

A Study in Revelation - Introduction

“Can you understand the book of Revelation? Yes, you can. You can summarize its message in one sentence: God rules history and will bring it to its consummation in Christ.”

-Vernon Poythress, *The Returning King*

Name: First of all, let's clear this up: it's the book of Revelation, *not* Revelations. The name is derived from verse 1, and has also been called *The Apocalypse of John*, from the Greek word “apokalypsis.” Common understanding is that *apocalypse* means “an event involving destruction or damage on an awesome or catastrophic scale.” However, the original meaning of the word in Greek is simply “unveiling,” or “revelation.”

Author: John the Seer. Possibly the apostle John, although this is not completely certain. We can say with certainty that John was a prominent church leader in western Asia Minor, that he was Jewish, and deeply immersed in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Location: Roman province of Asia, which is today's western Turkey. John was writing from the island of Patmos while the churches he was addressing were on the mainland.

REVELATION: ROME & THE SEVEN CHURCHES

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Map source: https://visualunit.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/rev_map.png

Date: Two dates are commonly suggested: late 60s or mid 90s. The second is more likely and puts it

near the end of the reign of emperor Domitian.

Main Themes: The sovereignty and glory of the triune God; God's final victory over sin; instructions to churches; visions of spiritual warfare meant to provide comfort for the suffering saints.

“Revelation begins with a vision of the resurrected and ascended Christ and his words to seven first-century churches in Asia Minor that were facing a range of challenges: persecution from without, false teaching from within, temptation to compromise with the surrounding pagan culture, and spiritual lethargy. The book then covers a vast sweep of time, from the first century all the way to the return of Christ.

Central to Revelation is its assertion that Christ has already won the victory over Satan through his death, and has therefore freed Christians from their sins by his blood (1:5). Christ's past, inaugurated (i.e., already begun) victory guarantees his future, consummated (i.e., fully completed) victory (2:26–27). Because Christ has already conquered Satan through his uniquely redemptive suffering, Christians can also “conquer” in the present by holding fast their witness in the face of enticing temptation or violent persecution, even if their faithful witness results in death.”

- Stephen Witmer, *Knowing the Bible Series: Revelation*

Genre: Revelation contains a mixture of three literary genres: epistle, prophecy, and apocalyptic.

Epistles simply means “letters,” usually referring to formal letters written in the ancient Greek speaking world. We find many of them in the New Testament (e.g. Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, etc.). Revelation opens (1:4) and closes (20:21) like an epistle, and states that it was written to seven churches in Asia which are individually addressed in chapters 2-3. Therefore, in order to get a better understanding, we should do our best to reconstruct the situation the writer and the recipients were in. This means it's time for a history lesson! (he said to raucous applause). As an epistle, the book was meant to be read out loud (1:3).

Revelation also shares much in common with the *prophetic* books of the Old Testament. John identifies himself as a prophet (22:9). Prophets spoke for God. As a whole, prophetic work was mostly **forthtelling** (addressing the present situation) and occasionally it was **foretelling** (predicting the future events). The book of Revelation does both.

Apocalyptic is the most challenging genre for us today. However, apocalyptic literature was something familiar to the first century audience. Many Old testament books – most notably Daniel, Ezra, and Zechariah – have apocalyptic passages. There were many popular non-biblical books that belonged to this genre, as well. The apocalyptic genre is a specific type of prophecy which uses **highly symbolic and figurative images** that **must not** be interpreted literally. Typically, apocalypses would be delivered by an angelic being, and would be addressing God's people in a time of distress, assuring them of final victory, while telling them that in the meantime things will go from bad to worse.

Some things to keep in mind:

- Revelation has 404 verses and (depending on the count) between 275 and 500 references to the **Old Testament**. The references are mainly from Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Our understanding of the OT will determine how successfully we interpret Revelation.

- The book contains numerous symbols – colors, animals, items (lamp stands), etc.
- Numbers are also symbolic. 7 represents completeness; 3 represents the triune God; 4 represents the created world; 12 represents God's people;
- The book contains **recapitulation**, or the retelling of the same story from a different angle.
- Another persistent theme is **counterfeiting** (e.g., the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet represent a false trinity)

Approaches to the book

Preterist – everything written in the book of Revelation has already been fulfilled in the first century (full preterism) or has mostly taken place (partial preterism). Full preterism is not a legitimate evangelical view as it makes the book irrelevant to every generation after John. For the preterist, the question is “When did it happen?”

Historicist – understands the literary order of the visions from 4:1 – 20:6 to symbolize the chronological order of events from apostolic times to the second coming of Christ. The question that a historicist asks is “What chapter of Revelation are we in today?” The problem is that the visions in Revelation do not follow a chronological order. Instead, they are thematic.

Futurist – most of the book (starting at chapter 4) is yet to be fulfilled in the future. The futurist asks the question “When will Revelation be fulfilled?” The biggest problem with futurism is that it makes Revelation irrelevant to every generation except the one who will witness the second coming.

Idealist – the scenes of Revelation do not depict specific events, but principles of spiritual war which are operative throughout the church age and may be repeated. Idealists see repeated patterns of fulfillment. A good example of this is Satanic counterfeiting—the original Father, Son, and Spirit are counterfeited by dragon, beast, and false prophet; the beast in 13:1 represents the image of the dragon from 12:3, echoing the fact that man is made in the image of God. The main point of the book of Revelation is not to talk about the specific events of the past or the future, but to give hope and comfort to God's people in every age. The idealist asks “Why should we have hope?”

Eclectic – an approach that is mostly based on idealism but borrows from futurism in that it believes that Revelation does also speak of the events that will take place at the end of the age.

Eschatological positions (Millennial views)

Eschatology is the study of the “last things.”

Millennium (1,000 years) usually refers to the thousand-year reign mentioned in Revelation 20:4-6.

Tribulation – generally refers to hardships and suffering of God's people.

Pre-millennialism (usually held to by the futurists) says that Christ will return bodily before the millennium to defeat and destroy the beast and the false prophet at Armageddon. The battle will result in the binding of Satan for 1,000 years (usually understood as a literal number) during which Christ will reign with his resurrected saints. At the end of the millennium, a second rebellion provokes another war in which the dragon is defeated and finally destroyed; after this, the earth is completely renewed.

Post-millennialism (usually held to by preterists, but also by some historicists) teaches that Christ will return after the 1,000 years in which the dragon is bound. The millennium in this view represents a “golden age” in which the gospel will triumph so greatly that it will transform the world's societies and cultures. The thousand years is a symbolic time frame.

Amillennialism (usually held to by idealists) holds that there will be no “millennium” in the same sense as the first two groups understand it. Amillennialists believe that the first binding of Satan happened with the death and resurrection of Christ. The gospel continues to be preached throughout the world, but always encountering opposition.

Outline:

- Chapters 1-3: Introductions and the letters to the seven churches.
- Chapters 4-5: Heavenly vision of the throne of God where we see the scroll which only the lion/lamb is worthy to open.
- Chapters 6-7: The seals represent issues common to every church age.
- Chapters 8-11: The trumpets parallel the judgments announced by the seals.
- Chapters 12-14: The scene changes. He's telling the story again from a different vantage point. The elect are saved and the city of Babylon falls. God's enemies are defeated.
- Chapters 15-16: Seven bowls bring seven plagues and Babylon is destroyed, again! (Recapitulation.)
- Chapters 17-19: The destruction of Babylon, the beast, and the false prophet.
- Chapters 20-21: The final city of God, New Jerusalem.

The main points we see in this book (per Voddie Baucham)

1. The glory of the triune God;
2. The relevance and reliability of the whole Bible;
3. The sovereignty of God;
4. The reality of suffering;
5. The inevitability and severity of God's judgment;
6. The certainty of Christ's return;
7. The consummation of redemptive history.