

# Every eye will see him

## Imagining the Christ of Revelation 1:12–18

Jacob Elias Curtis

*I can still remember the explosive power and beauty of it, the sense that the New Testament I held in my hands had a thunderstorm hidden inside it that nobody had warned me about.<sup>1</sup>*

Most modern scholars agree that the Book of Revelation was written in the Roman province of Asia Minor during the reign of Domitian, between 81 and 96 CE. Its author, a Christian leader named John, addressed it to

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seven local churches for which he was responsible. These congregations, located on or near the west coast of modern Turkey, were all facing a common struggle. They were probably not enduring active persecution. Instead, they were becoming complacent during a period of relative peace and prosperity. The reviled Emperor Nero was gone, along with his violent hatred of Christians. The economy was flourishing, and even Christians could become wealthy if they were willing to keep their heads down, participate

in public life, and pay their respects to the emperor. Many of them had begun to do just that. According to New Testament scholar Brian Blount, Christ-followers in major urban centers like Ephesus and Pergamum had taken to “[passing] themselves off as Roman cultic devotees in order to avail themselves of Roman resources.”<sup>2</sup>

1 N. T. Wright, quoted in Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness; Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), xvi.

2 Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9.

By setting aside their allegiance to Christ in order to participate in the Roman economy, the Christians of Asia Minor were doing exactly what their rulers hoped they would do. The entire cultural apparatus of the empire was designed to encourage accommodation. In paintings and murals, on coins and statues and buildings, those living under Roman rule were surrounded by the mythology of the empire. “Poetry and art [were] filled with the imagery of a blessed world, an empire at peace under the sway of a great ruler.”<sup>3</sup> The material culture of the empire reminded its subjects over and over again that Rome had been chosen by the gods as the agent of their will and the mediator of their blessings, that the emperor was himself a god, and that the imperial age was, in fact, the never-ending eschatological age in which all human hopes were finally being fulfilled.

John countered these insidious messages of imperial culture by receiving a vision and then writing a poem about it. His poem “pulls its reader into a world of sky battles between angels and beasts, lurid punishments and glorious salvations, kaleidoscopic vision and cosmic song. It is a world in which [hearers] . . . recapture an elemental involvement in the basic conflicts and struggles that permeate moral existence, and then go on to discover again the soaring adoration and primal affirmations for which God made us.”<sup>4</sup> John, the poet, makes something for the churches of Asia Minor—a poem to purge their imaginations of imperial pictures and replace them with pictures of the risen Christ.

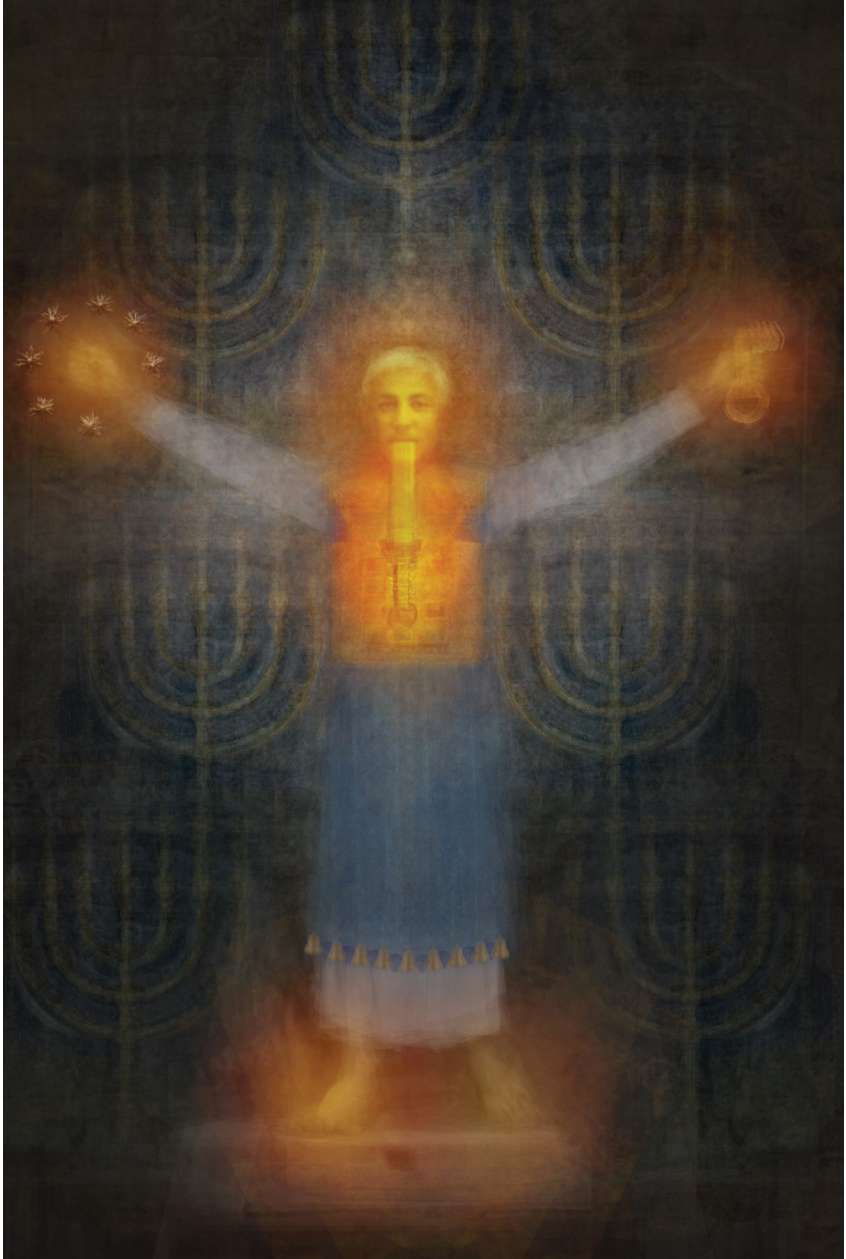
All of which brings me to my project. I want to do what John does. I live in an empire too. I’m surrounded by the empire’s propaganda—by its billboards, websites, glossy magazine spreads, slogans, logos, and branding. I, like the churches of Asia Minor, need not so much new information as a new imagination, filled with pictures of Christ. So I made such a picture. It’s a picture of Christ as John meets him in Revelation 1:12–18. To create it, I researched how a first-century Christian audience might have seen the various elements of this Christ—the seven lampstands, the long robe and golden belt, the hair like white wool, the fiery eyes and glowing feet, the seven stars in his right hand, the sword from his mouth, the keys to Death and Hades. As much as possible, I tried to find sources from the material culture of the time. And then, using what I’d found, I built up a composite portrait of Christ. I took the images I’d gathered,

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3 Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), v.

4 Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), x.

digitally rendered them semi-transparent, and overlaid them in Adobe Photoshop, stacking one on top of another like so many onion skins in order to achieve the desired effect. I hope that this will spark something in your imagination. I hope it will let you look at Christ, if only in a glass darkly, while we wait for him to come again. (See image below.)



### Revelation 1:12–13a

*And I turned to see the voice that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden menorahs. And in the middle of the menorahs was one like a human son.*

In my composition, I've tried to preserve the tension between the otherworldly and the human Jesus. It's easy to see that this is a supernatural figure. His eyes are on fire! His feet are glowing! He's holding the entire

**I've tried to preserve the tension between the otherworldly and the human Jesus.**

galaxy in his hand! As a counterbalance, I made his face as human as possible. To create the image, I used almost fifty different faces. About half of them come from Christian devotional art: ancient Jesuses and modern Jesuses, African and Asian and American and European

Jesuses, Jesuses from paintings, icons, sculptures, and children's books. The other half represent the faces of people living in present-day Israel/Palestine. I found many of these in an Associated Press article called "Portraits of the Wounded."<sup>5</sup> "The wounded," in this case, are all young Palestinian men shot by Israeli security forces along the Gaza Strip. Some were working as paramedics when they were attacked, some were protesters, and some were simply bystanders. As the ordinary people of occupied Palestine, they share something with Jesus of Nazareth. I drew on Christian devotional art again to build up the body of Jesus. Here, I chose only crucifixions. These Jesuses are all nailed to that awful cross, their arms flung wide in agony, in triumph.

### Revelation 1:13b

*He was clothed with a high priest's robe and fastened at the breasts with a golden belt.*

New Testament scholar Ross Winkle argues that the Greek word used here, *podérés*, almost always refers to the foot-length, hyacinth blue, woolen robe of the Jewish high priest.<sup>6</sup> John's audience, on hearing of seven

5 "Portraits of the Wounded," *AP Images Spotlight*, <https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2018/12/5/portraits-of-the-wounded>.

6 Ross E. Winkle, "Clothes Make the (One like a Son of) Man': Dress Imagery in Revelation 1 as an Indicator of High Priestly Status" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2012), 303–304.

golden menorahs, would have guessed that Jesus was in a temple setting. Now their suspicions are confirmed. The one who steps forward to greet John is the high priest of heaven himself, the one who is continually interceding for them and sacrificing on their behalf.

### **Revelation 1:14–16**

*His head, that is, his hair, was white like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like a brass censer, glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 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 with full force.*

John’s audience would have been keenly aware of the swords carried by Roman soldiers. So, in my composition, the sword in Jesus’s mouth is the parallel-edged, short-pointed, “Pompeii-type” blade they would have known best. And it’s coming out not blade-first but hilt-first. I imagined it this way because, in Revelation 5:6, we read about Christ as “a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.” And in 19:13, we learn that Christ, as the rider on the white horse, wears “a robe dipped in blood.” Given that this description occurs before the fighting begins, the blood on the robe can only be Christ’s own. In other words, Christ has the power to defeat the armies of the beast because of his sacrifice on the cross. When threatened with the swords of Rome during his own lifetime, Christ chose to swallow them, to be crucified, to neutralize imperial violence within his own body rather than to turn it back against the empire. It is for this reason that I have the sword facing in, not out.

### **Revelation 1:17–18**

*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”*

In the Greco-Roman pantheon, Hekate was the goddess who held the keys to Hades, who could travel between the realms of the living and the dead, and who revealed hidden secrets to her followers. As such, she was

a rival to the once-dead, now-risen Christ.<sup>7</sup> By showing the keys of Death and Hades in the hand of Christ, John is making a bold claim about who has true power over death. I've built up my composition using a series of ancient Roman keys, much like one Hekate is holding on a miniature bronze altar from the temple at Pergamum.<sup>8</sup>

### **About the author**

Jacob Elias Curtis is the co-pastor of Ambler Mennonite Church, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Michelle. In his free time, Jacob likes to catch crayfish and turtles in the Wissahickon Creek (which runs behind his house) and go for adventure walks with his Boston Terrier, Lizzie.

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7 David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 354.

8 This article began as a project for a course on the book of Revelation taught by Drew Strait, and a large, printed version of the image above (p. 63) now hangs outside the library at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Thanks to Professor Strait for encouraging this project.