

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

INTRODUCTION

- The book of Revelation is perhaps the most misunderstood and misused of all the books in the Bible
- It has been ignored or misinterpreted by thousands of Christians for thousands of years
- But this must not dissuade us from studying it because it, like all Scripture, is “profitable” (2 Tim 3:16)

IMPORTANCE

- This book is vitally important for a number of reasons:
 1. It is the last inspired book of the Bible and is rightly positioned as the final book of the NT. As such it concludes with those critical words:

Revelation 22:18-19 ~ I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

While this warning applies specifically to Revelation, its principle must be applied to the entire revealed Word of God (cf. Deut 4:1-2; Prov 30:5-6)

2. In a similar way the NT opens with the four Gospels describing the first coming of Christ, so Revelation closes the NT with the general theme of the second coming of Christ
3. It brings together the many lines of revelation in both the OT and the NT concerning the nation Israel, God’s kingdom, the covenants, prophecies, judgment, and the return of Christ

TITLE

- “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1)...also known as the Apocalypse
- “revelation” is the Greek word *apokalypsis* referring to the content of “revelation, disclosure;” it is related to the verb *apokalypso* referring to the act of “uncovering, revealing”
- It refers to an “unveiling” or “revealing” of something or someone that was once hidden
- In this case, it refers to an “unveiling” of the future glory of Jesus Christ which culminates in His final victory and reign upon the earth, a reward for His humiliation and obedience to the Father’s will
- It is an unveiling of the character and program of God
- This “revelation” could refer to that which comes from Christ or that which is about Christ (probably both)
- The revelation contained in this book was given to Christ by God the Father and was communicated to John by an angel (1:1)
- Because the contents of this book function as a unified whole, it should not be called “Revelations”

AUTHOR

- Four times in the book, the author is named “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8)
- John’s faithful preaching of the Gospel led the Roman authorities to exile him to the small, desolate island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (1:9) following his pastorate at Ephesus
- This island of volcanic rock was one of several places to which the Romans banished criminals and political offenders
- Victorinus, the first commentator on the Book of Revelation, stated that John worked as a prisoner in the mines on this small island
- During John’s bleak days on Patmos, God gave him these tremendous visions which lay out the future history of the world
- When the Emperor Domitian died in AD 96, his successor Nerva let John return to Ephesus



- From the beginning, Revelation was considered an authentic work of the apostle John, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and 1, 2, 3 John
- From the first century to the present, orthodox Christians have almost unanimously agreed that the author is the Apostle John
- Dionysius (third century AD) was the first to dispute the Johannine authorship and he did so because he disagreed with the book’s theology and found many supposed inaccuracies in its grammar
- These objections were disregarded in the early church by most of the important fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen
- Erasmus, Luther, and Zwingli questioned the Johannine authorship because it teaches a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ

DATE

- Revelation was written at a time when Roman hostility to Christianity was erupting into overt persecution (1:9; 2:10, 13)
- Some scholars believe that it should be given an early date during the persecution of Christians under Nero (54-68 AD) after the 64 AD burning of Rome because the Hebrew letters for Nero Caesar add up to 666, the number of the beast (13:18)
- A later date near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian (81–96 AD) is preferable for several reasons:
 1. This was the testimony of Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp who was a disciple of John) and other early Christian writers
 2. John probably did not move from Jerusalem to Ephesus until about 67 AD, shortly before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The early dating would not give him enough time to have established an ongoing ministry (for which the authorities would feel a need to exile him) in Asia by the time he wrote this book.
 3. The churches of Asia appear to have been in existence for a number of years, long enough for some to reach a point of complacency and decline (cf. 2:4; 3:1, 15–18). Since the churches were healthy when

Paul ministered to them in the mid 60's AD, not enough time would have passed between that and the end of Nero's reign.

- Thus, John likely wrote this book in 95 or 96 AD
- The date of his release from Patmos is unknown, but he was probably allowed to return to Ephesus after the reign of Domitian

AUDIENCE

- John wrote this book to the 7 selected churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:4, 11; chaps 2-3)
- The messages to these churches in chapters 2 and 3 begin with Ephesus, the most prominent, and continue in a clockwise direction until Laodicea is reached
- It is likely that this book was initially carried along this circular route
- While each of these messages had particular significance for these churches, they were also relevant for the church as a whole ("He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" ~ 2:7, 29)

STYLE

- Revelation constitutes an apocalyptic form of literature/genre which were meant to encourage God's oppressed people in a time of crisis and to give them hope in God's future deliverance
- It possesses the following characteristics:

1. A Revelation by God

The revelation given by God covers a wide range of subjects (i.e. end time events, the coming kingdom, the coming of Messiah, final judgment, etc.) but the common theme in each revelation is that it is not naturally known, but rather supernaturally given through special revelation

2. Through a Mediator (Angel or Christ)

The message of Revelation was communicated by Christ through an angel to John (1:1)

3. Given in a Time of Exile or Gentile Oppression

John was on the Island of Patmos and the church was facing much persecution

4. Which Consists of Visions

Such is the case in Revelation (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10)

5. Includes Many Symbols

"A feature of much apocalyptic that often makes it unintelligible to modern men is the use of strange symbolism... This type of literature abounds in beasts and seals, in rivers and mountains and stars, in personages celestial and infernal... Symbolism and significant numbers, then, abound. Whether they explain them or not, the apocalyptists use their bizarre symbolism and their curious numerology consistently. Any student of these writings must make an effort to grapple with the phenomenon."¹

¹ Morris 1973:36, 37, 39.

6. Refers to the Distant Future
7. Culminates in the Triumph of the Kingdom of God Over Earthly Kingdoms

“Absolutely characteristic of this class of literature is the thought that in His own good time God will intervene. He will bring the present evil world to a cataclysmic end and establish a better state of affairs. The absolute rule of God is the significant thing...absolutely fundamental is the thought that in the end God will prevail. He will overthrow all the evil this world contains. The apocalyptists were just as sure that God could and would defeat every evil man and every evil thing as they were that even the best efforts of good men could not bring this about...As they looked around them they saw the righteous oppressed and with no way out of their troubles. Humanly speaking there was no hope. But this did not weaken their faith in the slightest. The salvation they looked for would not be in the here and now but in an age yet to come.”²

PURPOSE

- The purpose of the Book of Revelation is to assure believers of the ultimate triumph of Christ over those who rise up against Him and His saints
- John’s readers were facing dark times of persecution and even worse times will follow
- They needed to be encouraged to persevere and stand firm in Christ in light of God’s promises to vindicate His name
- Revelation also provides a perspective on end-time events by revealing what will take place immediately before, during, and following the second coming of Christ
- This functions to complete the prophetic theme presented earlier in the prophecies of the Old Testament (i.e. Daniel) and the prophecies of Christ, especially in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25)

THEMES

Jesus Christ

- Revelation is first and foremost about Jesus Christ in that it reveals Him like no other book
- He is called “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler over the kings of the earth” (1:5)
- He is referred to as “the first and the last (1:17), the living One who has the keys of death and Hades (1:18), the Son of God (2:18), holy and true (3:7), the Amen, faithful and true Witness, the beginning of Creation (3:14), the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David (5:5), a lamb (5:6), Faithful and True (19:11), the Word of God (19:13), King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16), the Alpha and Omega (22:13), the bright morning star (22:16), and the Lord Jesus Christ (22:21)”.
- He is worthy to open the book of judgment (chap 5), pours out His righteous wrath on the whole earth (chaps 6-18), returns in power to judge His enemies (chap 19), reigns as Lord over all (chap 20), and rules forever over the new Jerusalem (chaps 21-22)

Warnings to the Church

- In chapters 2-3, the church is warned about sin and exhorted to pursue holiness

² Ibid., 43, 45.

The Kingdom of God

- Kingdom language permeates the book of Revelation: “throne” (38x), “kingdom” (3x), “reign” (7x), “rule” (4x), “judge” (8x), “wrath” (15x)

The Events of the End Times

- Chapters 6-18 deal with the Tribulation, chapter 19 the return of Christ, chapter 20 the Millennium, and chapters 21-22 the eternal state
- A particular emphasis is on the second coming of Christ since He is the One who brings the kingdom with His return and replaces the kingdoms of this world inspired by Satan (the book begins and ends with this theme – 1:7; 22:20)

The Sovereignty of God

- Revelation demonstrates that God will accomplish His sovereign purposes despite worldly and Satanic opposition

INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

- Four main interpretive approaches have been used to interpret this book

The Allegorical, Symbolic, Nonliteral View

- This form of interpretation maintains that Revelation is not a predictive prophecy but symbolic of spiritual principles
- This approach was emphasized by the Alexandrian school of theology in the third and fourth centuries
- It regards the entire Bible as an extensive allegory to be interpreted in a nonliteral sense
- A liberal variation of this in modern times considers Revelation simply as a symbolic presentation of the concept of God’s ultimate victory

The Preterist View

- This view regards Revelation as a symbolic picture of the first century church conflicts which have been fulfilled
- It is a symbolic description of the Roman persecution of the church, emperor worship, and the divine judgment of Rome
- This view denies the future predictive quality of most of the Book of Revelation

The Historical View

- This view sees Revelation as a symbolic picture of the total church history of the present Age between Christ’s first and second comings
- It sees “in the symbolism such events as the barbarian invasions of Rome, the rise of the Roman Catholic Church (as well as various individual popes), the emergence of Islam, and the French Revolution. This interpretive method robs Revelation of any meaning for those to whom it was written.”³
- Not surprisingly, this approach has led to a wide range of conflicting interpretations

³ MacArthur, J., Jr. (Ed.). (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed., p. 1990). Nashville, TN: Word Pub.

The Futuristic View

- This view “acknowledges the obvious influence that the first-century conflict between Roman power and the church had upon the themes of this book. But it also accepts the bulk of Revelation (chs. 4-22) as an inspired look into the time immediately preceding the Second Advent...and extending from the return of Christ to the creation of the new cosmos (19-22)...Futurists attempt to discern the literal meanings behind the symbolism of Revelation whenever this is permitted by the context or by comparison with other Scripture.”⁴

NOTE: The key to interpreting the book of Revelation is hermeneutical consistency, namely that the literal-historical-grammatical method of interpretation applied to narrative portions of Scripture also be applied to prophetic portions. Literal interpretation understands that, in normal communication and in the Scriptures, figures of speech are frequently used as communication devices. Literal interpretation does not ignore such devices, but recognizes the literal point behind them since **symbols and figures of speech represent something literal.** We are not to look for other meanings if the natural meaning of the sentence makes sense!

STRUCTURE

Focus	“Things Which you Have Seen”		“Things Which Are”		“Things Which Will Take Place” (1:19)									
	1:1	1:20	2:1	3:22	4:1								22:21	
Divisions	The Lord Jesus Christ		The Seven Churches		The Judge		The Tribulation		The Second Coming		The Millennium		The Eternal State	
	1:1	1:20	2:1	3:22	4:1	5:14	6:1	19:6	19:7	19:21	20:1	20:15	21:1	22:21
Topics	Vision of Christ				Vision of Consummation									
	Theophany		Talks		Tribulation			Trumpets			Together!			
Place	Written on the Island of Patmos													
Time	c. A.D. 95–96													

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- Three major sections give a basic chronological framework for the book
- These three divisions are identified in Revelation 1:19 ~ Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

The Things Which You Have Seen (chap 1) – Past

- Revelation contains a prologue (1:1-3) before the usual salutation (1:4-8)
- The Revelation was received by Christ from the Father and communicated by an angel to John

⁴ *Talk Thru the Bible*, Wilkinson and Boa 1983: 512.

⁵ This chart taken from Wilkinson & Boa: 509.

- This is the only biblical book that specifically promises a blessing to those who read it (1:3), but it also promises a curse to those who add to or detract from it (22:18-19)
- A rich theological portrait of the triune God (1:4-8) is followed by an overwhelming theophany (visible manifestation of God) in 1:9-20
- The omnipotent, omniscient, and sovereign Lord Jesus Christ who will subjugate all things under His authority is the central figure in this book

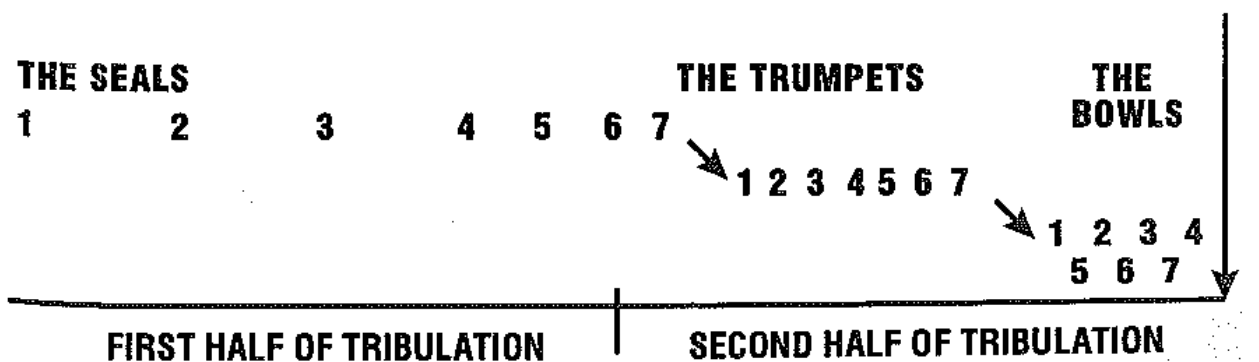
The Things Which Are (chaps 2–3) – Present

- The messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor (2-3) refer back to an aspect of John’s vision of Christ and contain a command, a commendation and/or condemnation, a correction, and a challenge for each church
- These messages are tailored to the needs of each of the seven churches
- “Clearly there were more than seven churches in Asia Minor when Revelation was written, so the question is why they are called the seven churches. The answer is that these seven historical churches were selected because they represent seven basic spiritual conditions that local churches in any age may be in. They accurately represent churches throughout the Church Age, from John’s day until the Rapture.”⁶

The Things Which Will Take Place After These (chaps 4–22) - Future

- This third division is the focus of Revelation
- John is translated into heaven where he is given a vision of the divine majesty
- In it, the Father (“one sat on the throne”) and the Son (The Lion/Lamb) are worshiped by the 24 elders, the four living creatures, and the angelic host because of who they are and what they have done in creation and redemption (chaps 4–5)
- The heavenly scene of the throne of God (chaps 4-5) is described in order to demonstrate who has the authority to judge and rule the world and the universe
- Jesus Christ is declared to be the only one worthy to judge and rule the earth as the Redeemer of men; therefore, to Him is given a scroll from the One on the throne, a scroll containing the title deed of the universe which entitles Him to reclaim the world for Himself
- The seals, trumpets and bowls are three consecutive series of judgments in the Tribulation, so that the seventh seal is the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet is the seven bowls (chaps 6-18)

THE THREE SERIES OF JUDGMENTS IN REVELATION

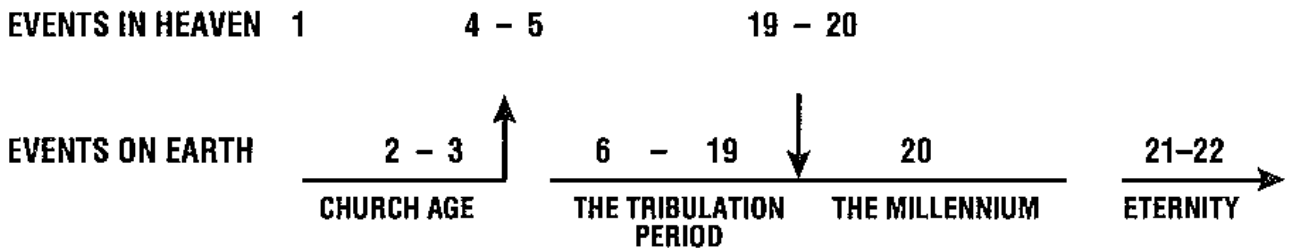


⁶ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 313-314.

⁷ Chart taken from Benware, *Understanding End Times*, 315

- These judgments culminate in the return of Christ (chap 19), the Millennial kingdom, (chap 20) and the establishment of the new heavens and earth (chap 21-22)
- The structure of Revelation is likely chronological
 - The phrase “after these things” (1:19; 4:1; 7:9; 9:12; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1; 20:3) points to the chronological nature of this book
 - The events around the throne (chaps 4-5) occur after the cross (the lamb has been slain) but before the Tribulation because the first seal which launches the Tribulation has not been broken yet
 - A few evidences point to a pretribulational Rapture:
 - The phrase “keep you from the hour of testing” (3:10) points to God’s promise to keep believers (church saints) from a worldwide testing (cf. 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9)
 - The absence of any mention of the church after Revelation 3 suggests that the church will be removed prior to the beginning of the Tribulation (the church is mentioned 20 times in chaps 1-3 and once in 22:16; but it is never mentioned in chaps 6-19)
 - The fact that the 24 elders are robed and crowned (4:4) likely points to the fact that the church is raptured prior to the Tribulation
 - The return of Christ (chap 19) prior to the 1000 years (chap 20) points to premillennialism

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION



COMPARISON BETWEEN GENESIS AND REVELATION

- While Genesis is the book of beginnings, Revelation is the book of consummation
- Genesis describes the inauguration of God’s divine program and Revelation describes its culmination
- “The first chapters of Genesis and the last chapters of Revelation reveal divinely intended connections between first things (protology) and last things (eschatology).”⁹
- In a very real sense, Revelation 21-22 describe the new Genesis, but this time

Connections Between Creation and New Creation¹⁰

	Creation Gen 1-3	New Creation Rev 21-22
God as Creator/Maker	"God <i>created</i> " (1:3); "in the day that the LORD God <i>made</i> earth and heaven" (2:4)	"I <i>am making</i> all things new" (21:5)
Heavens and Earth	"In the beginning God created <i>the heavens and the earth</i> " (1:1)	"Then I saw a <i>new heaven and a new earth</i> " (21:1)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever*, 506.

¹⁰ Chart taken from Vlach, *He Will Reign*, 507-508.

Light	Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light" (1:3)	"they will not have need of the light of a lamp . . . the Lord God will illumine them" (22:5)
Holy Space	Holy space on the earth: <i>Garden of Eden</i> (2:8)	Holy space on the New Earth: <i>New Jerusalem</i>
Presence of God with man	"the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day . . . the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden." (3:8);	"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them" (21:3)
Death	"in the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (2:17)	"there will no longer be <i>any</i> death" (21:4)
Curse	"Cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17)	"There will no longer be any curse" (22:3)
River	"Now a <i>river</i> flowed out of Eden to water the garden" (2:10)	"Then he showed me <i>a river of the water of life</i> , clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1)
Tree of Life	"the tree of life also in the midst of the garden"(2:9)	"On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve <i>kinds</i> of fruit" (22:2)
Rule/Reign	"subdue it [the earth]; and rule over . . ." (1:28)	"they will reign forever and ever" (22:5)
Satan	Satan free: "Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field" (3:1)	Satan sentenced: "And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire" (20:10)
Nations on the earth	Nations on the earth: Table of Nations (Gen 10-11)	"The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (21:24)
Nations in harmony	Nations in conflict (Gen 10 onward)	Nations at peace: "the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (22:3)

THE VALUE IN STUDYING REVELATION

- Although this book has resulted in many disagreements concerning its interpretation and fulfillment, a number of incredible benefits come from studying it

It Reminds Us of the Sovereignty of God

- In a world that is filled with chaos and wickedness, it is important to understand that God, not Satan or any other power, is in control
- God is the king of the universe, both now and in the future, and this remarkable truth brings great comfort to believers living in a hostile world (cf. Ps 2:1-12; Is 46:9-10; 1 Thess 4:18; Rev 1:18)

It Reminds Us of the Goodness of God

- Life, even for the Christian, is hard in that it is filled with sorrow and pain, hardship and difficulty
- Our age is characterized by a host of vices and an increased disregard for spiritual things (2 Tim 3:1-5)
- Studying prophecy, however, reminds us of the goodness of God in that He has written the final chapter and we know how it ends
- For the believer, it ends good, in heaven, living in the presence of a gracious, kind, and loving God, a truth meant to calm believers (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:16-18; Titus 2:13)

It Motivates Us to Holy Living

- When believers anticipate the Lord's return and the earthly reign of Christ, it has a purifying effect on them
- They are more apt to not allow sin's presence in their lives when they know how it will all end; whereas, those who fail to contemplate the end have a greater tendency to allow sin to permeate their lives (Titus 2:13-14; 1 John 3:2-3; 2 Peter 3:10-14).

It Helps Us Establish Proper Priorities

- The reality of future things provides clarity to what is most important in life
- Believers who live with a conscious awareness of the coming kingdom of God think differently and more circumspectly about the use of their time, talents, money, and resources (Matt 24:32-51; 25:1-30; 1 Cor 15:58)

It Gives Us Hope

- "If there is anyone who ought to live with a positive confidence in this world, it is the child of God (Titus 2:13). If there is anyone who ought not to live constantly under a blanket of defeat, fear, and depression, it is the child of God. Though none of us are exempt from painful, negative, even depressing situations, we ought not live in those conditions. A very real joy, pleasure, and glory are coming, and they are wrapped up in the 'blessed hope' of Jesus' appearance... Whereas the unbeliever may engage in wishful thinking about the future, the believer can look ahead with a confident expectation that God will accomplish everything that He has promised to do."¹¹

¹¹ Benware 1995: 14.