

“CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH THE SON OF MAN”
REVELATION 1:9-20

For Jews in the first century, one of the most familiar and one of the most remarkable passages in the Old Testament is Daniel’s astonishing visions of one “like a son of man” recorded in Daniel 7 and 10. The Jews were in exile in Babylon at the time, having been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar after Judah’s rebellion. Naturally, this raised all kinds of questions about the strength and sovereignty of Yahweh, their God. How could Yahweh, whom they considered to be omnipotent and sovereign, allow a pagan nation to overpower and subjugate them? And would they be subjugated forever, or could they expect Yahweh to deliver and restore them?

By God’s design, one of the Jewish captives, Daniel, had found favor with Nebuchadnezzar and had been given a prominent role in his court, and the courts of his successors. Daniel was also a prophet, and the Lord gave him a number of visions about the future that were intended to reassure the Jews that, indeed, Yahweh was still sovereign and omnipotent, that their present circumstances were part of His plans and purposes, and that they could anticipate a time when He would exercise His power and dominion on earth as it is in heaven.

So, in chapter 7, after a frightening vision of four fantastical beasts representing four powerful world empires, Daniel has a vision of Almighty God, identified as the “Ancient of Days,” whom he describes with vivid metaphors. He is so awesome and so glorious that these four ferocious beasts seem like kittens in comparison, and in His presence, they are diminished or destroyed. But the climax of the vision is one who approaches the Ancient of Days in heaven’s throne room who looks “like a son of man.” *“To Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14).*

In chapter 10 this same one returns to reveal more things to Daniel, and He is described as ⁵ *...a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around His waist.* ⁶ *His body was like chrysolite, His face like lightning, His eyes like flaming torches, His arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and His voice like the sound of a multitude”*

Jews in the first century rightly understood these prophetic visions of the one like a “son of man” as messianic. This, they believed, was the promised Messiah who would deliver Israel from pagan kingdoms and establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace. That’s why the “experts” on the law got so upset with Jesus when they put Him on trial the night of His Last Supper. Remember, they hated Jesus, and were looking for a way to condemn Him, but when they could not find credible witnesses to corroborate their testimonies against Jesus, Caiaphas, the High Priest, asked Him point blank, *“...I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:63).* When Jesus replied, ⁶⁴ *“You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (26:64),* Caiaphas and the members of the Sanhedrin went berserk, accusing Jesus of blasphemy, then sentencing Him to death.

Why? Because they were intimately acquainted with Daniel 7. Jesus was claiming to be this very “son of man” in Daniel’s vision, and for this He was crucified. Which brings us to Revelation 1.

Verses 9-10. ⁹ *I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and*

the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book 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."

John is the beloved disciple of Jesus and the only surviving member of the band of Twelve some sixty-plus years after Jesus ascended into heaven some forty days after rising from the dead. He had not seen Jesus since that day, though he had faithfully testified about Him, and he was now in exile for that testimony on the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. In that sense his situation is not much different than Daniel's.

One Sunday morning, while John was worshiping, presumably in private, he heard behind him a loud voice like a trumpet. As you know, there is nothing soft or subtle about a trumpet, especially if someone sneaks up behind you and begins to play it. That's why we frequently use the word *blast* to describe the sound of a trumpet.

But what John heard was not the sound of a real trumpet, but a sound *like* a trumpet. Trumpet is a simile for the volume, clarity, strength, and authority of the voice John heard. But there is something else about this simile. In the Old Testament, the trumpet blast was part of the pomp and circumstance when a king was coronated or when he rode into town after winning an impressive military victory. In almost every New Testament occurrence, a trumpet blast is associated with the Day of the Lord or the Second Coming of Christ. In other words, John's use of this simile as a description of the voice he heard has eschatological overtones.

Apparently, John was so astonished by the voice that he could not immediately turn around to see who was speaking, because before he did so the commanding voice told him to write what he is about to see in a book and send it to the seven churches, all of which are identified by the names of the cities in which they are located—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. As I told you last week, these were seven historical churches in Asia (modern day Turkey) that existed in seven influential cities in the first century that were connected by a great circular road. Chapters 2 and 3 record specific messages from Jesus to each church, and the order in which these messages are given correspond to their location on that road.

Verses 12-16. ¹² *"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands..."*

When John does turn around to see who the voice belongs to, the first thing he identifies is seven golden lampstands. John, who was intimately acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures, would have immediately associated these seven lampstands with the lampstand in the tabernacle and temple, the light of which represented the presence of God. No doubt John was musing about this, for later, in verse 20, Jesus identifies these "seven lampstands" as the seven churches in Asia—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, etc. It is reasonable to conclude that these seven lampstands are symbolic of the presence of Christ in these communities where these churches are located.

But when John turned around, he saw more, much more, than seven golden lampstands. **Verses 13-16,** ¹³ *and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his*

face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Does this sound familiar? This description bears a striking resemblance to Daniel's visions of one like a "son of man" in chapters 7 and 10. And, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that this is one and the same Person. But who is He? And what is the significance of these specific descriptions of His appearance? The Person identifies Himself in **verses 17-18**. *17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*

There is no doubt that the Person in John's vision is none other than the Lord Jesus, for the One who died and came to life is a reference to His death on the cross and His subsequent resurrection, which are the basis for His current exalted status as the King of kings and Lord of lords. In His death and resurrection, He single-handedly defeated the most powerful and destructive enemies of mankind—sin, Satan, and death. Thus, John, the beloved disciples who leaned against Jesus' breast during the Last Supper, is now facing that same Jesus in His exalted state, the very One whom Daniel saw and described in his visions. Jesus is that one who is "like a son of man." Which proves that He was telling the truth to Caiaphas when He identified Himself as the Son of Man during His trial.

But what is the significance of these descriptions of Jesus? Most scholars believe that they symbolize three major features of His heavenly role. The first is His priestly role. The long robe and the golden sash that Jesus is wearing were similar to the priestly garments worn by the Levites who ministered in the tabernacle and temple. What is more, one of the roles of an OT priest was to trim the lamps, remove the wick and the oil, refill the lamps with fresh oil, and relight those that had gone out (Beale, NIGTC). Chapters 2 and 3 portray Jesus tending the lampstands (the seven churches) by commending, correcting, exhorting, and warning them in order to ensure they are shining brightly in their dark communities.

Second is Jesus' kingly role. Some descriptions of Jesus, particularly Him holding the seven stars in His right hand, and His identifying Himself as "the First and the Last" (similar to "the Alpha and Omega" in verse 8), demonstrate His sovereignty and authority. Furthermore, kings typically wore robes and sashes.

But probably the most prominent feature in this description of Jesus is His role as Judge. The description of His eyes like flaming fire, His feet like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and His voice like the roar of many waters are not descriptions of someone who is cozy and cuddly, but someone who is fierce and frightening. Fire and furnaces are associated with judgment in the Old Testament. And there can be no doubt that the description of a sharp two-edged sword protruding from His mouth is a symbol of judgment. And this is not the least bit surprising or unexpected, for the Old Testament, portrays the Messiah as the eschatological judge who will punish those who oppose God and do evil. Here, in John's vision, Jesus is poised to fulfill this messianic expectation.

And it is particularly this aspect of John's vision of Jesus that compels him to, verse 17, fall at His feet as though dead. Please do not gloss over this. John was arguably Jesus' best friend when Jesus was on this earth. But his response when he sees the exalted Christ is not to say, "Jesus! So good to see you! Long time! Hey, let me give you a hug!"

No, he involuntarily falls at his feet as though dead. Why. He was scared—so scared that we call it being "scared to death." Why? Because He is not just the Son of Man; He is the Son of God. And this is the first time John has ever seen Him when He wasn't camouflaged by His humanity. He is seeing Him now in His full, undiminished deity, and no man on earth can see undiminished deity without reacting like John.

¹⁷ When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

I want to remind you that the literary genre of Revelation is prophecy, which is language that is intentionally picturesque, exaggerated, and fantastical, using metaphors, hyperboles, and images that are symbolic and not meant to be taken literally. Such is the language of seven golden lampstands. But it is not the first time this specific metaphor is used in Scripture. Any serious reader of the Old Testament would have immediately associated this metaphor with Zechariah's vision. And this would be a good time to tell you that this is typical in the Book of Revelation, and unless we identify and understand these Old Testament allusions, we will not be able to fully understand their meaning in Revelation.

"The First and the Last"

Revelation 1:9-20

Main Idea: John has a startling encounter with the "Son of man," who commissions him to record what he is about to see and deliver it to seven churches in Asia represented by seven golden lampstands.

John's self-identification and situation (9)

Brother and fellow participant in the cause of Christ

Exiled on Patmos because of his association with Jesus

John's commission to write (10-11)

John's apocalyptic vision (12-16)

The seven golden lampstands (12a)

The One in the midst of the lampstands (12b-16)

Like a "son of man" (12b-15; c.f. Dan. 7:13-14)

Seven stars and sharp sword (16)

John's fear and Jesus' description (17-20)