. This is similar to Daniel’s vision: “The court sat and the scrolls were opened” (Dan. 7:10; Vision of the Ancient of Days).

In ancient times, scrolls were often sealed. Today we put letters into envelopes sealed with glue. The way they did it back then was to tie a string around the

Tyre; also Eze. 28:16), who blocked or covered the glory of God from being seen directly. This was the position of Satan before he was thrown down because of his pride. (For more on this topic see the teaching “The Chariot” on our web site.)

²⁰ Prostration is rarely practiced among the Jewish people today, except sometimes on the Day of Atonement. But Muslims continue to use it in their daily prayers.

scroll, after it was rolled up tight, and then put a lump of clay on the place the string was tied. This lump of clay was then pressed with the seal of the person sending the document, just like we put a return address on an envelope.

The seal itself was a piece of stone, sometimes a precious stone, that had the name of the owner and other markings on it so it could be identified.²¹ These were sometimes worn as rings, or on a chain around the neck. The reason for the stamped lump of clay (also called a “seal”) was so that you would know if someone had opened the scroll or tampered with it—just as with our sealed envelopes today. For a scroll to have seven seals (that is, seven lumps of clay pressed with seven different seals) meant it was an important document the owner wanted to be very sure was not opened by an unauthorized person.²²

The court has now reached its verdict, and so has closed and sealed the scroll so its verdict can be delivered and executed according to the will of the court.

5:2-4: And I saw a mighty messenger proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?” [3] And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or even to look into it. [4] And I was weeping loudly for no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

Why does John start to cry about this? It means that none of us have been found worthy. None of us have measured up to God’s standard of righteousness. We are all guilty before God, and therefore we all deserve his judgment: the judgment written in the scroll. As God says in Isaiah: *“And I looked and there was no one helping, and I was astonished that there was no one supporting me; so my own arm brought salvation for me; and my wrath, it supported me”* (Isa. 63:5). The only one worthy to open the scroll of God’s judgment is someone who has never sinned, the “arm” of God himself: Jesus (*Yeshua*) the Messiah.

5:5: And one of the elders says²³ to me, “Don’t cry. Look!—the lion from the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered so that he might open the scroll and its seven seals.”

The *“lion from the tribe of Judah”* refers to Jacob’s Messianic prophecy over his son: *“Judah is a lion’s cub.... The ruler’s rod will not depart from Judah...until he whose it is²⁴ comes; and the obedience of the peoples will be to him”* (Gen. 49:9,10; Jacob prophesies over his sons).

The *“root of David”* is the equivalent of the Messianic title the *“root of Jesse,”* since Jesse was David’s father. As Isaiah prophesied: *“A root of Jesse...will be standing like a banner of the peoples; the nations will seek him”* (Isa. 11:10; Reign of the Messianic

²¹ These markings were carved in reverse, so that when the seal was pressed in the clay, you could read the name in the impression.

²² An actual example of a scroll sealed with seven different seals was found among the Samaria Papyri in the Wadi ed-Daliyeh (though originally the scroll also had additional seals).

²³ This literary present tense reflects the Greek present used here.

²⁴ *“He whose it is”* is left untranslated as *“Shiloh”* in many translations.

branch²⁵); or as Paul said in Romans 15, *“The root of Jesse...the one rising up to rule nations”* (Rom. 15:12). He is the only one worthy to open the scroll and execute God’s judgment.

5:6: And in the center before the throne and the four living beings and before the elders, I saw a lamb standing that appeared to have been ritually slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth.

What we see doesn’t look like a lion; it doesn’t look like the mighty warrior, David. It’s a little lamb with a cut in its hide like that made to sacrifice an animal in the Temple. Yet it’s standing—alive. This is a hint you already know, to Isaiah 53: *“He was hard pressed and he was afflicted, yet he does not open his mouth. As a lamb, he is led to the slaughter”* (Isa. 53:7; The Suffering Servant) or as John puts it in his gospel: *“Look!—the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29; The baptism of Jesus). It’s Jesus. On its head are seven horns, which is a hint to 1 Samuel: *“He will lift up the horn of his Messiah”* (1 Sam. 2:10; The prayer of Hannah). This horn is a symbol of the strength of the Messiah, as also in Luke 1: *“He raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David his servant”* (Luke 1:69; The prophecy of Zacharias). Since seven is the number of fullness or completion, seven horns mean the fullness of the power of the Messiah. Jesus achieved his overwhelming victory by submitting himself, like a lamb, to slaughter, and rising victorious over death.

The lamb also has seven eyes that are identified as the seven spirits of God: Revelation’s mystical description of the Holy Spirit (that we saw earlier in Rev. 1:4, 3:1, 4:5: *“The seven spirits”*). This is another beautiful expression of the Trinity: that the Son and the Spirit, though distinct from each other, are together one being. Here it tells us that the Son, the lamb, sees with the eyes of the Spirit.²⁶ This is a hint to Zechariah 4: *“These will be glad...the seven eyes of the LORD that roam to and fro in all the earth”* (Zech. 4:10; Vision of the lampstand and the olive trees). Zechariah connects the seven eyes with the Father, and so this is another place where imagery used of the Father is shared with the Son.²⁷

²⁵ For how the Messiah can be both root and branch, see Rev. 22:16.

²⁶ This image of the lamb with the eyes of the Spirit explains the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 11, where it says: *“He [the Messiah] will not judge according to what his eyes see”* (Isa. 11:3; Reign of the Messianic branch). The rabbis were puzzled by this statement: how will the Messiah judge, if he does not judge by what his eyes see (bSanh. 93b)? Revelation’s answer? He will see by the Holy Spirit that rests on him: the seven-fold Spirit of God mentioned by Isaiah in the previous verse (*“The Spirit of [1] the LORD will rest on him, a Spirit of [2] wisdom and [3] discernment, a Spirit of [4] counsel and [5] might, a Spirit of [6] understanding and [7] the fear of the LORD”*) (Isa. 11:2; Reign of the Messianic branch).

²⁷ This identification of the eyes of the Messiah with the Holy Spirit makes it possible to understand another image: the torches in the eyes of Daniel’s radiant man: *“And his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as torches of fire”* (Dan. 10:6; The Radiant Man). Since Revelation tells us that torches are an image of the Holy Spirit (Rev. 4:5: *“And seven torches of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God”*) and that Daniel’s radiant man is the Messiah, this image in Dan. 10 can now be understood more completely: it, too, is a picture of the Messiah seeing with the eyes of the Spirit. This in turn helps us understand the description of the eyes of the radiant Son of Man in Rev. 1, whose *“eyes were like a flame of fire”* (Rev. 1:14). The Son of Man does not only see with human eyes, but with the eyes of the

5:7,8: And he came and has taken *the scroll* out of the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. [8] And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb, each *one* having a lyre and golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones.

Then this one that seems so weak, yet has the horns—the strength—of the Messiah and sees with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, takes the scroll from the Father (mentioned earlier in Rev. 5:1: “I saw in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne a scroll”). And when he does, the heavenly court begins to worship the lamb, something that every Jewish person knew is forbidden to anyone but God. So why are they worshipping the lamb? There can only be one explanation: he is God. He and the Father are one, together with the Holy Spirit that is in him. The taking of the scroll by the lamb is exactly as it is written in John 5:22,23: “For the Father judges no one, rather he has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (also John 5:26,27; Eph. 1:22a). Here is a beautiful visual portrayal of this spiritual truth: all judgment has been given to Jesus.

The worship of the living beings and the elders is similar to the worship that took place in the Temple, with harps and incense. This kind of worship is mentioned in 2 Chronicles: “And the Levites who were singers...with cymbals and with harps and lyres... And all the sons of Israel...sank down on their knees, nostrils to the earth...and prostrated themselves” (2 Chron. 5:12, 7:3; Solomon dedicates the Temple); also in 2 Chron. 29: “[Hezekiah] had the Levites of the house of the LORD stand with cymbals, with harps, and with lyres... And the whole assembly were prostrating themselves” (2 Chron. 29:25,28; Hezekiah consecrates the Temple).²⁸

In the Temple, the offering of incense was the holiest part of the worship, when a priest, all alone, stood before the altar of incense in the sanctuary. Just behind the altar was the curtain of the Holy of Holies, the dwelling place of the presence of God himself. For that offering, the incense was brought before the Lord in a golden bowl. As it says in Num. 7:86: “Twelve vessels of gold full of incense” (Num. 7:86; Offerings for the dedication of the altar). For the elders to prostrate themselves with their bowls of incense before Jesus is a symbol that Jesus himself is the Holy of Holies, the presence of God himself.

Here Revelation unlocks another “mystery” for us (in vs. 8), where it tells us that the bowls of incense represent the prayers of God’s people. This is a hint to Psalm 141: “My prayer will be established as incense before you” (Psalm 141:2). Here again, Revelation tells us directly that everything is not as it seems. The true meaning is

Spirit. Why? Because he and the Spirit, though distinct, are one being, together with the Father.

²⁸ Two types of harps were used in the Temple: in one, called a lyre, the tone was determined by placing the fingers on the strings, as with a modern guitar. In the other, called a harp, the tone of each string was fixed, as in a modern piano or keyboard. In the time of Jesus, there was no limit to the number of harps that could be played in the Temple, but only a handful of lyres were allowed, and only one set of cymbals. Whether the elders of Revelation were playing harps or lyres is unclear as there is still some dispute about the meaning of the Greek word used here.

not the literal one, but can be found only by seeking that same image elsewhere in the Bible to discover its hidden Biblical meaning. Bringing these bowls of incense to the lamb represents bringing our prayers to Jesus – because he is the holy one of God, who intercedes for us with the Father (Rom. 8:34).

5:9-10: And they sing a new song, saying, “You* are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you* were ritually slaughtered and you* bought for God with your* blood some from every tribe and language and people and nation, [10] and made them a kingdom and priests for our God. And they will reign on the earth.”

The song they sing is called a “new song.” This is a hint to the Messianic Psalm 98: “Sing[#] to the LORD a new song...his right hand has accomplished salvation for him, even the arm of his holiness.²⁹ The LORD has made known his salvation [yeshuah] in the eyes of the nations.... All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation [yeshuah] of our God.... Make music...with a lyre, with a lyre and the sound of singing” (Psalm 98:1-3,5; A song of praise; also Psa. 33:2,3; 144:9). Here’s a prophecy of Yeshua (Jesus) that even hints at his name given hundreds of years before his birth.³⁰

Psalm 98 is not the only psalm to connect the idea of a “new song” with Messiah Yeshua. In fact, you could say that “a new song” is a code-word in the Bible for Messiah and his ministry – something new that God is doing on the face of the earth. As Isaiah puts it: “Look! – my servant.... I will make you* a covenant for the people, a light for the nations.... Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth” (Isa. 42:1,6,10; Praise for the Servant of the Lord).

Not only has Jesus made us priests and a kingdom (past tense), a theme we saw already in chapter 1 (“And made us into a kingdom, priests to his God and Father,” Rev. 1:6), but now Revelation says that we will reign with him: not up in heaven someplace, but where? “On the earth”! This is a prophecy of the coming earthly reign of the Messiah. It’s also a hint to Daniel 7: “The holy ones of the Most High will receive the kingdom, and they will take possession of the kingdom forever” (Dan. 7:18; The vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man).

5:11-14: And I saw and I heard the sound of many messengers around the throne and the living beings and the elders. And the number of them was myriads³¹ of myriads and thousands of thousands, [12] saying in a loud voice, “Worthy is the ritually slaughtered lamb to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.” [13] And every created thing that is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To the one sitting on the throne and to the lamb, praise and honor and glory and might for all the ages to come.” [14] And the four living beings were saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshipped.

²⁹ The “right hand” and the “arm of God” are frequently used images referring to the Messiah (see Isa. 40:10,11; 51:5,9; 52:10,13; 53:1,2; etc.)

³⁰ Yeshuah (“salvation”) is the feminine noun form of the masculine given name Yeshua (the original Hebrew name of Jesus).

³¹ A myriad is ten thousand.

This is a hint to Philippians 2: “That at the name of Jesus every knee will bow [for prostration in worship] of heavenly beings and earthly beings and beings under the earth” (Phil. 2:10; The humiliation and exaltation of Christ).

The mention of thousands of thousands and myriads of myriads of angelic messengers is a hint to Daniel 7: “A thousand thousands serve him and a myriad of myriads stand before him” (Dan. 7:10; Vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man). Even these multitudes of messengers were represented in the ancient Temple of Solomon, whose walls were covered with small engravings of fierce animal-style angels (“And all the walls of the House [the Temple] all around he [Solomon] carved with carved engravings of cherubs” 1 Kings 6:29; Construction of the Temple of Solomon; also 1 Kings 6:32,35). But now, they worship not only the Father, but also the Son! And all creation joins in the praise. I don’t think there’s any place in the Bible that so clearly points to the worship of Jesus as God. There’s just no other way to explain it: Jesus (*Yeshua*) is the Presence of the Almighty God!³²

REVIEW OF CHAPTERS 4 AND 5: In this first part of the Second Vision Sequence, we saw a beautiful vision of the Father in heaven – the heavenly reality of which the Temple in Jerusalem was a model. The Father was seated with the court of heaven to render judgment – a judgment written in a scroll with seven seals. But in all the universe, only one was found worthy to open the scroll and execute God’s judgment: Jesus, the lamb of God, who is one God with the Father. When he took the scroll, all creation worshipped him together with the Father. This is the moment in the vision that we return to now: the lamb holding the scroll, surrounded by a crowd of thousands of angels in heaven.

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³² In addition to the many small hints we have seen along the way, the whole of Rev. 4 and 5 are a hint or major parallel to Dan. 7: First the court and the Father sit on their thrones (Dan. 7:9,10), then the Son of Man comes up to the Father and is presented to the Father (Dan. 7:13), then he is given dominion that all might worship him (Dan. 7:14). This is a fascinating example of prophecy interpreting prophecy.