

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 353

Revelation 1:4

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Episode Summary

Our series on the Old Testament in the book of Revelation opens with Rev 1:4a, where we find the phrase “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” The phrase is repeated in Rev 1:8 where parts of it are defined in an important way. Scholars are in general agreement that John gets the phrase from the Septuagint (LXX) Exodus 3:14, but that verse accounts for only one-third of John’s wording. Where does the remainder come from? Why would John draw on Exodus 3:14? What point was he trying to make?

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 353: Revelation 1:4. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! We’re finally here. The day has come!

MH: Yep, we’re actually into the book of Revelation. What do you know? [laughs]

TS: I’m excited. I know everybody around the world’s excited, Mike. I am excited about this. [MH laughs] I’m fired up.

MH: Yeah? Well, let’s just jump in to our first stop in Revelation. We’re not doing verse-by-verse commentary. We’re not doing End Times stuff. We’re going to go through the book and we’re going to look at places (maybe not *every* place, but a lot of places—most of the places, I think would be fair to say) where the book (the author, John) references or does something with the Old Testament. And it isn’t long (not far into the book) before we hit our first one. That is verse 4. So Revelation 1:4 today. And I’m just going to read the first part of verse 4 because I want to focus on one particular thing in this episode. And then we’re going to have Revelation 1:4 (the remainder of it) and a few other things in the next episode. I want to try to chop it up like that because I think it’s just easier to fixate on one particular thing, especially in the case of this episode. There’s just a lot to think about and talk about with respect to the phrase that we get in verse 4, and that is:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...

So there's our phrase for the day. That's our focus for the day. Not the rest of the verse; just that first part. And this is going to get repeated in verse 8. We'll loop verse 8 in toward the end of the episode. Verse 8 (of Revelation 1) says:

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

So a little bit tacked onto that in the front and the back, but essentially that phrase: “him who is and who was and who is to come.” So out of the gate, this wording may or may not bring some Old Testament things to mind for listeners, but scholars have certainly noticed it and spent a lot of time, actually, talking about it. So the first thing I want to comment on is that the phrase is unusual in certain respects. Aune has a three-volume commentary (I think it's three volumes) on the book of Revelation. So three separate volumes in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series. In volume one, he writes this about the phrase. He says:

In Revelation, John refers to God only as “my/his [Jesus’] Father” (1:6; 2:27; 3:5, 21; 14:1), but here [MH: in verse 4 of chapter 1], perhaps intentionally, he omits the designation “Father” from the greeting. In fact, he transforms this part of the traditional Christian salutation [MH: “grace to you and peace” is how verse 4 begins] by referring to God using this very elaborate set of three clauses, each of which functions as a divine title. Though unattested elsewhere in early Christian literature, this distinctive phrase occurs three times in Revelation (here; 1:8; 4:8)... A shorter, bipartite [MH: two-part] formula, perhaps a more traditional form that John expanded, is ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν (*ho ōn kai ho ēn*) “who is and who was,” which occurs twice (11:17; 16:5).

5:00 So the first thing to notice here is that John is apparently doing something deliberate. Because the way he opens this book... Granted, it's not an epistle. It's not, like, a normal letter. Normally these would start: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul does this over and over and over again. So John alters that formula for the book of Revelation and has this threefold title: “Him who is and who was and who is to come.” So that's the first thing that commentators have noticed—that it's a little bit different so there must be a reason why. Choice sort of suggests intention.

So the next question scholars typically ask is, “What is John's source text for this? Is he getting it somewhere?” And there's broad agreement here. Sean McDonough, who I think I alluded to in the introductory episode, has a whole book on this, *YHWH at Patmos* (which is where John is when he writes the book of Revelation)... So *YHWH at Patmos: Revelation 1:4 in its Hellenistic and Early Jewish Setting*. This is a paperback from Wipf and Stock. It used to be expensive

because it was his published dissertation. But it's a very technical book because it was his dissertation. He actually spends a lot of time on this whole thing. Revelation 1:4 is the whole book. So there's a lot to consider here. We're not going to get into the weeds that deeply. But he writes, toward the beginning of his book:

It has long been recognized that this description of God [MH: that John opens with] is indebted to Jewish reflection on the name YHWH [MH: the divine name, the Tetragrammaton], and in particular to reflection on the enigmatic words of Exod 3:14 'I am who I am'.

So if you look at Revelation 1:4, the Greek there is ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*ho ōn kai ho ēn kai ho erchomenos*) — *ho ōn* is “him who is”; *kai ho ēn* is “and who was”; and then *kai ho erchomenos* is “and who is coming” or “who is to come.” In Exodus 3:14, you have Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (*egō eimi ho ōn*) — *egō eimi* is “I am.” And you would *think* that the Septuagint translator would say, “I am,” and then have a relative pronoun, “that,” and then “I am” again (*egō eimi*, and then a relative pronoun, then *egō eimi*.) But that's not what he does. The Septuagint translator has *egō eimi* (“I am”) and then *ho ōn* (“I am the one who is”). So right away, scholars who are into Greek (the New Testament is originally written in Greek and then the Septuagint is Greek)... When they come across this wording (this opening of Revelation), they're thinking, “Ah, John is thinking about Exodus 3:14 here.” And I'm not going to differ with anybody here. That's on track. And really, it's *certainly* on track. And Beale, I think, has a really good point of evidence for this. So scholars have reached a broad consensus here. John is drawing on the burning bush episode (“I am that I am”)—Exodus 3:14 in the Septuagint. And that is secured by... If you remember our previous episode (our introductory episode to the book of Revelation), I told you we would be hitting one of these... We're going to be hitting several of these. But there's actually a solecism in Revelation 1:4. Remember, a solecism is a mistake, and in John's case it's an intentional mistake of Greek grammar. You actually have one of these in Revelation 1:4 and it's important. Beale, in his Revelation commentary (he has this massive New International Greek Textual Commentary on Revelation), writes this. The whole phrase... If you go back to Revelation 1:4 in English,

Grace to you and peace *from* him who is and who was and who is to come...

So “from” is where this is going to start. And that's the word ἀπό (*apo*).

ἀπό ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*apo ho ōn kai ho ēn kai ho erchomenos*) is one of the characteristic solecisms in the Apocalypse [MH: the book of Revelation], since [MH: this is going to sound technical, but I'll parse it in a moment] a genitive construction should follow ἀπό [MH: the preposition; he

actually says there are examples in manuscripts where] Scribes tried to correct [John's] apparent mistake by adding [MH: a genitive noun] θεου (“[from] God”...

So “from God,” “the one who is and...” So you actually get manuscripts where the scribes see that “this isn’t good Greek.” And so they actually added words to have it make better sense. [laughs] So it’s a solecism. This is a mistake in Greek style—in Greek grammar. But again, as we said in our introductory episode, people who have studied these in the book of Revelation have realized that they’re intentional. And they are deliberately there to draw our attention to something. So Beale continues and he says:

10:00

But it would be a blunder of modern thinking to judge this as a mistake of one who did not know his Greek very well. Here, as often elsewhere, commentators generally acknowledge that the “incorrect” grammar is intentional. ὁ ὢν is probably taken [MH: directly] from Exod. 3:14, where it occurs twice as an explanation of the divine name Yahweh, and John keeps it in the nominative...

ὢν from ὁ ὢν is a nominative participle. John keeps it in the nominative case, even though it follows a preposition that... In Greek grammar, prepositions govern which case follows them, if it’s a noun. And ἀπὸ calls for a particular grammatical case (the genitive). But John says, “No, I’m not going to do that. I’m going to put Exodus 3:14 in Greek right in here. And I’m going to keep the form that it occurs in in Exodus 3 in the Septuagint. And I know it’s bad Greek. And people who know Greek well are going to be jarred by it. And that’s *good*, because I want them to go back and see what form it was in in Exodus 3:14. And they’ll know that I want them to look. I’m actually...” This is like a red flag planted in the text. “There’s a boo-boo here. And where would we see this particular form? I mean, John knows Greek everywhere else. Why is he doing this? Where would this particular wording be found? Ah. Back in Exodus 3:14, the burning bush.” So John marries two things grammatically that don’t go together. But it’s his way of drawing attention back to the source, and the source is Exodus 3:14. Aune, in his commentary, comments on this as well. He says:

ὁ ὢν (*ho ōn*), “the one who is” (a substantival participle from the verb εἶμι [*eimi*] “to be”), was, among Greek-speaking Jews, a popular name for God ultimately derived from the phrase ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ὢν (*egō eimi ho ōn*) “I am the one who is,” in the LXX translation of the Hebrew phrase אֲהִי־אֲשֶׁר אֲהִי־אֲנִי, *’ehyeh ’āsher ’ehyeh*, “I am who I am,” in Exod 3:14.

So Beale and Aune and a bunch of other commentators see what’s going on here. And they see the fact that this is a “mistake,” but they also recognize that it’s deliberate. John is telling you essentially where to look, where he got this.

The third point is that if you look at it, though... And when we compared them... Let me just read it again here. In Revelation 1:4, you have this longer phrase,

“the one who is and who was and who is to come.” The first part of that (“the one who is”) is this Greek ὁ ὢν (*ho ōn*). Exodus 3:14 only has *ho ōn* (*egō eimi ho ōn*). It doesn’t have the rest of what John’s phrase is. It doesn’t have any reference to “who was and who is to come.” That doesn’t come from Exodus 3:14, so it raises the question, “Well, why does John supplement this? Why isn’t Exodus 3:14 as it is good enough? Why does he add to it? Is it some kind of commentary on his part? Does it have some significance?” And McDonough, in his book on Revelation 1:4, his first and third chapters are really aimed at trying to answer this question. And the first chapter frames the context for the whole question. So what he does in this first chapter is he surveys Greek literature—just the whole of Greek literature—from its beginnings all the way up to the Hellenistic period, which is the Second Temple Jewish period. And he finds a few near parallels to Revelation 1:4’s wording in Homer and Hesiod. And the latter is with respect to the deeds of the gods. So here is Hesiod’s *Theogony* (with his cosmogony—his cosmology—in there). In lines 29-34 he writes:

So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave [30] me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvellous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime (τά τ’ ἐσσόμενα πρό τ’ ἐόντα – *ta t’ essomena pro t’ eonta*); and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally (μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἐόντων – *makarōn genos aiēn eontōn*) [MH: eternally there], but ever to sing of themselves both first and last.

15:00

Now in English you see a few phrases there. “Things that shall be. Things that were, before.” Then there’s this reference to “the gods who are eternal, and they sing of themselves first and last.” Some of this language you already know is in Revelation. So McDonough notes this and says, “You know, these phrases refer not only to the deeds of the gods, but really the gods themselves.” And that seems coherent. But none of this is an exact parallel to the Septuagint of Exodus 3:14 or Revelation 1:4. But you get similar language about these other gods (the Greek gods). There’s actually a closer parallel, though. The Greek writer Pausanias, citing an oracle at Dodona, is the one that’s really close. And this text is considered by scholars to be contemporaneous with the book of Revelation. So it’s first century (when John is writing) or maybe a little bit before. And it describes Zeus. And here’s the description. Zeus is described as “Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus shall be. O mighty Zeus.” Zeus, of course, was considered at the time (in the pagan world) to be the Most High. Now the term *hypsistos* in Greek (which means “Most High”) is used of Zeus a lot. So the pagan world is thinking Zeus is the most high deity, and “he was and he is and he shall be.” So as soon as you run into that, you’re thinking, “Okay. It seems like John is taking a shot at the Greco-Roman most high god, Zeus.” I’m going to read a little something from DDD (the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*) about the term *hypsistos*. It says:

‘Υψιστος (*hypsistos*) is a superlative form from the adverb ὕψι (*hynsi*) “most high, highest”.

You have the article up front, so it serves as a noun. So *hypsistos ho hypsistos* (the Most High). And it has the sense of...

... “the most high” or “the highest”. In the Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible [MH: the Septuagint] עֲלִיּוֹן (→Elyon) is always translated by (ὁ) ὕψιστος (*ho hypsistos*) [MH: the Most High]. In these instances, as in the Greek literature of Judaism of the Second Temple Period and in the literature of primitive Christianity, the expression ὁ ὕψιστος (*ho hypsistos*) refers to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In non-Jewish or non-Christian texts written in Greek, the expression occurs as a divine name for Zeus...

So here’s a good question: Did the Septuagint translator... Did the Jews in the Hellenistic period who did the work translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek... Did the guy who got Exodus render the divine name in Exodus 3:14 the way he did in order to challenge the status of Zeus? Because “he who is”... *egō eimi*. (“I, I myself am the one who is.”) Is that a shot? Because what John does is John takes that and then he adds it. I mean, John makes it completely transparent, because he adds the other two elements, that he is... It’s pretty evident, if you were a Greek person (if you were a Gentile especially) or knew Greek well, you know... You’re familiar with this title. And John is not talking about Zeus here. He’s talking about the God of Israel. He gives him this titling of Zeus, which ties in back to Exodus 3:14—the burning bush. So it seems that this is what John’s doing. He’s laying down the gauntlet. And McDonough picks up on this point and he says here:

The stage has now been set for our investigation of the use and understanding of the name YHWH in early Judaism [MH: this is part of his first chapter]. We have seen that Greek thinking would have posed a considerable challenge to a reflective Jew or Christian in the hellenistic era. The Greeks were in control of the world [MH: this is the era of post-Alexander here], which might raise the question as to whether their gods were likewise in control of the world. What is more, the chief of their pantheon, Zeus, has undergone a transformation which rendered him a considerable foe for any god claiming supremacy over the universe. No longer simply the lustful tyrant of Homeric days [MH: you know, Homer’s epics], Zeus now came as the embodiment of the Stoic designing fire, or as “the one through whom all things have life.”

That’s another title of Zeus. That actually sounds like descriptions of Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament. But this is how Zeus is described. McDonough continues:

As they sang at Dodona, “Zeus was, Zeus is, and Zeus will be.” The name YHWH, we will see, was ready to enter the etymological fray as “the One who is.” But this in turn led back to the questions posed by Greek philosophers about the nature of Being, and its relationship to time and space. YHWH’s confrontation with the “gods of the nations” was taking a new turn.

20:00

So McDonough and other commentators are thinking what John’s doing here *is* in fact not just, “Hey, you readers who might have some acquaintance with Judaism, I’m using this phrase now and I’m committing a grammatical error so that you go look and find Exodus 3:14. And you’ll find, ‘Ah, the same God of Exodus 3:14, the same God of the burning bush, is the God that John’s writing about now.’” Well that’s all true. John wants people to see that. But he wants more. So he supplements it. It’s not only the “he who is,” but “he who was and who is to come.” And when he adds those two elements, it’s a swipe at Zeus. So now he’s looping the pagans in, too, and anybody else in the Jewish community who might be familiar with how pagans looked at Zeus and how Zeus was set as a rival or better than Yahweh. So just this one little selection from Exodus 3:14 and then supplementing it a little bit (giving it a little more play) is actually theological telegraphing. It’s significant.

So just to go on here, McDonough mentions Philo. So Philo actually uses this phrase (*ho on*—“the one who is”) as well. I want to get into this a little bit. One of the possible... Not just the solecism (the grammatical mistake) points back to Exodus 3:14 (this fundamental text in Judaism). But Philo (very famous first century B.C. writer) takes that from Exodus 3:14 as well, and he writes within the context of Second Temple Judaism (Hellenistic Judaism)... He uses this description as Yahweh’s name.

Now you have to realize, this has significance. Because this is also the era when, for Jews, they begin to be very hesitant to use the name of God. This notion is very familiar to people who listen to this podcast, Bible students, evangelicals, whatever—this notion about how you couldn’t pronounce the name of the Lord. Well, I hope you realize, in the Old Testament period that wasn’t actually the case. [laughs] Exodus 3 actually *requires* people to say the name of God. Let’s just go back to Exodus 3. Just a quick rabbit trail here. Because we know all about this notion that “Jews didn’t pronounce the name.” Well, that really is something that comes from the Second Temple period and scholars speculate on reasons for it. But in the biblical period, people were saying the divine name all the time. I’m going back to the burning bush here. And here’s what Moses says in verse 13:

¹³ Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

And God tells him what to say. “Here’s what you say, Moses.”

14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” [MH: אהיה אשר אהיה, *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*, “I am who I am”] And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD [MH: and that’s Yahweh, that’s the third person form], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’

So God actually *demand*s that Moses use his name if he gets asked this question. And then you have the priestly blessing, like in the book of Numbers. This is Numbers 6:22-27:

22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 23 “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel [MH: You, you, high priest, Aaron, you guy, you]: you shall say to them,

And this isn't, like, a whisper, and he’s not writing it out and handing it around. “Now don’t utter it; just read it.” No! He says, “You say to them, ‘Yahweh...’” There’s the divine name.

24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

27 “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

25:00

Again, these are just two instances. My point is that yeah, it’s not a myth that Jews didn’t want to say the name of God. That’s true. But that whole hesitance—that reticence—really is something that you begin to see in the very period where John is writing the book of Revelation and he’s using what then (according to the literature we have)... He’s using the conventional way or the literary way to use God’s name verbally to people. And that is *ho on* (the one who is) in Greek. Because everybody speaks Greek. Philo (going back to McDonough’s book here)... McDonough points this out about Philo, that he uses this as God’s “proper name.” And Philo also says elsewhere that God has no real name, he has no proper name, he just *is*. But he uses this as a way to speak of God and utter his name in Greek. And everybody was... There was nothing unusual about it. It’s okay. Philo was never labeled a blasphemer or anything like that. And of course, neither is John. Aune comments on Philo. He says:

Philo often uses the phrase ὁ ὢν of God, sometimes in combination with θεός, “God” (e.g., ὁ ὢν θεός, “the God who is”; ὁ ὄντως ὢν θεός, “the God who truly

is”) [MH: Philo will use these phrases]. The phrase ὁ ὢν is used at least eight times as a divine name...

Then he lists the references and so on and so forth. And half of them very certainly come directly from Exodus 3:14. So we’re not going to rabbit trail as to why Jews became hesitant to use the name, but it was important that they did it in this way at least. And John does it. John uses the name. But he does it in Greek. He uses the Greek form of Exodus 3:14 (*ho on*—“the one who is”). And there’s nothing wrong with that. He wasn’t blaspheming or anything. Because he wants people to recognize that we’re talking about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses, the God of the burning bush, so on and so forth. And he thinks it’s important enough to start his book this way. And the book is going to be read orally. So people are going to hear *ho on*. And if you’re Jewish, “Oh, I can’t listen to that because that’s the name of God! Even though it’s Greek, that’s the name of God, and we’re not allowed to hear it!” No, it’s not like that.

Now in terms of the Hebrew terminology, like in the Dead Sea Scrolls, you do get the divine name written in a lot of scrolls. For some of the scrolls, the scribes don’t write it. They put four dots in its place. Some of them write it and put dots over and under it. They do all sorts of things. In Aramaic, they typically use the word *mr’*, which means “Lord.” The Septuagint does that a lot, mostly. It’ll use *kurios* instead of trying to transliterate the term in Greek. But some manuscripts try to transliterate it. If you know the Greek alphabet, you will see capital letter I and then a capital Pi (the I is one column and the Pi is two columns) and then another capital letter I and then another one with two columns. It looks like six columns in a row in capital letter Greek. But it spells (from left to right) *Pipi*. That’s actually the divine name in some Greek manuscripts. Because the Greek writer is trying to use Greek capital letters to create something that looks like the YHWH in Hebrew. They do all sorts of things to either veil the divine name or in some cases, they will use Exodus 3:14 so that they can say it. And in John’s case, it’s important because he not only takes that out of Exodus 3:14 into Revelation 1:4, but then he supplements it as apparently a swipe at Zeus, who was considered most high in his time in the Greek-speaking world.

30:00

So what do we have to this point? I think what we have as it pertains to the Old Testament is the use of Exodus 3:14 to link what John is going to write about. It’s not just the God of John. It’s the God of Christians. Not only Israel, but the God of Christians—the God of those who follow Jesus. It’s the same God. And this God is Most High. But for John, he’s *more*. It’s not just that this is the God of Exodus 3 and the burning bush and so on and so forth, because this God became a man in Jesus. The Most High became a man in Jesus and died and rose again. This is the center of the Christian faith and it’s going to be the center of the book of Revelation. It’s going to be the center of who he’s writing about. And this is why verse 8 becomes important. So if it was just verse 4 (“the one who is and who was and who is to come”)... “Yeah, okay, that’s the God of Israel back at the

burning bush, and yeah, John's supplemented it because he wants to take a swipe at Zeus..." I mean that's good stuff, but now we get to verse 8, where God ("the one who is and who was and who is to come") says,

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

So we have the same threefold description as in 1:4, but here it's linked to "I am the Alpha and the Omega," which will later be explained (as if we couldn't tell), meaning "I'm the first and the last." That's Revelation 21:6, Revelation 22:13.

Now we may not realize it, but when John adds that ("I am the first and the last") in those references (and we'll get to them down the road, but we'll say something here as well), John's dipping into the Old Testament there, too. Isaiah 41:4. Let's just give you some examples here of how John with these other phrases is also thinking about the Old Testament. He's also repurposing it. And it's going to become significant. We'll get to why in a moment. But in Isaiah 41:4, we read:

**⁴ Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD, the first,
and with the last; I am he.**

Isaiah 43:10:

**¹⁰ "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.**

Isaiah 44:6:

**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.**

Isaiah 48:12:

**¹²“Listen to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, whom I called!
I am he; I am the first,
and I am the last.**

Isaiah 43:10 is the big one. I reference these in *Unseen Realm*. Yes, there are plural *elohim* and all that stuff, but before God, there was no other. He has to create the other ones. And after him, no one else is going to be creating them. He is the lone creator. He is the lone self-existent. He is the lone pre-existent. He is the lone eternal. Nothing else even in the spiritual world can claim these attributes. These are really important, powerful phrases. But the point for our purposes here is that you get the “first and last” language looped into this. And Beale comments on this. He says:

The complete threefold clause [MH: “the one who is, who was, and who is to come”] is a reflection of Exod. 3:14 together with twofold and threefold temporal descriptions of God in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12)...

So even if we didn’t have the Old Testament with this additional stuff in verse 8, back in verse 4 it’s very clear that John’s taking a swipe at Zeus. And if there was any ambiguity as to which deity John prefers, the “who was and who is to come,” “the first and the last”... He was the first one on the stage, and he’s going to be the last one—that whole kind of thing. If you start looking for *that* language, you run into it in verse 8. And you go back to the Old Testament there, you’re going to run into the same God—the God of Moses, the God of the burning bush, the God of Israel. So going back to Beale, he says we have these “threefold temporal descriptions of God in Isaiah...”

... which themselves may be developed reflections on the divine name in Exod. 3:14. The name in Exod. 3:14 was also expanded in twofold and threefold manners in later Jewish tradition: ... “I am now what I always was and always will be” (*Midr. Rab. Exod. 3.6; Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba*; likewise *Midr. Ps. 72.1*) [MH: that’s some Midrash, it’s some rabbinic writings there from Rabbi Akiba]; “I am he who is and who was, and I am he who will be” (*Targ. Ps.-J. Deut. 32:39*)...

That’s Deuteronomy 32:39 in a Targum, the Targum specifically Pseudo-Jonathan, which is later. This is the Rabbinic period. But you can see how the Jewish community is putting Exodus 3 together with some of these other verses. Now there’s a practical point to John’s strategy. Beale explains elsewhere:

All these expansions are used in their respective contexts to describe God, not merely as present at the beginning, middle, and end of history, but as the incomparable, sovereign Lord over history, who is thus able to bring prophecy to

fulfillment [MH: John's going to talk a lot about that in Revelation] and to deliver his people despite overwhelming odds, whether from Egypt, Babylon, or the nations [MH: which would, of course, in John's day be the Greeks and the Romans]. In Revelation the last part of the threefold clause, ὁ ἐρχόμενος (*ho erchomenos*) [MH: "the one who is to come"] is to be understood eschatologically and as referring to God's sovereign consummation of history in the future.

So in other words, John wants readers to know that the God of Moses, the God of Israel, who is, and was, and is coming (the first and the last), will deliver believers under persecution. Because that's who he's writing to. These churches are in a difficult spot. It's toward the end of the first century or in the middle of the first century. The Church is under persecution from the Jewish community mostly, but later it's going to ramp up with the Romans. John wants them to know that he will deliver believers under persecution. God is capable of doing this, as he delivered the remnant of Israel in the past. So again, there's the connection point. And more than that, for John, this God became a man in Jesus Christ. And John will specifically link his description of God in Revelation 1:4a (the first part of verse 4), and verse 8. He actually links these descriptions. Think about it. "The one who is and who was and who is to come," "the first and the last," "the Alpha and the Omega." As you're reading Revelation 1:4, "Oh, that's God." Verse 8, "Oh, that's God." Verse 17, "That ain't God." [laughs] Revelation 1:17 says this. Well, let's go back up to verse 12.

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

I mean, these are descriptions you can find in the Old Testament... We're going to hit more of this, but just generally now, you can find this imagery used of the God of Israel in the Old Testament.

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.

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..."

Now if it stopped there in verse 17, you'd think, "Oh yeah, that's the God back in verse 4 and back in verse 8." But it continues in verse 18.

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.

See, now we’re not talking about God the Father here. This is Jesus. And the language overlaps with verse 4 and verse 8, and it’ll overlap later, too.

So John wants to make certain claims. (And with this, we’ll wrap up today.) He’s telling them, “Look, the same God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt, who delivered them from Babylon... the same God at the burning bush—he’s still God. He’s still *our* God. He’s not just the God of Israel. He’s the God of all believers—all those who believe in his messiah, Jesus. And not only that, but this God is also Jesus. He became a man, he died, and he rose again.” “I was dead. I died. I’m the first and the last, just like the first and the last back in verse 8, who is the Almighty, who is ‘the one and who was and who is to come.’” John is mixing the language here and applying it to both the Father and the Son.

And by the way, for those of you who (God forbid) do internet theology, this is another one of those things that... Nobody is going to say Revelation was written way, way, way late. It’s at the end of the first century at the latest. Here’s your Christology. It doesn’t have to wait till Nicaea, is the point. This is Christology long before the Council of Nicaea. It is describing Jesus the way you would describe God, and you do it to both in the same chapter in the span of ten verses. So John wants people to know God is able to deliver them. It’s the same God who became a man, he was Christ, and so on and so forth. And he *is* the Most High.

40:00

So right out of the gate, John is making a theological statement. And he wants his readers—his hearers—to know that this same God... Even though they’re under persecution, this is the God who has the keys to life and death. Okay? To death and Hades, so on and so forth—everlasting life or everlasting death. And this one is on their side (the side of the believer).

So again, John does what he does through (I don’t want to call it clever, but maybe not completely transparent) ways that he marries Exodus 3:14 to some passages in Isaiah and uses them to take a swipe at Greco-Roman religion. John has a reason for doing with the Old Testament what he’s doing here, to communicate all these theological thoughts and to encourage people he knows that are going to be listening to the book or reading the book, in their situation. And away we go. Because the rest of the book... He’s going to pick up speed and start talking about the end of days, the final resolution of all things. And he wants them to know who’s on their side.

TS: Alright, Mike. The first one is in the books.

MH: The first one in the books.

TS: Yeah. How do you feel about it? Feel good?

MH: Good, yeah. I mean, you know... I like... I'm going to have a predilection for things that John's going to do that aren't surface level transparent from English. Parts of this were and parts of it weren't. So I kind of like that. You get a sense that he's doing something, but don't quite know exactly what he's doing. There are other places that are going to be... Like when he hits the plagues and he starts talking about the plagues, and it's going to sound like Egypt, well that's a little more transparent than some of this. But you know, I think anybody's who's reading the book of Revelation closely will have a sense (if they've read through the Old Testament a few times) that he's doing *something* there. But exactly what, that's why we're doing this. That's why we're here. That's why we're doing this series.

TS: Do you foresee yourself learning anything new, Mike, going through this?

MH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've never systematically gone through Revelation. Yeah.

TS: Is there something you're looking forward to more than the others? Or is it just all good?

MH: To me, it's like... Some of the stuff we did leading up to this, like with the Gospels... Like in my dissertation, you get references... Because I had to read about Jewish binitarian Christology all the time, so I had hints of what was lurking in the Gospels in that regard. But a lot of those episodes we did, yeah, there was some of the Christology stuff, like pre-existence, for instance. But there were other things that I had never taken a look at, like how Jesus handles the Old Testament specifically to telegraph Gentile inclusion and things like that. So I enjoy doing this kind of thing because I like connectivity, just in general. And so in those cases it gets my head more into the Gospels, and in this case, it'll be the book of Revelation.

TS: I know I enjoy the connectivity as much as everybody else, so I'm excited about it. And with that, I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.