

The Introductory Vision

And now we come to the first “vision” that John observed, called by many scholars “The Introductory Vision.” It is believed to be an introduction to the entire book of Revelation, not just an introduction to the letters to the seven churches of Asia. We will see several visions as we go through the book of Revelation. Scholars are at odds over whether these visions were given to John over an extended period of time, with breaks in the chain of visions to give him time to record what he has seen, or were revealed in one long, continuous vision, after which John wrote the book. This dispute will probably not be settled in our lifetime. There is, however, one thing we can all agree on: John received the entire message, and whether it was all at once or over a period of time, the complete and proper message was revealed to him. Furthermore, he wrote what he saw and heard so that we have an accurate and truthful account of it all.

We will discuss each of the visions John saw in the order he saw them. Naturally, the visions are all connected to each other even if sometimes the connection is not readily obvious. It will quickly become apparent as John relates each of the visions, that your mind will form a “scene.” Those mental pictures will help you to see the meaning of the message being presented, so let them form. They will bring to life the mystical nature of this book. We will discuss them, of course, followed by a verse-by-verse analytic approach to what we saw if necessary. The scenes we form in our minds are only valuable if they are the correct representation of the passage, though, so we must become familiar with the common meaning of the components of the visions. Otherwise, our mind will form a more literal “translation” of what we read and the book will remain a mystery to us.

We will approach each vision in the same manner: I will first cite the passage that provides the vision – sometimes lengthy – but we will read the passage in its entirety. As you read it, let the vision form and afterwards we will discuss it together. I will present what I believe the passage is actually telling the reader, and explain why I believe that to be correct. If the passage is difficult, we will analyze it “phrase-by-phrase” to see why that conclusion was reached. I will be using the 1611 King James Version of the Bible when I cite the passages

because the majority of scholars have deemed it to be the most accurate literal translation from the original Greek manuscripts. Let's read, then, the first part of John's first vision recorded in Revelation 1:10-20.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, what thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea. I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; and his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and I have the keys of hell and of death. Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; the mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”

Vision 1:

John was *“in the Spirit,”* indicating this was not his ordinary condition. Perhaps he was under the power or control of the Holy Spirit. A parallel to that is found in another apocryphal book, Ezekiel. He records virtually the same meaning when he was *“lifted up and shown wonderful things of God.”* We might call it a dream or a trance, but I suggest it was a state provided so

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that complete comprehension could best be seen. It would be very similar to seeing something “first hand” instead of reading it in a dissertation. We often use the expression, “a picture is worth a thousand words,” Well, Jesus relays the message to John in such a way that John could have said, “It was as though I was actually there.” That would allow John a vivid recollection of all that was happening so he could best describe it later. It doesn't bother me at all to think this book was revealed to John while he was in a trance, or was dreaming.

John uses the phrase, “***I saw***” 85 times within the book of Revelation. We see the first such occurrence in verse 12 at the beginning of the first vision right after John hears the voice behind him, and we will address that more in detail a bit later.

In verse 10, we see the phrase “***on the Lord's day.***” I believe this is the only place in the entire New Testament that you will find that phrase, which in itself is somewhat startling. But I have found that many readers confuse that statement with another expression, “***the day of the Lord.***” Actually, the two are very different: The “day of the Lord,” which is found several places in the Bible outside of the book of Revelation, is always used to refer to a particular day for judgment and retribution. The term “the Lord's day,” on the other hand, does not refer to judgment but shows possession. It is a day belonging to the Lord. It is a day that the Lord holds to be something special. Incidentally, did you know that the day of Pentecost always came on the first day of the week? (Lev. 23:15) This means that in Acts 2:1, where the Holy Spirit is recorded as first coming upon the apostles, it was the first day of the week. It was “the Lord's day.” It was that same day that Peter and the other apostles first preached, and the first converts were saved. The day on which our Lord and Savior rose from the dead was on the first day of the week. This day belongs to the Lord, and we are told in Acts 20:7 that we are to eat the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. But in this text, the phrase used is not “the day of the Lord,” but is “the Lord's day,” meaning John received this vision on the first day of the week.

John continues by writing “***and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.***” The voice he heard must have been loud and clear. Trumpets have long been used as a call for attention. What was said to John in verse 11 is quoted below, but notice that he heard the voice before he turned to see who was speaking, because according to verse 12, the voice was the

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reason for his turning. ***“Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.”*** The *“Alpha and Omega, the first and the last”* is the way Jesus was described in verse 8, and the directions for John to record all he sees and then send it to the seven churches of Asia is a repeat of what is said in verse 4. Continuing with the vision, let’s return to the *“loud voice like a trumpet.”* When you hear a loud voice behind you, it is only natural to turn to see who is talking, and whether or not they are talking to you. Quite often you recognize the voice, but you turn anyway. Whether John recognized Jesus’ voice or not is debatable. He tells us that he *“turned to see the voice”* that spoke to him. But when he turned the first thing to catch his eye were seven golden candlesticks. He probably expected to see only a person standing there, and nothing else. As he continues he says, ***“...and in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man.”*** He does then see the one who



spoke, standing in the midst of the candlesticks, but the candlesticks themselves are what first caught his attention. It is a bit difficult to understand what John actually beheld. He could have seen a single lampstand similar to the one made for the Tabernacle in the wilderness as depicted in this image. That lampstand is described as a single center "stand" with a single bowl on the top, but it also had six arms that curved out from the center stand and each arm had a bowl on the top,

which would be a total of seven "bowls" into which the oil was poured. I am not convinced

John would have been so transfixed by that sort of candlestick that he would not have focused on Jesus first. I also find it difficult to picture Jesus standing in the “midst” of that type of candlestick. So perhaps John saw seven individual lampstands, each having a single bowl, with Jesus standing in the midst of them such as that pictured on the right. (There are some who believe John saw seven candlesticks like the first one above, arranged in a circle with Jesus in their midst.) We cannot be certain of what John actually saw.



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We do, however, know what the candlesticks represent. According to verse 20 it's the seven churches. These seven candlesticks (remember the symbolism of seven) represent the perfect kingdom of Christ, which would include all of our Lord's individual churches in the world. Furthermore, they should all be unified, all teaching the same thing, all standing for the same thing, and all denouncing the same thing. All would have a love for God and His Son, and all would have that same love for each other. In other words: A perfect kingdom. I believe John sees all of that.

Now, John addresses the one he saw standing in the midst of the candlesticks: "One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band." This image is not exactly what I imagine John seeing, but it is the closest I could find. It appears He is holding the stars in His right hand, and is wearing the golden band.



I believe John recognizes Jesus! Remember, John was a close disciple of Jesus about sixty years before this writing. John served Him and most likely saw Him every day for a little over three years. John witnessed the miracles that Jesus performed and listened to the things that Jesus taught first hand. John was among those who saw Him ascend into heaven, and now it appears he recognized Him as the Jesus he loved. But there is a difference: That difference is the glory of Jesus in His "King's" clothing. In the expression ***"clothed with a garment,"*** the Greek word translated "garment" actually means a robe, the indication of royalty. He also was wearing a ***"golden girdle,"*** another symbol of high rank or office. And the statement ***"His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow"*** is very similar to the description of Jesus at the transfiguration, which John witnessed.

We are seeing, through John's eyes, the majesty of a Divine person with the attributes of eternity and Heavenly Glory. As was stated in the introduction, ***"white wool"*** signified purity and holiness to the Jewish mind. This is Jesus, the Son of Man, the head of His kingdom, standing in the midst of His kingdom! Matthew 18:20 quotes Jesus saying, ***"For where two or***

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three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.” True churches are inseparable from their head.

John continues: His eyes were like a *“flame of fire.”* They were penetrating, able to look into the heart and soul of every member of every congregation and discern their thoughts and intents. You may recall the building of the Tabernacle in the wilderness where the walls of the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were made of wood planks overlaid with fine gold as depicted here. Where the boards were joined to each other, fine brass or bronze was used. Jesus’ feet are described as like burnished bronze or fine brass, symbolic of strength and endurance; perhaps signifying His ability to tread underfoot the wicked. In the curse that was placed on Satan in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit, God told Satan he would bruise the heel of Jesus, but that Jesus would tread on Satan's head.



His voice is described as *“many waters”* which implies it was strong, powerful and resolved. If you have visited Niagara Falls you might better understand the significance of the phrase *“many waters.”* The sound is loud and overpowering, and the strength of the water as it flows over the falls is immense.

Earlier, we saw John describe Jesus' voice as a *“trumpet”* which also is commanding and powerful.

The *“seven stars”* that Jesus held in His right hand are said to be the *“angels of the seven churches.”* The symbolism is perfect: Stars have been used for thousands of years to navigate, or to direct pathways. I believe the *“angels of the seven churches”* are the leaders of the church, the elders, which were appointed in every individual congregation. They were (and still are) appointed for the purpose of leadership and guidance to keep us on the right path. Stars, then, serve as excellent symbols to represent that guidance. When we look into the

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heavens on a clear night, we know that some of the stars we see are other suns, planets, moons, or even man-made satellites in orbit. Some are sources of light and others are just reflecting the light of a sun. Even so, the metaphor remains: The leaders of the churches should shine, not with their own light, but with the light of Jesus reflecting from them. They also shine most brilliantly during the darkness of tribulation where they serve as beacons to guide the wanderer looking for home.

John also records that the stars are being held in Jesus' right hand. That, too, is significant, because the right hand is symbolic of protection and control, the kind of protection and control that comes from Jesus Himself, because it is in His kingdom that they serve. Those leaders of the churches needed Jesus' protection, guidance and control back then, and they still need it today. The apostle Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus to, ***“take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood; for I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock...”*** (Acts 20:28-29) This indicates that even from among the leadership, some would succumb to temptation.

In John's description of Jesus, he sees a ***“sharp two edged sword”*** protruding from Jesus' mouth. The sharpness conveys the ability to discern, to judge, or to convict. Of course, this is not a literal sword, but a description of the **Words** that came from Jesus' mouth. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:12, ***“For the word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”*** Jesus knows our inner thoughts, and can fairly judge us by our adherence to His word. The word used for the sword protruding from Jesus' mouth is the Greek word *“rhomphaia,”* not *“machaira”* which was the word for the type of sword usually worn by Roman soldiers. The *“rhomphaia”* is longer and heavier than the *“machaira”* conveying the idea of power, but also the willingness and readiness to go into battle should it be necessary.

John continues his description by saying Jesus' ***“countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”*** The word *countenance* refers to His whole appearance, even though some

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Bible versions render the sentence “*and His face was like the sun.*” Commentators are not in agreement as to whether the word face or the word countenance is correct, but John provides another description of Jesus in his gospel, chapter 1:4-5 that may help us decide. There John records: “*In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.*” This of course, is referring to Jesus beside the Father in the very beginning, but John used the expression “*in Him,*” which seems to indicate more than Jesus’ face. Here in Revelation John still appears to be referring to the whole appearance of Jesus as He stood there in the midst of the candlesticks. I imagine the brilliance of Jesus as He stands among the candlesticks to be like looking directly into the sun on a clear summer day, with not the slightest cloud to dim the glow.

The result when John turned to see who had spoken to him was: John fell at Jesus' feet as if he were dead. Seeing Jesus, along with the recognition, awe, and the fear inspired by that sight, caused John to faint or collapse, and lie there with no feeling of life. This effect is not unusual, for when Isaiah beheld the vision of Jehovah's throne, he cried out, “*Woe is me for I am undone!*” (Isaiah 6:5) When Ezekiel saw the vision of Jehovah's chariot, he “*fell on his face.*” (Ezekiel 1:28) Daniel, at the sight of Gabriel in a vision, “*fell upon his face and was sick certain days.*” (Daniel 8:17-27) And Peter “*fell at Jesus' feet*” when for the first time he realized the difference between the sinfulness of man and the sinless-ness of Jesus. (Luke 5:8)

Perhaps it is pure speculation on my part, but I believe John’s overall reaction described here is more personal than the examples just given. Remember that in his gospel John refers to himself as “*the one Jesus loved.*” It is almost universally accepted that Peter, James and John all three had a special relationship with Jesus. Clues contained within the gospel writings suggest that these three – Peter, James, and John – would have specific responsibilities in the kingdom that was to be established. For example, James mostly stayed in Jerusalem, and was the first to be killed. Peter was the primary spokesperson early on, and his tasks were mostly centered on converting new contacts. John, on the other hand, lived the longest, and his focus was on those who were more mature, rather than the “babes in Christ” that Peter converted.

And those three were with Jesus on three very special occasions: They were at Jesus’ Transfiguration; they were there when Jesus healed the daughter of the synagogue ruler; and

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those three were with Jesus when He went to pray in the garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion.

At the time of these visions John is the last of the original twelve apostles still living, and not having seen Jesus since the day He ascended into heaven (at least 60 years before), when he turns and sees Jesus standing in the midst of the candlesticks... he falls to the ground! Perhaps he has often dreamt of Jesus and of the times when they were together, but this is different: He is not asleep and this isn't an ordinary dream! This is something special, and John recognizes it as such. With tenderness and care, Jesus reaches out, puts His right hand on John and speaks gently to him. We all, I suspect, assume John regained his consciousness when Jesus touched him and spoke to him saying, ***“Do not be afraid... I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.”*** We are not told of a lengthy, personal interchange between Jesus and John, instead Jesus comes right to the purpose of this vision.

When Jesus mentioned having the ***“keys of hell and of death,”*** do not conjure up the image of a large ring of keys in Jesus' hand. The word key is never used literally anywhere in the New Testament. It is always figurative or symbolic. Two examples are:

Matt. 16:19 - Just after Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus replies to that confession, and toward the end of Jesus' statement He says, ***“...And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth...”*** That is figurative: There are no physical keys to the kingdom of heaven!

Luke 11:52 - Where Jesus is having a discussion with the Pharisees and lawyers and Jesus says, ***“Woe to you Lawyers! You have taken away the key of knowledge...”*** He was talking about them hindering those who wanted to learn – there is no physical key of knowledge.

The word ***“key”*** in the New Testament is the symbol of authority or power from outside. Here, in this instance, the usage is plural, indicating authority or power over more than one thing: Hell and Death. It is extremely important for us to understand exactly what Jesus is saying here. If you read from a bible version other than the King James, you will likely see the

word “**Hades**,” the actual Greek word used, instead of “**hell**.” The origin of the Greek term “Hades” is uncertain, but generally has been used to mean “*the unseen one*” since antiquity. The formal definition of “Hades” according to Strong’s dictionary translation, is “*unseen*” and carries the same meaning as the Hebrew word “*Sheol*” which simply means “*the grave*,” or “*under the earth*.” The proper understanding of Jesus having the “**keys**” of Hades simply means that He has the authority and/or power to unlock the graves and raise the dead. [In Greek mythology there are several different views in regard to Hades. I will not delve into them because they all stem from mythology and are not true. The Bible deals with truth, and the truth with regard to the word Hades has been stated above.]

The second word rendered “**Death**” in most bible versions is the Greek word “*Thanatos*” which literally means just that: Death. But stop and think: Jesus has already said He has the “keys” (authority and power) over “Hades” or “Sheol” inferring he has power over death – He can “open” the graves and raise the dead. Now, as a second separate item, Jesus is telling us He has the “keys” (authority and power) over “Thanatos” which means death. Doesn't it sound strange that Jesus would tell us He has the power over death (which we naturally assume means he can raise the dead) and then as a second thing apart from the first, tell us again that he has the power to raise the dead? Jesus doesn’t mix words, and He always speaks the truth! So, what are we missing here? Let’s take a closer look...

The answer lies in the context in which He uses these two Greek words “Hades” and “Thanatos:” “Hades” is used to refer to the physical death that eventually comes to all men. It is the natural death that we witness occurring daily. Natural death is the separation of the physical body from the spiritual soul and is sometimes referred to in scripture as the “first death.” After that our physical bodies are typically placed in a grave of some sort. Jesus’ statement that He has the keys (power) over the grave (“Hades” or “Sheol”) simply means He has the power to resurrect the dead as we have already said. He did this for Himself to prove that He can do it for us. But much later in this book, in chapter 20, we are going to see the phrase “**the Second Death**” which is the term used for what happens to the unrighteous after this earthly life is over. Those that are deemed “righteous” have no worry of the second death. Those deemed to be “unrighteous” in this context are the remainder, including the devil and his followers. Therefore, the context in which that second Greek word “Thanatos” is used in this

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passage refers only to the fate of the unrighteous – those who will suffer this “second death.” That fate is “Gehenna,” a place of eternal torment. Jesus also has the keys (authority and power) over this “second death!” He is the one who determines who suffers that fate. It will be His word by which all are judged, to determine whether we are righteous or unrighteous. All of the “righteous” are promised eternal life with the Father, Son and all heavenly beings.

So, Jesus makes the statement to John that He (Jesus) holds the keys to the grave (Sheol – “Hades”) and of death (“Thanatos” – the second death). Jesus, alone, has the authority and power to release us from both. All of us need to fully understand just how important it is for us to live our lives in such a way that we will be judged righteous at our physical death, so we can escape that second death and live forever in Heaven! Keep in mind that some will still be alive when Jesus returns and this conversation does not include them, that matter will be discussed when we get to chapter 20.

After this Jesus says, ***“I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea.”*** This vision also includes the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. Remember, when the “books” of the bible were written, it was done in manuscript form and not separated into chapters and verses. That separation came much later, and by man – most likely for the purpose of referencing – but unfortunately, we tend to use chapter divisions as good “stopping places” for our reading, which I’m sure was never the intent. In this study, because this first vision encompasses chapters 2 and 3, we will study them as one. In those seven letters we will see a church that has lost its first love, forgotten the direction, and lost its path. We will also see a church that is being persecuted and tested. One has compromised with the world, and another has gone back to the way of the world, corrupt and in danger. The seven letters to the churches will form the conclusion of this first vision.