

NOTES – Details of the Vision

John's vision of Jesus is similar to, but clearly outstrips Daniel's vision of a revealing angel (Dan. 10:5–6). The Gospels nowhere describe the physical appearance of Jesus; hundreds of artists have used their imagination to fill in the gap. The current description is symbolic, not literal, for the picture becomes bizarre if, say, the sword coming from his mouth is literal. Also note the number of times like is used. No artist could paint what John described. The meaning of these symbols is not exceedingly difficult, as the following discussion makes clear. This is subjective but the suggestions do have good historical support.

Location. John sees Jesus among the lampstands. The one who “loves us and freed us from our sins” (v. 5) is first presented in Revelation not enthroned in heaven or fighting evil but present with and caring for his people. Suffering Christians throughout the ages have taken comfort in Jesus' presence with them.

Shape. Jesus is someone “like a son of man.” At the least, this identifies Jesus as maintaining his essential humanity even in his exalted state. John's Gospel records that Jesus often called himself “Son of man,” which makes unmistakable that this figure is the same Jesus that John had followed as a disciple decades earlier. It also strengthens the identity between Jesus and the splendid figure of Daniel 7:13. The same Jesus that once lived and walked in Galilee is now described as glorious and powerful beyond imagination.

Clothing. The robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest links him in appearance with the high priest of Israel (Exod. 39:2–4). We have already seen Jesus described in priest-like terms in this chapter. This clothing symbolizes his ongoing work of representing his people before his Father.

Hair. The hair appeared like wool, as white as snow. In the ancient world, white hair symbolized the respect due to the aged for the wisdom of their advanced years (Prov. 16:31). This part of the picture points to Jesus' wisdom. In traditional theological language, the “omniscience” of the exalted Jesus may be suggested. He knows what is best for his people, even when they are suffering.

Eyes. The eyes of Jesus appeared like blazing fire. This may mean that he sees everything there is to see (Ps. 139). In theological terms, this may refer to the “omnipresence” of Jesus. He sees the evil of this world; he sees his people in their distress; one day he will respond with righteous fury.

Feet. The feet are like bronze glowing in a furnace. The introduction to one of the great psalms about the coming Messiah announces, “The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Ps. 110:1). The picture is of a powerful king who has so subdued his enemies that they are nothing more than the king's footstool. Some ancient kings symbolized their victories by literally placing their feet on the necks of defeated enemies. These powerful feet of Jesus point to his ultimate triumph over all the forces of evil, natural and supernatural alike. If his hair symbolizes “omniscience” and his eyes “omnipresence,” then the feet may represent “omnipotence.”

Voice. In verse 10, Jesus' voice was compared to a trumpet that could not be ignored. Now his voice is compared to the sound of rushing waters, which also cannot be ignored. On Patmos, John likely could never get away from the insistent sound of the breakers coming off the Mediterranean Sea. The voice of Jesus is the Word of God that must be constantly heard and obeyed (vv. 2, 9).

Hands. In the right hand of Jesus, John saw seven stars. In verse 20 the stars are explained as the angels of the seven churches. Some interpreters see these as meaning a guardian angel for each congregation, an idea found nowhere else in the New Testament (although Matt. 18:10 affirms that individuals have guardian angels). Other interpreters see these in the sense of human messengers, that is, those who were to convey the message of Revelation safely to their respective churches (see 2:1, 8, 12). These would almost certainly have been the pastors of the churches. Although I prefer this second interpretation, I believe John's main point is that Jesus sovereignly held these persons in his protection and care.

Weapon. The strangest part of this picture is that out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. The sword described is a long sword for battle rather than a dagger. According to Revelation 19:15, "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations." The sword stands for Jesus' power to judge and conquer his enemies, thus protecting his people.

Face. The element of the vision John noted last, perhaps because it was the most important, was Jesus' face: like the sun shining in all its brilliance. Here John can only mean the glory of full deity. In Matthew 17:2, Jesus' face "shone like the sun" at his Transfiguration. The Jesus that John, saw both on the Mount of Transfiguration and on the island of Patmos, is none other than Almighty God.