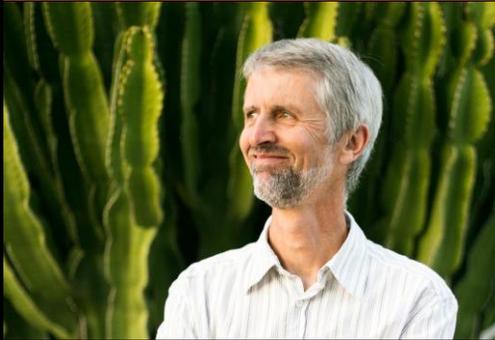


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Revelation Text: Chapter 1

This is Wilrens Hornstra, now on the text of Revelation. I started this series with five units looking at the book as a whole, a general introduction. I dealt with the overall approach to take, the paradigm, with some basic questions, with ‘apocalypse’ as a type of literature and its use of symbols, and with the structure of Revelation. This general introduction is the foundation for this series, and I think it’s worth watching the introduction first, before continuing with these units on the text of Revelation – in case you have not done so. Much was covered in the introduction that I’m not going to repeat here, especially also pertaining to chapter 1 – which is why I am going to start with verse three.

This is one of twelve units taking a closer look at the text of Revelation, section by section. If you like this material:

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Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev 1:3, ESV)



It's a blessing, the first of seven (!) blessings that are included in this book. As we have seen in the introduction, seven is the number of perfection and completion. In different ways, in different places, and different forms the number seven will appear and reappear throughout this book, so here's number one of seven blessings.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. What's this about? Back then people who read would have read aloud in any case, but there is more to it. This is specifically about reading the words in church. Fact is, most people couldn't read, at most one in 10 could. So people were dependent on someone else reading to them. Besides, the church would have been lucky to have one copy of this book. It is not like everyone would have had their own copy. Therefore, this blessing is for the one who reads aloud the words of this book in the congregation of the church.

It is a double blessing because it continues: blessed are those who hear and keep what is written in it for the time is near. Remember this is written to a group of churches in the Roman province of Asia, shortly before the end of the first century. The events it refers to are, for the most part, things that are in the near future. For them, not for us. However, as we join them in hearing the words of this prophecy and

keep it, we too will be blessed.

Which elements in chapter 1 are relevant and encouraging for Christians facing persecution and possibly death in the near future?



Before I continue with the text, I want to give you a brief assignment. And I encourage you to pause this recording once you have heard the assignment and do it. Turn to Revelation chapter 1, read through this chapter, and mark or jot down those elements in the text that are relevant and encouraging for Christians facing persecution and possibly death in the near future. What has John included that directly speaks to this kind of situation? I will be waiting for you here; just pause the recording and take a good look at chapter 1.

- Faithful witness (5, *martus*)
- Firstborn of dead (5)
- Ruler of kings (5)
- The Almighty (8)
- John shares with them tribulation, kingdom, endurance (9)
- First and last (17)
- Living one (18)
- Keys of Death, Hades (18)



These are some of my answers to the question. This is by no means complete but it gives you an idea. Jesus is the faithful witness. *Witness* and *testimony* are important words in this book. It is through its witness and its word of testimony that the church will overcome the beast and every other opposition. The Greek words are *martus*, witness, and *martyria*, testimony. This is where the English word *martyr* comes from. Originally, the word *martyr* meant *witness*, but because so many early Christians lost their lives for their testimony, the word changed its meaning to someone who is killed for his or her faith. Jesus, of course, did this too. John presents him as the ultimate example of a faithful witness, for the church to imitate.

Jesus is the firstborn of the dead. This means there will be more – born from the dead. Death is no longer final. Jesus is the ruler of kings on earth – not Caesar. God is the Almighty. Ultimate power resides with him, not with anyone on earth. John makes himself an example as well; he shares with the readers in tribulation, the kingdom, and endurance. Jesus is the first and the last, which means he will have the last word. He is also the living one. Death is no longer something to be feared. It has been defeated. Jesus holds the keys of death and of Hades, the realm of the dead, where according to Greek mythology the souls of dead people continued to exist as

shadows. And of course, he holds the keys, not to keep people locked in but to open the gates and release them into freedom. These examples illustrate that from the beginning Revelation seeks to strengthen believers to bold witness.

Grace to you and peace from him who is
and who was and who is to come, and
from the seven spirits who are before his
throne and from Jesus Christ ... (Rev 1:4-5a, ESV)

There are a few more things I would like to point out in this chapter. First, let's look at the benediction in verses 4 and 5. Notice it has a threefold structure. It begins with the one who is and who was and who is to come. This is God the father, the one who has control over the present, the past, and the future. It ends with Jesus. We would therefore expect a reference to the Holy Spirit. But what we get is a reference to seven spirits.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

SEVEN

7 7 7 7 7 7 7

So what is this about? Who or what are the seven spirits? Different answers have been proposed.

Seven Spirits?

Seven archangels

The sevenfold Spirit of God (Isaiah 11:2)

A strange way to refer to God's Spirit

The fullness of God's presence through his Spirit

Some believe they are seven archangels. Certain Jewish writings refer to these, but the Bible does not.

Based on Isaiah 11:2, where the spirit of God is described using seven phrases, it has been argued that we should understand the phrase to mean the *sevenfold* spirit of God.

It may simply be a strange way to refer to God's Spirit. John does other strange things in this book as well. Apocalyptic literature wants to shake and challenge our normal perception of things. It wants to enable us to see things in new ways. I think this is certainly part of it.

The fourth and final option is a little harder to grasp. We need to consider the wider context. The seven spirits reappear in 4:5, where they are the seven torches or lights in front of the throne, and in 5:6 where they are represented by the seven eyes of the lamb, "which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." This builds on Zechariah 4:10, where the prophet also sees seven lamps, like in Revelation, and is told: "These seven are the eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole earth." (The reference is either to the seven lamps of the lampstand Zechariah sees or to the

foundation stone in Zechariah 3:9, which has seven 'eyes' or inset precious stones.)

7 Spirits = 7 Lamps = 7 Eyes

+

sent out into all the earth



The fullness of God's presence on
earth and in the church

We can therefore combine the ideas of *spirits* and *lamps* and *eyes* with the idea *sent out into all the earth*. This leads to the conclusion: It is through the Holy Spirit that God is present on earth and in the church. Seven symbolises the fullness and completeness of this presence. Therefore the seven spirits represent the fullness of God's presence through his Spirit.

The Second Exodus

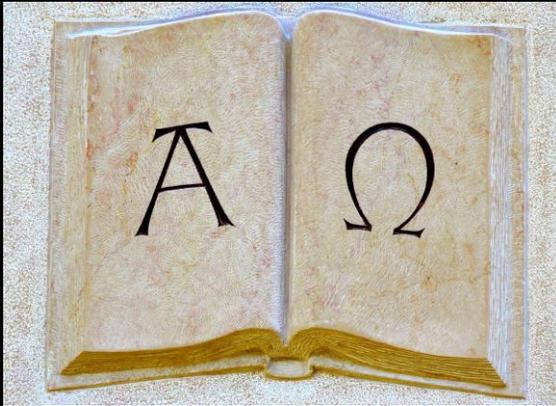
A kingdom, priests (1:6)

As in Exodus 19:6



Something else to point out: In the introduction, I argued that one way to look at Revelation is to see it as a second or new exodus. This already becomes visible here, in chapter 1. That the readers are a kingdom and priests is language directly borrowed from the book of Exodus. This is what God said about the people of Israel once they arrived at Mount Sinai.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Rev 1:8, ESV)



Then there is this statement that God makes about himself in 1:8. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8, ESV). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet. He is the beginning and the end. When God speaks again in chapter 21, he combines these two phrases. The idea is based on Isaiah, esp. 44:6.

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god." (Is. 44:6, ESV)

It is worth noting that in 1:17 and in 22:13 the exact same things are said of Jesus: he is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Only one can be the first, and only one can be the last. But this One includes both the father and the son.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

The Power Question

The Almighty

9x (out of 10)



In this statement that God makes about himself, he also claims to be the Almighty. This phrase is used nine times in the book of Revelation and appears only once in the rest of the New Testament. It is one of many indications that the power question, who is in charge, is central to this book. And for good reasons. Believers facing persecution need to know who is going to win this battle.

on the Lord's day (Rev 1:10, ESV)

In verse 9, we start reading the setting for the first series of seven in the book. This is the introduction to the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3, as explained in the introduction unit that looked at the structure of Revelation. John sees Jesus in priestly dress. There are several elements here that remind us of Daniel 7, where one like a son of man comes to the ancient of days. Amazingly, Jesus combines the characteristics of these two. He is the son of man with white hair, which makes him ancient of days. He is very different from the Jesus John had known on earth. This is Jesus glorified.

John tells us this happened on the Lord's Day. This phrase only appears here in the Bible. It is probably a reference to the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection. It is an indication that Christians began to celebrate this weekly day early on.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, 2016 (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)



John sees Jesus in the midst of seven lampstands. These represent the seven churches. These churches do not only exist on earth; they also exist in heaven, in the presence of Christ. The seven stars in the right hand of Jesus are the angels of the seven churches, so we are told in verse 20. This is more difficult to understand. Does each church have a guardian angel? But if so, why would Jesus communicate with these angels by means of a letter? Are these angels in reality the leading elder or pastor of each church? The word *angel* can also mean messenger. Had these churches sent representatives to John and is he now sending them back as messengers? An intriguing fourth possibility is that the “angel” in each case is the one who will read the letter and the book to the church out loud, making him the messenger.

We cannot be certain what John meant with the seven angels, but one thing is clear. Their position in the right hand of Jesus shows closeness and protection.

With this, we are ready to hear the seven letters – in the next unit!

Credits

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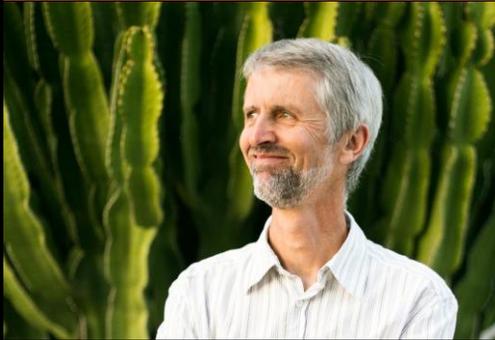
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