

## INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

### **“LOOK, I AM COMING SOON!”**

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (22:12-13).

#### **Author, Date and Place of Writing**

The author identified himself as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8). He called himself “God’s servant” (1:1), and “your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus” (1:9). According to Christian tradition, this is John the Apostle.

In dating the writing of this book, there is no internal evidence to guide us. However, it is clear that it was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted. Most scholars date its writing to A.D. 95-96, following Irenaeus’s statement that John received his vision “towards the end of Domitian’s reign” (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3).

John was exiled on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). Patmos is a very small island off the coast of modern day Turkey (see map). There he received and wrote down the divine vision which would soon take place.

#### **Recipients**

The immediate recipients were seven historical churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (1:4,11). The number seven, which symbolizes wholeness, suggests that this letter is for all the churches. At the same time, the repeated phrase, “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22), indicates that this letter is intended for all churches throughout history.

## Genre

This book identifies itself as an epistle, prophecy, and apocalypse. As an epistle, it follows the usual format: from the author, John, to the recipients (1:4-6), the seven churches of Asia Minor (1:11), greetings (1:4-5), body and benediction (22:21). It was a circulated letter written to the seven churches of Asia Minor. So we need to pay attention to the historical context.

John himself calls the book “the words of prophecy” (1:3; 22:7,10, 18,19). It is “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus” for which John and the churches were suffering (1:9; 20:4). John received divine revelation “in the Spirit” and wrote what he saw and heard (1:1-3,10). This book contains more than 250 specific echoes of Old Testament prophecies. It is the climax of all the prophecies in the Bible which Jesus has fulfilled, is fulfilling, or will ultimately fulfill as the King triumphant.

This book is primarily called “an apocalypse,” derived from the Greek word “*apocalypsis*” (1:1), which means “revelation, disclosure and unveiling.” This type of literature features revelatory visions within narrative. Its language is symbolic, metaphoric, and cryptic. This apocalyptic literature was often used in the times when God’s people were oppressed by world power nations (e.g. Daniel, Ezekiel).

We should keep in mind: 1) That images in apocalyptic literature are often fantastical. Therefore, we should interpret them figuratively. For example, the red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns is a figurative expression of the devil’s power (Rev 12:3). 2) That the author John has already provided interpretations for most significant images. For example, the seven lamps refer to seven churches (1:20); the great dragon is Satan (12:9); the prostitute is the great city (17:18). We should take John’s interpretations at face value and refrain from altering them. 3) That these images are a vehicle for revealing God’s ultimate purposes in judgment and salvation. So we should avoid being engrossed with the details but rather see

the vision as a whole. 4) That these images are rooted in the Old Testament. So to understand them, we need to refer to the Old Testament, not our own ideas.

## Historical Background

There are several factors that we should know about the historical background of the times to properly understand the book of Revelation.

*First, persecution by the Roman empire and the Jews.* John mentions repeatedly that Christians were suffering persecution and even martyrdom because of their testimony of Jesus (1:2,9; 2:13; 6:9; 20:4). This persecution came from what is described as a beast, especially in chapter 13. This beast was given power to wage war against God's holy people. Figuratively this refers to the Roman Empire, which practiced emperor worship.

During Caesar Augustus' time, the motto "Caesar is Lord" began to appear on coins. Gaius Caesar (Caligula, 37-41 A.D.) was the first emperor to be worshiped as a god in his lifetime. Claudius (41-54) and Nero (54-68) took emperor worship to extremes. In the time of Domitian (81-96), emperor worship was prevalent in the entire Roman empire. The cities in which the seven churches were located all had temples dedicated to emperor worship. These emperors insisted on being called "Lord," "Prince of Peace," "Son of God," and "Savior." Although it was often hypocritical, it was valued as a test of loyalty to emperor and empire. Those who refused to worship the emperor were charged with treason. This became the basis of persecution of Christians, who confessed that only Jesus was the Son of God, Lord, and Savior. (*See Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible and Lexham Bible Dictionary.*)

Christians were persecuted not only by pagan Gentiles, but also by hostile Jews, who were tolerated by the Roman Empire. These Jews used their privileged position to oppose the Christian testimony that Jesus is the Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God. In order to discredit Christian testimony, the Jews spread rumors and told lies about Christians. John called them "a synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9).

*Second, heresy and false teaching.* John mentions several heretical and false teachers. The Nicolaitans, whose name means “victory people,” were a sect which advocated licentiousness as a way of life (2:6,15). They taught that Christians could indulge in pagan immoralities. Pergamum was a center of the Nicolaitan teachings, and the church there was influenced by them. John compares them to Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and indulged in sexual immorality (2:14; Nu 25:1-2; 31:16). It is commonly thought that the woman “Jezebel” (2:20) was the leader of the Nicolaitans. She taught Satan’s so-called deep secrets, perhaps an early form of gnosticism (2:24).

*Third, pressure to compromise with the culture.* In Revelation 2:14,20, the words “they ate food sacrificed to idols” are repeated. This probably refers to joining in pagan festivals, which included idol worship and sexual immorality. While this was often caused by the influence of false teachers, cultural influences were also a significant factor. For example, in order to survive in the international marketplace, it was advantageous to join trade guilds which required sacrificing to pagan deities, participating in guild feasts and temple worship. (See *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible and Lexham Bible Dictionary*.)

When we consider this historical background, we can understand the situation of the first recipients. This will help guide us to understand this book properly as we engage in our own study.

## **Main Theme**

This book portrays, in dynamic imagery, the spiritual warfare that is ongoing between Jesus, the Lamb of God, and Satan--the enemy of God and his church. Jesus already won the victory over Satan by his death and resurrection. So Jesus became the King of kings. His kingdom has already been established, but is not yet fully realized. When Jesus comes again he will bring about the full manifestation of his reign and kingdom by destroying the last vestiges of Satan’s power (ch. 5, 21-22). Until then, the church must undergo trials and persecutions.

## Author's Purpose

The author encourages believers to have the assurance of victory, rooted in the sure hope of Jesus' coming again. When Jesus comes again, God's enemies will be judged and condemned, and God's people will be rewarded. With this assurance, they can endure the inevitable trials and persecutions that will surely come. The faithful are those who hold to the testimony about Jesus and to the word of God, even to the point of death (6:9; 17:6; 20:4). The author repeats the phrase, "To the one who is victorious," (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21), and calls for patient endurance and wisdom on the part of the saints (13:10,18; 14:12; 17:9).

## Characteristics

Old Testament background. Revelation presents itself as the climax and fulfillment of God's history prophesied and prefigured in the Old Testament and fulfilled in and through Christ Jesus. For this reason, Revelation draws upon Old Testament prophecies, primarily Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and the Psalms, as well as the Biblical narratives in Genesis, Exodus and more. For example in 1:13-16, Jesus is described as the glorious Son of Man, which references Daniel 7:13. In chapter 5, Jesus is described as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, a reference to Genesis 49:9. He is also portrayed as the Lamb who was slain, which refer to images from Exodus, and the sacrificial system. The seven eyes of the Lamb, which symbolize omniscience, refer to the seven eyes of the Lord in Zechariah 4:10. Jesus is described as the ruler of the nations, who wields an iron scepter, as foretold in Psalm 2:9. By the same token, the beast that comes out of the sea in chapter 13 is a composite of the four beasts mentioned in Daniel 7. Furthermore, the judgments that are mentioned in Revelation mirror some of the plagues described in Exodus. The new heaven and new earth mentioned in 21:1 alludes to Isaiah 65:17.

Symbolism. Revelation is rife with symbols from the beginning to the end. Rather than portraying characters or events directly, the author presents them indirectly through symbols. These symbols include images relating to the Old Testament, Temple articles--such as lampstands, bowls and trumpets--as well as numbers. For example, the number 7 is a symbol

recurring 52 times in this book in various ways and with diverse aspects. Exemplary of this is the seven spirits before the throne of God (1:4). This does not mean that God has seven spirits. In the same way, the Lamb is portrayed as having seven horns. This should be understood figuratively as an expression of the Lamb's power. Perhaps the number seven symbolizes completeness. There is the mention of 144,000 holy believers (7:4). Some heretics limit the saved to this number, regarding them as the spiritual elite. But this number should be viewed figuratively. The same is true of Christ's thousand year reign (20). In order to understand and interpret Revelation according to the author's intention, we need to have a good grasp of the Old Testament books it draws upon and the symbolism therein. Otherwise we may interpret it in our own way and misunderstand it.

Key Words and Concepts. There are a number of key words that appear in this book. A brief consideration of them will guide us to better understand it.

*God Almighty.* The word "God" appears 96 times. In Revelation God's sovereign power is emphasized. The word "throne" appears 46 times; it is almost always God's throne and he is sitting on the throne ruling. "God Almighty" appears nine times (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 19:6,15; 21:22). The phrase, "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4,8) expresses God's eternal rule. And the phrase "I am the Alpha and the Omega" is attributed to God two times (1:8; 21:6). He is the beginning and the end, the sovereign Ruler of history. Though evil seems to run rampant, and many cataclysmic events happen, God is always in control. His final triumph is certain.

*Christ the Lamb and King.* The word "Lamb" appears 27 times in reference to Jesus Christ. It is by far the most frequently used designation of Jesus. The Lamb was slain, yet he is victorious. He often appears at the center of the throne and is due the praise and worship that belongs to God alone. The evil powers wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb triumphs over them because he is King of kings and Lord of lords (17:14). The word "king" appears many times in the book of Revelation. Most of the time it refers to worldly rulers. In contrast, Jesus is the King of kings (17:14; 19:16). And at his coming, he turns the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of our God and

of his Christ (11:15). God's people await his return with eagerness, especially in the time of suffering. The returning, victorious King proclaims repeatedly to his people, "I am coming soon" (3:11; 22:7,12,20).

*The Spirit.* The word "Spirit" appears 14 times, most often in the phrase, "the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). This indicates that the Spirit is the main speaker of God's message to the church. So we should pay attention to what the Spirit says. We must hear and take to heart his words in the Bible with fear and trembling and put them into practice (1:3). It is because his words are the words of life (2:7, etc.). We must not add anything or take away anything. If we do, God will take away from us any share in the tree of life and in the holy city (22:19).

*Church.* The word "church" appears 20 times. Seven specific churches are mentioned and all of them, without exception, go through suffering. These churches are representative of all churches. While on earth, the church struggles against the forces of evil and to grow in holiness. This is a challenging process, as the key words "endurance," and "patience" tell us (1:9; 2:3; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). God's people pray for the Lamb's final victory, trusting in God's sovereign power (5:8; 8:3-4). A key characteristic of these church members is that they hold to the "testimony" of Jesus (1:9; 6:9; 12:17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4). Because of this testimony they are persecuted and some are martyred. Yet, also because of this testimony of Jesus they overcome the power of evil (12:11). The church does not compromise with evil, but overcomes evil through the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony about Jesus. This is the church militant and triumphant. The church is also described as the bride or wife of the Lamb (19:7; 21:2,9). This bride is equivalent to the New Jerusalem. The church, that is the people of God, will be perfected, purified and glorified, and will reign with Christ throughout eternity.

*God's judgment.* The word judgment appears five times (14:7; 16:5,7; 18:20; 19:2). And the concept of judgment flows throughout the book of Revelation. God's judgement is just, universal and eternal. God's judgment is manifest in two ways: salvation and justice for God's people and eternal condemnation for God's enemies. God judges the nations. The word

“nation(s)” sometimes refers to the peoples of all nations who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and worship him (5:9; 15:4; 21:24,26). As redeemed people from every nation are brought into God’s kingdom, there will be divine healing and restoration (22:2). Other times the word “nation(s)” refers to those who rebel against God and receive final judgment (10:11; 11:9,18; 13:7; et Al.).

God also judges Satan, who is the first cause of all evil and unrighteousness. Satan is mentioned specifically seven times (2:9,13,24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2,7) and figuratively as the dragon or beast (ch. 12,13). He fights furiously against God’s people through persecution, deception and temptation (ch. 2,3,13,20). Although he has lost the war because of Jesus, he bitterly fights to destroy every single soul. But ultimately Satan and his efforts are doomed to failure and defeat. He will be thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur to be tormented day and night forever (20:10).

*Blessed.* The author pronounces seven blessings throughout the book, in the form of “blessed are,” or “blessed is.” The blessed are: those who read, hear, take to heart, and keep the words of the prophecy (1:3; 22:7), those who are invited to the Lamb’s wedding, wash their robes in his blood, stay awake and remain clothed, who die in the Lord and share in the first resurrection (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:14). The blessings include such things as rest from labor, deliverance from the second death, the privilege of being priests of God and of Christ, reigning with him, and the right to eat from the tree of life and to enter the eternal city.

*The new heaven and new earth (21:1).* At the end of this book, the last book in the Bible, the author reveals an amazing picture of the new heaven and the new earth. This is the consummation of the Kingdom of God. It is God who makes everything new (21:5). There is no evil or impurity, and there are no tears, sorrows, pain or death. The most important thing is that God dwells among his people and our relationship with God is fully restored. We see his face and share his glory forever. There is no longer a temple, for God and the Lamb are the temple. This is how the Bible ends--with a redeemed people dwelling in a new earth, enjoying the presence of God forever. It is perfect paradise. This fulfills God’s original purpose in creation. Glory to him forever.

*Angels.* The word “angel” appears in the book of Revelation 77 times (NIV), much more often than any other book in the Bible. Angels are supernatural beings, created by God. They are God’s messengers, agents of his judgment, and servants of his people. They worship God. In the book of Revelation, there are different kinds of angels: archangels, mighty angels, and other angels. Some of these angels are so glorious that even Apostle John fell down to worship them (19:10; 22:8). But they quickly corrected him, saying, “Don’t do that! Worship God!” On the other hand, some angels followed Satan and rebelled against God (12:7). They became God’s enemies who will be thrown into the lake of fire with Satan (20:10; Mt 25:41).

### **Interpretive Approaches**

Through the centuries, this book has been interpreted in a variety of ways. We may sum up the principal ways as follows:

*Preterist.* “Preter” is from the Latin which means “thing that is past.” According to this view, those in our time regard the prophecies in Revelation as having been already fulfilled in the early Christian church. Partial preterism holds that some prophecies--such as Christ’s second coming, and the coming of a new heaven and new earth--are still to be fulfilled. This may be a viable option.

*Futurist.* This view underlies much of the popular end times literature. It holds that Revelation is largely a prophecy still to come. *Dispensational futurists* interpret chapters 6-19 as prophecy of a literal seven-year tribulation, which takes place after the church’s rapture. After the tribulation is over, God will establish a one thousand year reign for Israel on earth. *Historical futurists* teach that the church will pass through the final tribulation and share in Christ’s future earthly rule during the Millennium. In general, futurists are too literal and disregard the significance of genre.

*Historicist.* This view sees Revelation as an inspired forecast of the whole of human history, from the early church until Jesus’ second coming. It often

focuses on western church history. There are many different historicist views and no real agreement among them.

*Idealist.* For this view, the whole book is about ideas and principles that relate to all Christians. The forces and conflicts symbolized in Revelation visions express themselves in the church's ongoing struggle in the present. It also foretells a future escalation of persecution and divine judgment leading to the return of Christ and the new heaven and new earth.

*Combined View.* Each of the views mentioned have merit, but are limited. A combined view tries to incorporate the merits of each view. For example, preterists take the historical context seriously. Futurists emphasize the reality of Jesus' second coming after a time of severe crisis. Idealists respect the apocalyptic picture language which speaks truth to every generation in symbolic form. This kind of combined view is recommended. The major symbols of Revelation repeat a pattern of the suffering of God's people, judgment against God's enemies, and the triumph of Christ. This is relevant to anyone, from the early church to the present time and into the future.

### **Millennial Views**

Millennium means the thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth, as described in Revelation 20:4-6. The word is from Latin (*mille* = thousand). There are four major positions: premillennialism (historic premillennialism; dispensational premillennialism), postmillennialism, and amillennialism. The terminology used to delineate these basic positions arises from the answer given to the question of Christ's return relative to the millennium.

- a) Historic premillennialism: the millennium will start when Jesus comes again. The church will go through a time of tribulation and then Christ will return before (pre-) the millennium.
- b) Dispensational premillennialism: there will be a rapture of the church, a great tribulation, and then Jesus will come again to reign for a thousand years over a literal Jewish kingdom.

- c) Postmillennialism: the return of Christ will occur after (post-) the thousand-year reign of Christ. The millennium is a time in which most of the world submits to Jesus, and peace and justice reign.
- d) Amillennialism: The millennium is a symbol of Christ's present reign among his people; there will be no literal earthly thousand year reign of Christ.

The core teachings of the Bible regarding end times include Jesus' second coming, the resurrection of the body, and life eternal. These are issues of life and faith that should not be compromised. In contrast, millennial views are not essential nor core teachings. The amillennial view is recommended, in standing with the Reformed tradition. Historic premillennialism can be a valid position. Dispensational millennialism is least recommended. However, we should not be so dogmatic in this matter that it breaks relationships with fellow believers.

## Structure

Since the book of Revelation is not easy to understand, it is helpful to try to discover its internal structure. Several things are apparent through careful observation.

- There is a prologue (1:1-8), body (1:9-21:27), and epilogue (22:6-21).
- Another noticeable subdivision is characterized by the number seven, whether explicit or implied: seven churches (2-3), seven seals (4-7), seven trumpets (8-11), seven signs (12-14), seven bowls (15-16), seven messages of judgment on Babylon (17:1-19:10), and seven last things (19:11-22:5). These subdivisions of sevens are not necessarily a chronological order of events. Rather, we find what seem to be parallels which follow the pattern of tribulation of God's people, judgment of the wicked and the triumph of Christ. It is helpful to understand that the principle of recapitulation, that is the repetition of the same truth in a different form, emphasizes the certainty of God's fulfillment of his purposes and the final victory of Christ.

- It is also possible to divide the contents around four key visions: 1) the Son of Man among the seven churches (1-3), 2) the seven-sealed scroll, seven trumpets, and seven bowls (4:1-19:10), 3) the return of Christ and the consummation of this age (19:11-20:15), 4) the new heaven and new earth (21-22).

### **Purpose of our study**

Some people study the book of Revelation out of curiosity, and others to gain insight to predict future dates and events and to escape from the burdens of reality. Still others study it as mere myth, disregarding its spiritual value. Many recent books and movies have sensationalized end times scenarios based on a warped view of Revelation, demeaning its true value. They pick verses and images, and take them out of context, to legitimize their own views. For these reasons, it is our intention to approach this book with deep respect as the very word of God spoken to us today. With much prayer and humility, we want to listen to the message of this book and be blessed according to God's promise (1:3). We pray to have John's vision of glorious Jesus coming again and sitting on the throne as King of kings. Though we may not be facing the same trials that the first readers did, we are still engaged in the same spiritual warfare that they faced. And we have the same task of testifying to Jesus. In addition, each of us also have our own trials and temptations to overcome. We pray that through this study we may reawaken the hope of Jesus' coming again. This hope gives us new strength and grace to overcome trials and temptations so that we may be faithful witnesses of Jesus until he comes again.

### **Outline**

- I. Introduction (1:1-8)
  - A. Revelation from Jesus Christ (1-3)
  - B. Greetings and Doxology (4-8)
- II. To the seven churches (2:1-3:22)
  - A. John's vision of the Son of Man (1:9-20)
  - B. To the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

- C. To the church in Smyrna (8-11)
  - D. To the church in Pergamum (12-17)
  - E. To the church in Thyatira (18-29)
  - F. To the church in Sardis (3:1-6)
  - G. To the church in Philadelphia (7-13)
  - H. To the church in Laodicea (14-22)
- III. God's throne in heaven, the Lamb and the scroll (4:1-5:14)
- A. Worship of God the Creator (4:1-11)
  - B. The Lamb is able to open the scroll (5:1-5)
  - C. All creation worships the Lamb who was slain (6-14)
- IV. The seven seals (6:1-8:5)
- A. The Lamb opens six seals of the seven (6:1-17)
  - B. 144,000 sealed by the living God (7:1-8)
  - C. A great multitude from every nation worship God (7:9-17)
  - D. The seventh seal opened (8:1-5)
- V. The seven trumpets (8:6-11:19)
- A. Six trumpets of the seven sounded (8:6-9:21)
  - B. The angel commanded John to eat a little scroll and prophesy (10:1-11)
  - C. God appointed his two witnesses who will prophesy (11:1-14)
  - D. The seventh trumpet sounded (11:15-19)
- VI. The spiritual conflict between Christ and Satan (12:1-14:20)
- A. The woman, the dragon, and the beast (12:1-13:18)
    - 1. Two signs: a woman and a dragon (12:1-6)
    - 2. The dragon defeated in heaven (7-12)
    - 3. The dragon pursues the woman to kill her (13-17)
    - 4. The beast coming out of the sea (13:1-10)
    - 5. A second beast comes out of the earth (11-18)
  - B. The Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1-20)
    - 1. The 144,000 sing a new song (14:1-5)

- 2. Three angels proclaim the gospel, judgment and warning (6-13)
  - 3. The harvest of the earth (14-20)
- VII. Seven angels with seven plagues (15:1-16:21)
  - A. Redeemed people sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1-4)
  - B. Seven angels are given seven bowls of God's wrath (5-8)
  - C. Seven angels pronounce judgment on the earth (16:1-21)
- VIII. Judgment on Babylon and the defeat of the beast (17:1-20:15)
  - A. Babylon the prostitute on the beast (17:1-14)
  - B. The beast and ten horns destroy the prostitute (15-18)
  - C. God's people called out of Babylon (18:1-8)
  - D. Woe to Babylon (9-24)
  - E. Song of victory over Babylon's fall (19:1-10)
  - F. The faithful and true warrior defeats the beast and dragon (11-21)
  - G. Satan's doom (20:1-10)
  - H. The second death (11-15)
- IX. A new heaven and a new earth (21:1-22:5)
  - A. God's dwelling place (21:1-8)
  - B. The Holy City, the New Jerusalem (9-27)
  - C. A description of God's kingdom (22:1-5)
- X. Jesus promised to come soon (22:6-21)

## Map

