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Jesus Christ in the Midst of His People: A Study of Revelation 1:9–22

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Our objective in this study is to observe the relationship that emerges between Jesus Christ and His people in the opening vision and prophecy of the seven letters to the churches. We wish to understand the revelation about Jesus, the way He is pictured, His claims, requirements, expectations, and decisions. The titles attributed to Jesus will shed light on the purpose of the vision connected to the seven letters. If the reality of judgment is involved, we will find out the nature of this judgment, and the implications for the church of this generation.

The Great Issues of the Apocalypse

All the issues presented in Revelation are intended to motivate God's people. God is described by impressive titles so as to awaken the consciousness of His followers and of humankind in general. The invitation to faithfulness, the urge to persevere, the call to conversion, the promises and warnings, the description of covenant curses, all fit under the umbrella of historical and eschatological arousing/alerting of God's people. There are several reasons for this emphasis. We list the following:

Persecution/deception. Facing the persecution and the deception by forces hostile to God's kingdom, His subjects are exhorted to be patient and persevere. This aspect is illustrated by the apostle John's testimony:

I, John, your brother and fellow-partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev 1:9, NASB).

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Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Rev 2:10).

The emphasis is clearly on endurance, steadfastly maintaining hope.

Lukewarmness. Another objective is to revive and to restore the consciousness of the lukewarm. They are urged to evaluate their true condition and the issues at stake and to render unconditional faithfulness to their Resurrected Lord.¹

Time and again appeals are made to straying believers for their conversion and also appeals to those who are unaware of God and who ignore His plans.² This is the missionary aspect of the writing. Moving declarations of love testify to His passion for His people as He explains the way of salvation and how to maintain it. He displays in His Word His plan of teaching, reproof, of correction and training in righteousness, for the vindication of His people and of His name.

Judgments. Warnings and judgments, whether investigative or executive, remind us of the book of Hosea. God is pictured in that prophecy as a loving husband attempting various ways to draw His unfaithful spouse back, at the same time displaying the hurt and jealousy of a husband deceived and abandoned by his wife.

Cosmic Controversy. Since Revelation portrays the cosmic controversy, it is important to notice the various opponents that God and His people face. On the one hand there are internal opponents (inside the church) whose dispositions, words and attitudes favor compromise, lethargy, indifference and forgetfulness of the church and its mission. On the other hand there are Satan and his allies, all the powers hostile to the reign of God. These try to inhibit God's plan concerning the whole of humankind. Satan opposes everything that testifies that God is Lord and the Author of life. Satan seduces and then accuses the penitent, which in essence is an attempt to deprive the believer of the acquittal and forgiveness God graciously offers.³

His allies are the two beasts that appear to imitate God, the Lamb, and even the Holy Spirit. These powers counterfeit the Trinity in an attempt to usurp God's prerogatives to be worshiped and to receive exclusive allegiance. All their display of prestige, visions, signs and images are lies. What Satan could not be in the heavenly sphere, He tries to be on earth. The strategy of Satan and his allies consist mainly in usurping the worship that only God the Creator deserves. This is the issue in the central chapters 12-14.

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Revelation also shows that death, an enemy of another kind, will ultimately be destroyed, along with all the harmful effects sin has caused.

The Vision

Structure of the Passage. The following sections briefly outline this initial vision of the book of Revelation:

1. Introduction: the place, time, and circumstances (1:9-11).
2. Appearance of “one like a son of man” (1:12-20).
 - a. Description (1:13-16).
 - b. Self-presentation (1:17-20).
3. Addresses to the seven churches (2:1-3:22).

Between the description and the speaking of “the one like a son of man” (vs. 17), John falls before Him “as a dead man,” overwhelmed by the incomparable Christ, described in a unique manner by means of apocalyptic symbols.

The description of Christ’s person is arranged in the form of a literary chiasm:

- A Head; white hair (white wool, snow)
- B Eyes (flames of fire)
- C Feet (burnished bronze)
- D Voice (sound of many waters)
- C’ Hand (held seven stars)
- B’ Mouth (sharp two-edged sword)
- A’ Face (like the sun)

The numbering of the seven parts of the body in sequence reveals a correspondence between A and A’, B and B’, and C and C’. The center of the chiasm (D) emphasizes the voice, or the spoken word of the Christ. What John hears and what he sees is also in the form of a chiasm: Audition (vss. 10,11) - Observation (vss. 12-16) Audition (vss. 17-20).

Verse 20 is an interpretation of the symbols (the stars and the menorah) provided by Christ Himself. In verse 17b, He presented Himself to enable John to identify the Person speaking to him. This confirms the two aspects of the opening expression of the book: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” Its sense is both objective (a message about Him) and subjective (a message from Him.).

Author. John presents himself as “your brother and fellow- partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus” (vs. 9). These themes occur throughout the book. From the beginning the tone of solidarity is set. John brings an awareness and a

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reinforcement of the ties that bind God's children together as members of the family of the heavenly Father and His kingdom.

It is remarkable that John does not identify himself according to a lineage, a name, race, or by splendid titles inherited or acquired. He places himself in relation to God and His service; the references he calls upon are the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. He lives for Someone else; he is a witness, a servant.

The Theophany

The terms John uses to introduce the central personage in the vision clearly indicate a genuine theophany—a visible manifestation of deity. The unusual expression “I turned to see the voice” (vs. 12) reminds the reader of God's appearance at Mt. Sinai and the reading of the Greek Septuagint that “all the people saw the voice” (Exod 20:18).

The evocation of the trumpet that sounded at Sinai (Exod 20:18; Rev 1:10) is also a literary device to announce a theophany.⁵ The reaction of John to the vision likewise indicates a supernatural manifestation. “When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man” (vs. 17, cf. Ezek 1:28; Dan10:8).

John's reaction was due to the awe-inspiring vision of the majesty, the transcendence, the supernatural and divine manifestation of the glorified Christ. The Saviour's compassionate gesture expressed a divine act; He put his hand on John and uttered comforting words to give him confidence.⁶ He presents Himself and gives for the second time the commission to write what He is about to reveal to His servant.

The Lampstands. When John turned to see who addressed him, he first saw seven golden lampstands. These symbols collectively highlight the ecclesiological perspective of the encounter. Four passages are generally cited as the OT cultic background to this NT designation of the church (see Exodus 25:31-40; 37:17-20; 1 Kgs 7:49; Zech 4:2, 11).

John is not shown a reproduction of these earlier models. The lampstands in Revelation differ in various features from these. The seven golden lampstands of the initial vision are not supported by one shaft as described in Exodus 25. They also differ from the ten aligned menorah of the Solomonic temple both in number and position. Zechariah's vision of a golden lampstand with its bowl and seven lamps would seem closest to what is described in the book of Revelation; however, a different meaning is given them. In that context the lamps represent the eyes of the Lord which inspect the earth. Even though the cultic seven-branched lampstand is alluded to, John's vision is unique. His focus is on the position and activity of the Son of man in His relation to the church, the ecclesiological sanctuary.

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Of all the functions a symbolic lampstand might suggest, that of shining is the most probable. This function has already been attributed to the apostolic congregation (see Matt 5:14-16). However, because the focus of the vision is on the High Priest, Jesus Christ, we cannot overlook the fact He is the one who ought to take care of the menorah so that it fulfills its function.

To apply sanctuary typology to the earthly church does not nullify its application to the heavenly sanctuary in its proper context. Richard Davidson has observed the following:

We noted . . . that in the time of the church the earthly antitypes in the spiritual kingdom of grace find a *spiritual* (nonliteral), partial (nonfinal), and universal (nongeographical/ethnic) fulfillment, since they are spiritually (but not literally) related to Christ in the heavens. Thus, we should expect that when sanctuary/temple imagery in Revelation is applied to an *earthly* setting in the time of the church, there will be a *spiritual* and not literal interpretation, since the temple is a spiritual one here on earth.

In harmony with this hermeneutical principle, the antitypical lampstands *on earth* in Revelation 1 are not literal but spiritual. The church living between “the already and the not yet” is portrayed elsewhere in Scripture as the antitypical ecclesiological temple. Revelation is consistent with this in utilizing the sanctuary terminology of the lampstands to apply to the spiritual body of the earthly church. Jesus (through His Spirit) is spiritually present with His church on earth.⁷

In the first covenant God expressed His desire to dwell among His people (Exod 25) so that the attention of all Israel would center on Him, their Lord and Guide. In this initial vision of Revelation the Son of Man is in the midst of His people, not as in a dwelling, but to judge and prepare them to meet His requirements. The investigative aspect of the function of the Son of Man has been compared to a Jewish household’s search for leaven before Passover.⁸

One Like a Son of Man. The expression “son of man” occurs in the book of Ezekiel 90 times to designate the prophet himself. There are three instances in the apocalyptic literature where the expression “son of man” is used without the article (Dan 7:13; Rev 1:13; 14:14). These latter usages appear in a vision setting. This personage is not only a mysterious being, eschatological executor of a divine judgment, and holder of royal authority, but he also takes on further dimensions.

In the gospels Jesus designates Himself as “the son of man” (with the article). Oscar Cullman draws our attention to the fact that “one must distinguish two aspects of the words of Jesus: those with which he designates himself thinking about his eschatological work which will be

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accomplished in the future, and those which he applied to himself, thinking about his mission on earth.”⁹ We find the first aspect in the book of Daniel and the second, with the idea of an incarnation, as an original revelation of the New Testament. The one like a Son of Man in the opening vision in Revelation occupies a unique position. There is no description of the “son of man” in Daniel, nor elsewhere in the NT. In the book of Revelation, He is disclosed through the veil of a symbolic description.

Priestly Clothing. The first item in the description of the son of man concerns His garment. The Greek word, *podērēs*, is used only here in the NT and indicates “a robe reaching to the feet.” It is used in the LXX (Septuagint) to translate four different Hebrew words that may at times pertain to priestly attire (*hōsān*, Exod 25:7; 35:9); *me’īl*, Exod 28:4, 31; 29:5); (*mahalāsāh*, Zech 3:4); (*baddīm*, Ezek 9:3).

The title of High Priest is not explicitly expressed in this passage, nor is it among the titles attributed to Christ in the book. However, the allusion to His costume in a context using sanctuary imagery favors the view that our resurrected Lord is functioning as the antitypical High Priest. Some disagree and limit the clothing to a symbol of a royal or divine dignity.¹⁰ The argument is also advanced that if Christ is associated with God to receive adoration, He is not a called priest, for a priest is the one who worships. Though interesting, this reasoning is not relevant. The association of Christ with the concept of sacrifice forbids the taking of this perspective into account (Rev 5:6, 9, 12).

Within the context of the biblical canon the garment of the high priest relates to his function. According to Jacques Doukhan, the distinctive function of the high priest occurs during his ministry on the day of atonement.¹¹ The expression “Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10) can also refer to this day; however, the immediate context gives the clues as to what aspects of priestly activity are envisaged.

John does not merely repeat the content of words that he borrows from the Hebrew Scriptures. We should be alert to the new aspects or dimensions the figures may carry because of the Christ event. Moreover, the symbolism that John uses in this initial vision is not isolated from the letters to the seven churches. They belong to the same literary section.¹² William Shea’s demonstration of the covenant formulae of the letters to the seven churches has added further evidence to the link between “the son of man” and the letters.¹³

The second item of clothing mentioned is a golden girdle “girded across His breast,” which most likely emphasizes the royal dignity of the priest.¹⁴

Physical Features. Anthropomorphic language is used to describe the eminence of the Son of Man. The expressions were employed to

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speak about God in the Hebrew Bible. However, many elements of the description are best understood in the immediate context of the messages to the churches.

1. “His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow.” John sees God’s prerogatives—drawn from the description of the “Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:8)—applied to the resurrected Christ. The Son of Man is not only a human being, He is Deity. The application of the whiteness of the hair to the Son of Man is also reminiscent of the judgment background of Daniel 7. A discussion reported in the Talmud shares this view.

One verse says: his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool and [elsewhere] it is written his locks are curled and black as raven. There is no contradiction. One verse [refers to God in session], and the other in war. For a master said: in session none is more fitting than an old man and in war none is more fitting than a young man.¹⁵

2. “His eyes were like a flame of fire.” This expression is used in Revelation 2:18 in a judgment setting, indicating to the church of Thyatira that the “Son of Man”—now designated “the Son of God”—is He who searches the minds of humankind. The immediate context, therefore, leads us to interpret this expression as evoking the omniscience of the resurrected Christ’s all powerful ability to penetrate everything that is hidden. This feature is obviously related to the investigative aspect of the biblical judgment.

3. “His feet were like burnished bronze.” The same expression is coupled with the preceding one in the letter to Thyatira in the self-presentation of Christ. It conveys the idea of stability and reliability.

4. “His voice was like the sound of many waters.” At the center of the descriptive chiasm (Rev 1:14-16), the voice of the Son of Man is emphasized. He is not only to be contemplated, but also to be obeyed. His voice is described in exactly the same terms as the voice of God in Ezekiel 43:2, in a sanctuary setting.¹⁶

5. “In His right hand He held seven stars.” The verb “held” in this sentence is a participle form of the Greek verb *echō*. However, when John restates this description (Rev 2:1), he employs the participle form of the Greek verb *krateō* which in its noun form shades off into the concepts of power and sovereignty. The description thus indicates the total control of the Son of man over the destiny of His church, and is in full harmony with Christ’s comforting words: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand (John 10:27-28). This prerogative of Christ is reassuring. No

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matter what the attack against His people, the Church is safe in His hands.

6. "Out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword." The immediate context of the letters and of the book indicate that the sword is a symbolic and metaphorical instrument of judgment. With the sword Christ declares the truth, fights heresy and unfaithfulness, and finally overcomes all powers hostile to God.

7. "His face was like the sun shining in its strength." John underlines the transcendence of the Son of Man by comparing the radiance of His face with the brightness of the sun.

The overall impression of the vision is a sudden splash of radiant light. The vision begins with the blaze of the lampstands, passing to the brilliance of the golden girdle, the intense whiteness of the hair like wool, like snow, the flashing eyes like flames of fire. His feet glow like burnished bronze, adding a yellow tone, and the stars twinkle in His hands. Finally the whole description climaxes in the dazzling light of His face, as blinding as the noonday sun.

The vision was so overwhelming that John himself, the beloved disciple, could not bear it. As he said, "I fell at His feet as a dead man."

The description we have reviewed discloses the divine dignity and eminence of the resurrected Christ. He is at the acme of what can be described. We can only speak about Him by means of comparison. This does not make Him less real. On the contrary, He is the One who defines reality. E. B. Allo has correctly noticed that "In all the passages where John introduces God or the Christ in vision, (Ch 1; 4; 5; 12; 14; 22), he avoids naming them directly. An awe, a mysterious respect distinguishes them from all other persons. Especially, he is careful not to call the 'Son of Man' an angel. He has clearly indicated throughout the book the divine transcendence of the Messiah to avoid any confusion."¹⁷

The Son of Man's Self-Presentation. Christ's words to John at this point in the vision put the symbolic description of His person in the historical perspective of His victorious death and resurrection.

1. "I am the first and the last." The same phraseology is used in Revelation 2:8; 21:6 with the variant Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and in 22:13, which reiterates all the terminology used.

In the OT this expression describes an attribute of God. In Isaiah 44:6 God uses it in a context of salvation. Likewise, in Isaiah 48:12-13, the expression focuses on God as the omniscient Creator whose right hand spread out the heavens. Parallel to the words of Isaiah 44:2, Christ uses the words "Do not be afraid" (Rev 1:17) when he speaks to John. These previous occurrences in which God acted bestow on Christ's use of such expressions a divine authority to speak the way He

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does to the churches. This observation fits the hypothesis of William Shea concerning the description of a suzerain in the preamble of the covenant formulae which he sees reflected in the messages to the seven churches.¹⁸

The words “the first and the last” are limits of duration, but reference points extremely distant one from the other. They indicate the One so described cannot be limited to a temporal category. In other words, the words “the first and the last” do not delimit the subject; instead they delimit one another. As a direct consequence of this, the text does not allow the reader to say that Jesus Christ has a beginning or an end.

2. “The living One.” This expression is one of God’s titles in the OT (Josh 3:10; Ps 42:3). In Revelation 1:18 the phrase, “the living One”, is associated with the affirmation of the death and the resurrection of Christ. The whole sentence is a proclamation of the victory of Christ over death. His possession of the keys of death and hades indicates Christ’s exclusive divine prerogative. This is how the power over these keys is interpreted in the Targumic literature.¹⁹

The possession of the keys indicates that the Son of Man is not only the all-powerful Judge, but also the Giver of eternal life, the One on whom the destiny of mankind depends. He is the eternal living One who has the eschatological power to resurrect the dead and to give eternal life. This is the reason why He can encourage the church and promise: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The Letters

Literary Structure. A. Vanhoye,²⁰ following the earlier proposition of Nils Wilhelm Lund, argues for a concentric structure of the seven letters.²¹ According to this view the letters are organized around the letter to Thyatira which is the central part of the chiasm. It is the longest and contains features of all the other letters. In its first section (2:18-23), the structure is similar to the first and the third letters in terms of Christ’s praise and the rebuke; whereas, in its second section (2:24-28), the letter is closer to the second and the sixth letters which contain no warning of covenant curses. These observations favor an overall homogeneity of the seven letters.

Moreover, the beginning and the end of the letters add evidence to this fact. The Son of Man introduces himself by means of the expression “says this” (*tade legei*), which we find only eight times in the NT, seven of those appearing at the beginning of the letters (Rev 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). This expression joins the prophetic mode of the OT prophets who, in order to emphasize the trustworthiness and authority of God’s

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word, began with a “Thus says the Lord” (*tade legei kasios*, Amos 1:6). In the context of the letter the expression is followed by Christ’s message to the specified church.

Five letters refer to features or prerogatives of the Son of Man drawn from John’s description of Him. This fact also attests to the unity of the letters with the first section of the vision. The literary construction is common to all the letters, except that the first three letters present the appeal to listen to the Spirit followed by the Promise to the overcomer; whereas the last four reverse the order of these two items.

The letters extend promises to those who overcome. The promises indicate that despite deviations of all kinds in the churches, an unconditional attachment to the Lord Jesus is possible. It is for the purpose of detecting these deviations and to show His people the way back to a covenant relationship, to victory, that the Son of man comes to judge. This judgment aims to correct the servants of God and to encourage them to hold firm to their allegiance.

Building on the study of G. E. Mendenhall,²² William Shea has pointed out that the letters appear to be patterned (with slight differences) after an Israelite covenant formula which is very similar to the ancient Hittite suzerain treaty.²³

In the seven letters we may identify the following recurring sections: a pre-ample, an historical prologue, stipulations, blessings and or curses according to the situation of the church, and finally a witness. Labeled differently we may express it thus:

- I. An Introduction
 - A. The Name of the Church
 - B. The Presentation of Christ
- II. The Body of the Letter
 - A. Diagnosis
 - B. Praises, Rebukes, Encouragement, or Warnings
- III. Conclusion
 - A. The Words of Christ Attributed to the Spirit
 - B. Promises to the Overcomer

Content. There is a passage from the writing to the message. The writing is addressed to the angel; the message to the church (Rev 2:1, etc.). The descriptive self-presentation of the Son of Man (Rev 1:10-18) is related to the situation of each church, which shows that He is not only the judge but also the remedy, the solution. His diagnosis is the first step to freedom from confusion, blindness or alienation from the covenant. The churches face several kinds of dangers. Opponents sap the vitality of its faithfulness. These dangers are unmasked in order to

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give the servants of God the opportunity to resist and to maintain a genuine covenant relationship with the Creator and Redeemer.

1. Christ's Coming. An important element in the vision of Christ and the seven churches is His coming. The expression "Son of Man" is linked to the idea of coming drawn from Daniel 7, where He is referred to as coming for His enthronement subsequent to a heavenly judgment. In the setting of the letters to the churches, all the declarations are situated in the perspective of the coming of God. There are, however, two aspects involved regarding the reality of this coming.

A. A conditional coming. The expression which insists on the manner rather than on the event. For example, in Revelation 2:5; 2:16; 3:3, the tone is "repent or else I will come to you." This coming is like the visit of God in the OT to judge His people.

B. An unconditional coming. This aspect is found not only within the context of the letters (2:25; 3:11), but also as a theme to the whole book. The opening lines of the Revelation refer to it (Rev 1:7). The center of the book, if one adopts the chiasmic structure proposed by Kenneth Strand, pictures the coming of the Son of man sitting on a white cloud. The last emphatic promise of Jesus in the book is "Yes, I am coming quickly" (Rev 22:20).

2. Features and Issues. We accept the historicist perspective of interpretation which sees a historical chronology in the succession of the churches from the beginning of the Christian era to the end of this world. However, in this study we will center on the issues dealt with in each letter in order to discover how Jesus Christ is revealed.

The letters reveal to those addressed the Lord whom they serve, their own spiritual condition, and what they should be or do to remain in the covenant in order to benefit from its present and future blessings. In each letter Jesus, the Son of Man, is described in such a way as to provide fitting answers to the problems raised by the circumstances and the need of the particular church addressed.

Analysis of the Churches

Ephesus. This church combines several features that cause her to appear as a genuine example of an ideal Christian community. She has doctrinal clear-sightedness that equips her to detect errors. Concerning her ethics, she seems irreproachable. She looks at the behavior of the Nicolaitans with contempt. With respect to several visible issues, she seems conformed to Jesus Christ, except for the link of perfection: "You have left your first love" (Rev 2:4).

We learn that a congregation may have good doctrines and at the same time practices caustic criticism and severe judgments that do not

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glorify the Lord Jesus. If love, which is supposed to motivate and inspire all our actions, is reduced to only a sense of duty, then vitality turns into routine. Love does not exclude sound doctrine. Actually, love fades because of iniquity. Jesus made that plain (Matt 24:12). Love faded because of a detective mentality which prevailed in the church.

The NT description of the historical situation at Ephesus during apostolic times indicates this church was warned by the apostle Paul: “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert. . .” (Acts 20:29-30). Testing evil persons and those claiming apostleship and authority (Rev 2:2), the Ephesians went to the extreme in this direction, so much so that their love was overcome by a “detective mentality.”

Love is at the foundation of the church, given that the most wonderful characteristic of the God who founded it is love and that He did it out of love. The moving away from love, which in the text is compared to a fall (vs. 5), is an alienation from light. The covenant curse, the removal of the lampstand (vs. 5), is significant in this respect.

The eye is not sufficient; we must include the heart. A heart moved by Christ’s love (Rev 1:5) must permeate our thoughts and actions. The remedy for the problem prophesied in the letter to Ephesus is to adopt the mind-set of Jesus (Phil 2:5, KJV). This is indicated by the call to repentance (*metanoē*) which is literally the changing of the mind. It is not enough to suffer in the name of the Lord; the worshiping servant is invited to think like Him.

Smyrna. The issue in this letter concerns the unconditional attachment to the Lord Jesus, whatever circumstances the believer faces. Loyalty to Jesus is the way to a total and a definitive liberation. Christ is presented as the One who tasted death and who rose to life, victorious over the grave (Rev 2:8). His power is not limited by the enemy death. He has the keys of death and the grave (Rev 1:18). Because of His prerogatives, nothing can ultimately prevail over the believer who clings to Him. No shutting up, whether by the tongue (blasphemy), or prison, or even death can overcome him, because of Christ who guarantees the removal of “the second death” (Rev 2:11). This letter is very comforting. It fills those who face persecution with courage and determination, even to the point of possible martyrdom. Whatever may be the tribulation, there are limits beyond which the persecutor cannot go.

Those who suffer may be tempted to give themselves up to revolt, rebellion, or despair. All these emotions tend to cause their victims to become prey to rancor, anger, or self-pity. The temptation is to lose the

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nobility of their dependence on God, an Adventist attitude, waiting on God under all circumstances while awaiting His advent, instead of taking one's destiny into one's own hands for the sake of self-preservation. Another way to express this loss of all things through clinging to Christ is the use of the term "poverty."

The awareness the believer is called to maintain is a lively consciousness of participating in the life, in the passion, and in the resurrection of Christ, and the conviction of being a "fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance" of God's servants, like John himself (Rev 1:9). Although the Christian may be bound, be limited by various obstacles, he has the possibility to go through them all because of "the first and the last," Jesus Himself. Nothing has absolute power to mask the vision of his Lord. His destination is the freedom of eternal life. The dynamic of the relationship between the antitypical High Priest and the people He cares for is essential to grasp, especially for the eschatological people of God who will face persecution, as we read in the letter to Philadelphia (Rev 2:10).

Pergamum. Jesus is described as a warrior who fights by means of a sharp two edged-sword against those who are opposed to faithfulness to His name and who spread false doctrines (the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans).

The Christian is urged to overcome two kinds of obstacles. The first, persecution, an external danger, can separate the Christian from Jesus and from His testimony (Rev 2:13). A second, idolatry and immorality, can separate the believer from God and from His word (Rev 2:14-15). Concerning the place, even though it is where Satan's throne is, the church is not advised to move away, but rather to be faithful like Antipas, even unto death. Because of the spread of false doctrines, there is a call to repentance, which in the context consists of giving them up (Rev 2:16).

The blessing symbolized by the gift of the manna indicates that genuine communion with the Lord cannot include a consumption of things offered to idols, or being involved in acts of immorality. These practices lead to alienation and are a corruption of the legitimate covenant relationship with God. Outside the covenant there is nothing but regression. When the faithful remain in the covenant, they are placed in a position of receptivity. They are granted some of the hidden manna—that is, life—and a new I.D. that lasts forever—that is, a new name written on the stone.

Thyatira. In this letter, Christ presents himself as the omniscient Judge. The issue is that the authority of the Word of God has been usurped and an illegitimate use made of it. There is a perversion of true prophecy and of true teaching in the claims of Jezebel. Instead of

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leading to God, she leads God's servants away from His covenant, "so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols" (Rev 2:20).

There is a usurpation of the prerogative of the Spirit in order to cover practices opposed to the plan of God. These practices, such as knowing "the deep things of Satan," call for judgment. And if the children of Jezebel are put to death, it is for the purpose of stopping the propagation and influence of the false teaching (Rev 2:23, 24).

The Christian is invited to hold on to the Word of God until the coming of Jesus (Rev 2:25). The disciple is urged not to replace it by any other foundation. No wonder authority is given to the remnant who keep Jesus' "deeds" (Rev 2:26). If we take into account the Hebrew concept of *dābār* (word/acts), then the expression, "My deeds" are a way of referring to the record of His deeds in the Scripture. True knowledge can only be obtained through the One who is "the bright morning star" (Rev 2:28; 22:16).

Sardis. Jesus is described as performing an intercessory ministry in favor of those who manifest a repentant attitude, so they may escape the lethargy that has taken hold of them. He also has the privilege of keeping the believer listed in the book of life (Rev 3:5).

In this letter we observe Christians who stagnate in their pilgrimage and do not allow their commitment to reach maturity. The church has "received," "heard," but her awareness has become feeble. The verb tenses lead us to formulate the hypothesis that part of this church has kept the letter of the Scriptures but has deprived herself of the hearing which is vital ("what you have received," is a Greek perfect which means "what you have received and still have"; then we have "heard," a Greek aorist, implying that you continue to hear but have not kept or obeyed or fully acted on that hearing). When the living Word of Christ is no longer at the center, when it is no more His invigorating Spirit who inspires and supports the achievements of the church, then routine takes over, leading inevitably to death unless something radical happens. A superficial evaluation of the condition of the church could make it look healthy and alive, but the investigation of the Son of Man results in a different diagnosis.

The good news in this letter is that Christ has redeemed us and we are listed in the book of life; however, we are invited to countersign personally, receiving the grace to be faithful to His living word. Christ is not only the Savior, He is also the Lord who should be obeyed through the hearing and the doing of His will, as revealed in the Scriptures.

The remedy to the situation of this church is to "remember," to go back to its source, to listen, to hear God through His Word made alive

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by His Spirit (Rev 3:3). To those who give heed to the invitation, the ultimate covenant blessing of being Jesus' companions is granted (Rev 3:4).

Philadelphia. In the letter Christ attributes to Himself the title of "saint" (*ho hagios*, the holy one). This is the only place in the book of Revelation where the title is applied to Him. Elsewhere, this title is God's prerogative (Rev 4:8; 6:10). This shows the high Christology of the book. Jesus Christ is also designated as the "True One." It is also His prerogative to have "the key of David," and the authority associated with it (Rev 3:7). This latter expression points to his messianic identity.

The letter to Sardis emphasized the relationship of Jesus to the Spirit of life. In the letter to Philadelphia it is the intimate and unique link between Jesus and the Father that is highlighted (vs. 12 alone refers four times to "My God").

In the letter to Smyrna, Christ gives the persecuted Christians the assurance of liberation from all chains, whether poverty, slander, prison, or death. In the letter to Philadelphia (the literary parallel to the Smyrna church), He presents Himself as the One who gives access to communion with God and who establishes an indestructible relationship with His people (Rev 3:7-8).

This church is attached to the Lord Jesus (there is no covenant curse or warning). Unlike the church at Sardis, she has kept His word and did not deny the name of the Lord. She is persevering in the covenant, although she has little strength (Rev 3:8).

This last aspect is a tremendous message and example for any generation of Christian tempted to look at its weakness and thereby refrain from doing evangelism. What is fundamental is to be unconditionally attached to the Lord Jesus and to rely totally on Him. The rich cultic sanctuary vocabulary of this letter points to the worship issue and indicates that the purpose of mission is to bring nonbelievers to worship a loving and just God.

Laodicea. There is no better way to end these messages than for Jesus Christ to introduce Himself as "the Amen," the "Yes," the climax of all the blessings of God (Rev 3:14; cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

The lawsuit tone is evident in the letter to Laodicea. Warnings and covenant curses follow a hard but realistic diagnosis concerning the condition of the church. Nevertheless, this is not the whole picture. Even when Jesus threatens the wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked church of Laodicea, He indicates the solution to the problems. Far from rejecting the object of His love, He judges her in order to heal her, in order to raise her up and to promote her to sharing His kingship (Rev 3:19).

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This letter underscores the passion of Jesus for His church. He is like an ousted king, useless in the sight of His people (she says: “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” Rev 3:17). This church deceives herself concerning her true condition. She has fallen into the trap of self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, just like Ephraim of old before the fall of the Northern Kingdom (Hos 12:8).

The remedy for this Church is to respond to the invitation to forge a vital relationship with Jesus. After the speech about the solution (securing from Christ refined gold in order to be rich, white garments in order to be clothed, and eye-salve in order to see), the narration shows the process leading to the desired relationship. Motivated by love, Jesus judges by reproof and by disciplining His people. He also presents Himself as begging for intimacy, knocking at the door of the heart. This indicates the intensity of His desire and the love flowing from Him. After the relational configuration, the text moves to the enthronement.

Several figures are used to describe the Son of man as He is portrayed in this message:

1. The recipient of all the blessings of God (the Amen) and the One by whom they reach humankind.
2. The supreme reference for the meaning of the life of humankind (the faithful Witness).
3. A disgusted consumer.
4. A threatening judge.
5. A physician who diagnoses the condition of His patient.
6. A provider of remedies.
7. A source of healing.
8. A clothier who restores the dignity of His people with proper clothing to prevent their shame.
9. An educator (A teacher who would teach His wayward disciple).
10. A suitor, pleading for a relationship with His beloved.
11. One who desires deep and genuine fellowship (although the church needs Him more).
12. A king who promises to share His prerogatives with His subjects.
13. The elect of God who transforms the homelessness of His church into a homecoming enthronement, who turns the disenfranchised into princely heirs.

Thus, an observation of the whole passage displays an itinerary which moves from total degeneration to shared kingship. This is absolutely amazing and unheard of. The Creator and King, the only genuine reference point for humankind, ignored and even crucified by His subjects, not only dreams about and plans a possible restored relationship, but more than that, wishes to restore the object of His love

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to the status and dignity of kings. He desires no less than to share His kingship. I assume from this revelation that the redeemed will spend eternity showing their deepest gratitude to the all loving Trinity.

Conclusion

To the historical and eschatological church, facing both persecution and deception, Jesus is revealed as the antitypical High Priest who judges His people. His function in this vision is unique. It surpasses that of the high priests of the old covenant. He is not just the bearer of the sins of His people, or the performer of cultic laws, or even the intercessor. In this setting, He is the one who warns and awakes His people from their lethargy. He prescribes a solution to each problem the church faces, whether from without or within.

Jesus has come and has lived among humankind (incarnation); He died for our sins and arose a conqueror over death. Many Christian communities appropriately teach this good news; but if nothing more is emphasized, a vital part of the biblical revelation about Jesus is lacking. Jesus ascended to heaven and intercedes as our *paraklētōs* (helper, intercessor) before the Father and before the angels (1 John 2:1; Heb 8:1,2; 9:24). The letter to the Hebrews has already revealed this truth. The book of Revelation, though reminding us of this aspect, also points to the ministry of Jesus as the eschatological Judge. This judgment involves the implications of the cross in the lives of His people. The issue is whether His disciples will follow in His steps and be faithful to Him, even if they should face death. In other words, does the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ at the cross for sinners create such a spirit of gratitude in the heart of Christians that they will live exclusively for Him?

The purpose of Christ's investigation of the churches is to make it possible for Him to dictate the appropriate remedy so that the servants and congregation of the antitypical High Priest may be conformed to the requirements of the truth and holiness of His Father.

Jesus examines His church and enters into judgment with her in the form of a lawsuit. He comes, however, to encourage His people, to reveal to them that He is the supreme treasure. All the covenant blessings are linked to their union in Him. But if His people fail to remain in the covenant, that is, if they abandon Him, the covenant curses will be their lot. In Revelation 22:12 Jesus declares: "Behold, I am coming quickly, and my reward is with Me, to render every man according to what he has done."

The judgment Christ expresses in the seven letters verifies our gratitude or ingratitude toward our divine High Priest who died for us,

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and who presently stands for us during this Laodicean era, confessing the names of all who belong to Him before the Father and the angels. He expects nothing less than to see His people standing for Him and confessing His name, no matter what the cost.

This analysis of the churches serves as a preparation for God's people, so that they may be ready when the Son of man returns in glory and majesty. The reader of the Scriptures is informed that "God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Thus, before the coming of "the day of the Lord" (Amos 5:18) for them, that is, before the tragic events of the end of the northern and southern kingdoms, in 722 and 586 BC, respectively, God sent prophets like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel. These prophets were sent as God's representatives in a covenant lawsuit against His people.

Likewise, before the coming of the eschatological "day of the Lord" (2 Pet 3:10), Jesus Himself (described in the book of Revelation as being in the midst of His people) assumes this prophetic office of warning and preparing them for His return.

Notes

* Scripture citations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

1 See the letter to Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22 and the letter to Sardis 3:1-6.

2 See the appeals to conversion in Rev 2-3 the series of trumpets, Rev 8-11; and the three angels' messages, Rev 14.

3 Rev 12:10, 11.

4 Death would have played a decisive role against God's sovereignty if fear of it prevented the servants of God from bearing witness to their unconditional attachment to Jesus.

5 See D. A. Foxvog, A. D. Kilmer, "Music," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 439-440.

6 The gesture of the Son of Man and the following words "fear not" are used in the Scriptures by God or by angels commissioned by Him.

7 Richard M. Davidson, "Sanctuary Typology," *Symposium on Revelation - Bk1*. Daniel and Revelation Committee Series, Frank B. Holbrook, Ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 6:109.

8 Jon Paulien. *Intertextuality, the Hebrew Cultus and the Plot of the Apocalypse*. A paper read at the Literary Criticism and the Apocalypse Consultation, SBL Annual Meeting, New Orleans, November 18, 1990, p. 15.

9 Oscar Cullman, *Christologie du Nouveau Testament* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1958), p. 134.

10 Ignace de la Poterie, "La tunique sans couture, symbole du Christ grand prêtre?" *Bib* 60 (1979): 255-269.

11 Jacques Doukhan, *Aux portes de l'espérance* (Dammaris les lys: Vie et santé, 1983), p. 103.

12 Kenneth A. Strand, "A Further Note on the Covenantal Form in the book of Revelation," *AUSS* 21 (1983):251-264.

13 William Shea, "The Covenantal Form of the Letters to the Seven Churches," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 71-84.

14 F. F. Bruce, "Revelation," *The International Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, ed. F. F. Bruce, Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 1599.

15 *The Babylonian Talmud: Sefer Hagidah*. Translated into English with notes, glossary and indexes by Rabbi Prof. I. Abrahams (London: The Soncino Press, 1938), p. 83.

16 See also Ezekiel 1:24 and Daniel 10:6

17 E. B. Allo, *Saint Jean L'Apocalypse* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1933).

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18 Shea, pp. 71-84.

19 Targum Jer on Gen 30:22; mentioned by R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of John*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920), p. 30.

20 Albert Vanhoye, *Le Message de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Cahiers Evangile, 19 (Paris: Editions du Cert, 1977), pp. 32, 33.

21 Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament. A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1942), p. 331, wrote: "The seven letters do not constitute an heterogeneous assemblage composed by chance, but rather an intentional construction, which purpose is to present a panorama of several situations found in the Christian congregations."

22 G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, PA: 1955).

23 Shea, pp. 71-84.