

Love Community Baptist Church

Wednesday Night Virtual Bible Study

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Revelation - Introduction

AUTHOR AND TITLE

Revelation 1:1 announces both the book's title (it is a "revelation") and its divine author ("Jesus Christ"). The divine author identified in the opening verse, Jesus the Messiah, has authority from God to describe coming events to his servant John (see also 1:4, 9; 22:8) for communication to the church. Without denying his own role in the composition of the book, John presents himself more as a recipient and recorder of visions than as the author of Revelation's message. Although John does not call himself an apostle and he numbers himself among the prophets (22:9), early church fathers—notably Justin Martyr (writing c. a.d. 135–150), Melito of Sardis (mid-2nd century), and Irenaeus of Lyons (writing c. 185)—consistently identified him as John the son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple who authored the Fourth Gospel and three NT epistles.

DATE

Irenaeus reports, on the basis of earlier sources, that "John received the Revelation almost in our own time, toward the end of the reign of Domitian" (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). Since Domitian's reign ended in a.d. 96, most scholars date Revelation in the mid-90s. Some, however, have argued for a date during Nero's reign (a.d. 54–68) and before the fall of Jerusalem in 70, basing their conclusion in part on the belief that Revelation 11:1–2 is a predictive prophecy of the Roman siege and destruction of the earthly Jerusalem during the Jewish War. However, the conditions in the churches of chs. 2–3 and their cities favor a date around a.d. 95–96, and in Revelation "the holy city" does not seem to refer to the earthly Jerusalem.

GENRE

The book of Revelation identifies itself both as "apocalypse" (or "revelation," 1:1) and as prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19; see also 10:11; 22:9). "Apocalypse" is derived from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, meaning "revelation, disclosure, unveiling"—that is, the disclosure of unseen heavenly or future realities.

Jewish apocalyptic literature flourished in the centuries following the completion of the OT canon, perhaps in part to help the oppressed people of God find purpose in their sufferings and hope for their future in the absence of genuine prophetic words from God. Apocalyptic literature inherited and magnified features appearing in such OT books as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. These features include visions that dramatize the prophet's admission to God's heavenly council and that convey meaning through symbolism, promising an end-time intervention of God to reverse present injustices.

Whereas OT prophecy was primarily preached orally and only secondarily preserved in writing, apocalyptic works were crafted literary pieces from their inception. Old Testament prophecy not only comforted a righteous remnant but also called faithless Israel to repent and anticipated the gracious ingathering of Gentiles. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, divided humanity into two immutable camps: (1) the holy minority who await God's deliverance, and (2) their persecutors, destined for wrath and beyond the reach of redemption. Finally, although OT prophets pointed ahead to the Lord's future coming, they also emphasized his present involvement with his people in their sins and trials; but

apocalyptic literature saw the present as so pervaded by corruption that no saving work of God could be expected before his cataclysmic intervention at the end. Unlike extrabiblical apocalyptic authors, however, John writes in his own name, not that of an ancient saint, and he brings a balanced message of comfort, warning, and rebuke. Because Christ's death has already won the decisive victory over evil, Revelation does not share the pessimism of Jewish apocalyptic literature regarding the present age.

Rather, Revelation sees believers as conquerors even now through endurance under suffering and fidelity to the testimony of Jesus, through which even their persecutors are called to salvation through repentance and faith.

THEME

Revelation unveils the unseen spiritual war in which the church is engaged: the cosmic conflict between God and his Christ on the one hand, and Satan and his evil allies (both demonic and human) on the other. In this conflict, Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through his sacrificial death, but his church continues to be assaulted by the dragon, in its death-throes, through persecution, false teaching, and the allure of material affluence and cultural approval.

PURPOSE, OCCASION AND BACKGROUND

The Revelation of Jesus Christ was given to John by God "to show his servants what must soon take place." This book is filled with mysteries about things to come. It is the final warning that the world will surely **end** and judgment will be certain. It gives us a tiny glimpse of heaven and all of the glories awaiting those who keep their robes white. Revelation takes us through the great tribulation with all its woes and the final fire that all unbelievers will face for eternity. The book reiterates the fall of Satan and the doom he and his angels are bound for. We are shown the duties of all creatures and angels of heaven and the promises of the saints that will live forever with Jesus in the New Jerusalem. Like John, we find it hard to describe what we read in the book of Revelation.

Revelation is addressed to first-century churches in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia as representative of all Christ's churches. These churches were threatened by false teaching (such as that of the Nicolaitans, 2:6, 15), by persecution (2:10, 13), by compromise with surrounding paganism through idolatry and immorality (2:14, 20–21), and by spiritual complacency (3:1–3, 15–17). Jesus sent his revelation to John to fortify his churches to resist the wiles of the devil, whether in the form of intimidating violence (the beast), deceptive heresy (the false prophet), or beguiling affluence (the prostitute).

BRIEF SUMMARY

The Revelation is lavish in colorful descriptions of the visions which proclaim for us the last days before Christ's return and the ushering in of the new heaven and new earth. The Revelation begins with letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, then goes on to reveal the series of devastations poured out upon the earth; the mark of the beast, "666"; the climactic battle of Armageddon; the binding of Satan; the reign of the Lord; the Great White Throne Judgment; and the nature of the eternal city of God. Prophecies concerning Jesus Christ are fulfilled and a concluding call to His Lordship assures us that He will soon return.

CONNECTIONS

The Book of Revelation is the culmination of the prophecies about the end times, beginning with the Old Testament. The description of the antichrist mentioned in Daniel 9:27 is developed fully in chapter 13 of Revelation. Outside of Revelation, examples of apocalyptic literature in the Bible are Daniel chapters 7–12, Isaiah chapters 24–27, Ezekiel chapters 37–41, and Zechariah chapters 9–14. All these prophecies come together in the Book of Revelation.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Have you accepted Christ as your Savior? If so, you have nothing to fear from God's judgment of the world as described in the Book of Revelation. The Judge is on our side. Before the final judgment begins, we must witness to friends and neighbors about God's offer of eternal life in Christ. The events in this book are real. We must live our lives in a way that demonstrates the truth of what we know so that others will notice our joy about our future and want to join us in that new and glorious city.

HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

The key to Bible interpretation, especially for the book of Revelation, is to have a consistent hermeneutic. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of interpretation. In other words, it is the way you interpret Scripture. A normal hermeneutic or normal interpretation of Scripture means that unless the verse or passage clearly indicates the author was using figurative language, it should be understood in its normal sense. We are not to look for other meanings if the natural meaning of the sentence makes sense. Also, we are not to spiritualize Scripture by assigning meanings to words or phrases when it is clear the author, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, meant it to be understood as it is written.

One example is **Revelation 20**. Many will assign various meanings to references to a thousand-year period. Yet, the language does not imply in any way that the references to the thousand years should be taken to mean anything other than a literal period of one thousand years.

A simple outline for the book of Revelation is found in Revelation 1:19. In the first chapter, the risen and exalted Christ is speaking to John. Christ tells John to "write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." The things John had already seen are recorded in chapter 1. The "things which are" (that were present in John's day) are recorded in chapters 2–3 (the letters to the churches). The "things that will take place" (future things) are recorded in chapters 4–22.

Generally speaking, chapters 4–18 of Revelation deal with God's judgments on the people of the earth. These judgments are not for the church (1 Thessalonians 5:2, 9). Before the judgments begin, the church will have been removed from the earth in an event called **the rapture** (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Chapters 4–18 describe a time of "Jacob's trouble"—trouble for Israel (Jeremiah 30:7; Daniel 9:12, 12:1). It is also a time when God will judge unbelievers for their rebellion against Him.

Chapter 19 describes Christ's return with the church, the bride of Christ. He defeats the beast and the false prophet and casts them into the lake of fire. In Chapter 20, Christ has Satan bound and cast in the Abyss. Then Christ sets up His kingdom on earth that will last 1,000 years. At the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is released and he leads a rebellion against God. He is quickly defeated and also cast into the lake of fire. Then the final judgment occurs, the judgment for all unbelievers, when they too are cast into the lake of fire.

Chapters 21 and 22 describe what is referred to as the eternal state. In these chapters God tells us what eternity with Him will be like. The book of Revelation is understandable. God would not have given it to us if its meaning were entirely a mystery. The key to understanding the book of Revelation is to interpret it as literally as possible—it says what it means and means what it says.

OUTLINE OF REVELATION

I. Prologue (1:1–8)

- A. Title, transmission, promise of blessing (1:1–3)
- B. Epistolary opening (1:4–6)
- C. Announcement of the coming King (1:7–8)

II. Body (1:9–22:5)

- A. "Things that are": Christ's presence with and knowledge of his churches (1:9–3:22)
 - 1. The Son of Man among his churches (1:9–20)
 - 2. Christ's edict-letters to his seven churches (2:1–3:22)
 - a. To Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - b. To Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - c. To Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - d. To Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - e. To Sardis (3:1–6)
 - f. To Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - g. To Laodicea (3:14–22)
- B. "Things that shall take place after this": Christ's defense of his church and destruction of its enemies (4:1–22:5)
 - 1. The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (4:1–8:1)
 - a. Heaven opened: the Lamb receives the scroll (4:1–5:14)
 - b. The Lamb opens the scroll's seven seals (6:1–8:1)
(*Interlude*: the sealing of God's international Israel, 7:1–17)
 - 2. The angels and the trumpets: warnings of coming wrath (8:2–11:18)
 - a. Heaven's incense altar: the saints' prayers, and fire flung to earth (8:2–5)
 - b. Angels sound seven trumpets (8:6–11:18)
(*Interlude*: the safety and suffering of God's city-sanctuary, his witnessing church, 10:1–11:14)
 - 3. The woman, her son, the dragon, and the beasts: the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan (11:19–14:20)
 - a. Heaven's temple opened (11:19)
 - b. The woman's son defeats the dragon (12:1–6)
 - c. Michael and heaven's armies defeat the dragon (12:7–17)
 - d. The beast from the sea (13:1–10)
 - e. The false prophet from the land (13:11–18)
 - f. The Lamb and his sealed victors (14:1–5)
 - g. Angelic announcements of judgment (14:6–13)
 - h. Harvests of earth and vine (14:14–20)
 - 4. The bowls of God's final wrath (15:1–16:21)
 - a. Heaven's sanctuary filled with glory (15:1–8)
 - b. Angels pour out seven bowls (16:1–21)
 - 5. Babylon the prostitute (17:1–19:10)
 - a. Babylon's power and luxury (17:1–15)
 - b. Babylon's fall lamented and celebrated (17:16–19:10)
 - 6. The defeat and destruction of the beasts, the dragon, and death (19:11–20:15)
 - a. Christ defeats and destroys the beast, the false prophet, and their gathered armies (19:11–21)
(*Interlude*: the thousand years of the dragon's binding and the martyrs' reign (20:1–6)
 - b. God defeats and destroys the dragon and its gathered armies (20:7–10)
 - c. The last judgment and the destruction of death, the last enemy (20:11–15)
 - 7. "All things new" (21:1–22:5)
 - a. The new heaven and earth, home of the Lamb's bride (21:1–8)
 - b. The new Jerusalem, the Lamb's pure bride (21:9–22:5)

III. Epilogue (22:6–21)

- A. Transmission and trustworthiness of the Revelation, promise that Jesus is coming soon, promise of blessing (22:6–9)

- B. Prohibition of sealing the book, promise that Jesus is coming soon, promise of blessing (22:10–15)
- C. Transmission of the Revelation (22:16–17)
- D. Prohibition of altering the book, promise that Jesus is coming soon, and final pronouncement of blessing (22:18–21)

