

Understanding the Book of Revelation

The title of the Book of Revelation is from its first word, *apokalupsis*, meaning to *unveil, disclose, or reveal*. Revelation 1:1 gives the theme of the book: it is a revelation of, from, and about Jesus Christ. Revelation is apocalyptic literature, though actually a combination of three literary types:

1. *Apocalyptic*—a heightened or intensified form of prophecy that uses cryptic, richly symbolic language to portray the dramatic end-time vindication and victory of God and His people (1:1)
2. *Prophecy*—God’s direct word of proclamation to His people through His servants, both foretelling and forth telling (1:3)
3. *Epistle*—a letter addressing needs of particular churches (1:4-7; 2-3; 22:21). Revelation points to future hope and calls for present faithfulness and perseverance.

To encourage faithfulness, Revelation points to the glorious world to come, a world where “death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer” (21:4; see 7:16) at the reappearing of the crucified and risen Jesus. The enthroned Lord will return to conclude world history with the destruction of God’s enemies, the final salvation of His people, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (see 21–22). The intensity of John’s experience is matched only by the richness of the apocalyptic symbolism employed to warn his readers of impending disasters and temptations that would require steadfast allegiance to the risen Lord. To be sure, the Lord will come in power and glory but not before His enemies have exercised a terrible but limited (by divine mercy) attack on those who hold to “the testimony about Jesus” (1:9; see 6:9; 12:11).

Author

Four times the author identifies himself as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8), to whom early Christian traditions attribute the Gospel of John, the three letters from John, and the Book of Revelation. Revelation is the only one claiming to be written by someone named John. Though the author does not claim to be the apostle John, it seems unlikely that any other first-century Christian leader would have had the authority or would have been associated closely enough with the churches of Asia Minor to have referred to himself simply as John. There are some differences in style and language among the Gospel, the epistles, and Revelation, but there are also significant similarities. For example, only the Gospel and Revelation refer to Jesus as the Word of God (see John 1:1; Rev. 19:13) and the Lamb. The theme of witness is also particularly prominent in all five books. The best view is that the John of the Revelation was in fact John the apostle, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee.

Setting

The author’s situation was one of suffering. He was a “brother and partner in the tribulation” which is “in Jesus” and, because of his testimony of Jesus, was exiled to the island of Patmos

(1:9). The situations of the recipients varied, though all were experiencing difficulties. A faithful Christian in Pergamum suffered death (see 2:12-13), and the church in Smyrna was warned of impending persecution (see 2:10). Ephesus had left its first love (see 2:4), Pergamum and Thyatira tolerated false teaching (see 2:14-15; 20), Sardis was spiritually dead (see 3:1), Philadelphia faced Jewish opposition (see 3:9), and Laodicea was lukewarm (see 3:16). These seven churches are the immediate destinations of the book. The representative character of the seven churches and the prophetic message of the book indicate, however, that it was for a much wider audience, the church at large.

Date

Revelation was written late in the first century. Early tradition dated the book during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96). An alternative view dates it shortly after the reign of Nero (A.D. 54–68). Scholars who favor the time of Nero argue that the repeated references to persecution in the book (see 1:9; 2:2-3, 10, 13; 3:9-10; 6:10-11; 7:14-17; 11:7; 12:13–13:17; 14:12-20; 19:2; 21:4) fit better during his reign, when persecutions clearly took place. The allusion to the temple in 11:1 seems to imply it is still standing, requiring a date before A.D. 70. Those who argue for the time of Domitian note that this was the view of Irenaeus, Victorinus, Eusebius, and Jerome. The letters to the seven churches presuppose development and decline, while these churches (not founded until the late 50s) seemed to be doing well when Paul was imprisoned in the 60s. By the time of Domitian, a second generation might not have exhibited the convictions of the first, especially facing intensified opposition and challenges to compromise. Most scholars affirm the time of Domitian as better and set the date A.D. 90–96. Whichever date is correct, it was a time of growing persecution, doctrinal challenge, and moral compromise.

Literary Structure of the Book

Several approaches have been offered, of which two have special appeal. First, the book may be outlined around the phrase “in the Spirit,” used at four strategic locations when John moved to a different location (see 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). A second approach sees 1:19 as the interpretive key. John was told to write “what you have seen” (see chap. 1), “what is” (see chaps. 2–3), “and what will take place after this” (see chaps. 4–22).

Interpretive Approaches to Revelation

Interpreters of Revelation can usually be placed in one of four categories.

1. *Preterist*. The book is about and for the first century. Most, if not all, of the events described in the book were fulfilled in John’s day.
2. *Historicist*. The book is a panorama of church history, with attention focusing on its development in the West.
3. *Idealist*. The book symbolizes timeless truth and the conflict between good and evil. No specific persons or events are in view. The message to be proclaimed and received is that in the end God is victorious.
4. *Futurist*. Beginning with chapter 4 (or 6), the book describes what will take place at the end of history just before the second coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His kingdom.

Outline

Introduction (1:1-8)

John's Vision on the Island of Patmos (1:9-20)

Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

The Sovereignty of the Creator God Committed to the Crucified and Now Enthroned Lamb (4:1-5:14)

The Enthroned Lamb's Judgments via the Seven Seals (6:1-8:5)

The Enthroned Lamb's Judgments via the Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)

The Dragon's Persecution of the Righteous (12:1-13:18)

A Summary of Triumph, Warning, and Judgment (14:1-20)

The Enthroned Lamb's Judgments via the Seven Bowls (15:1-16:21)

The Fall and Ruin of Babylon (17:1-18:24)

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:1-10)

The Second Coming of Jesus Christ (19:11-21)

The Millennial Kingdom (20:1-6)

Satan's Final Rebellion and the Great White Throne Judgment (20:7-15)

The Rejoicing of Heaven, the Revelation of the Lamb, and the Advent of the Bride, the Holy City (21:1-22:5)

Conclusion (22:6-21)

Commentary

Introduction (1:1-8). Written to “the seven churches” (1:4) of the Roman province of Asia Minor, John's work is a “revelation” (1:1) about and from Jesus Christ of “what must quickly take place” (1:1). The theme is clear: the Lord God Himself has guaranteed the final vindication of the crucified Jesus (see 1:7-8). A blessing (the first of seven) is promised to those who hear and heed its message (see 1:3).

John's vision on the island of Patmos (1:9-20). While in exile on Patmos, John saw the risen Lord (see 1:9-20). Appearing clothed in power and majesty (see 1:9-20), the Living One revealed Himself as the Lord of the churches and instructed John to send not only the seven letters but also an account of the things which he had seen and would see, a revelation of “what will take place after this” (1:19).

Letters to the seven churches (2:1-3:22). The letters to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea have a fairly consistent format. First, after designating the recipients, the risen Lord describes Himself, using a portion of the description in 1:9-20. Then follows an “I know” section of commendation and/or criticism. Next, typically, is an exhortation: to those receiving criticism, an exhortation to repent; however, to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, for whom the Lord had only praise, the exhortation is one of assurance (see 2:10; 3:10-13). Each letter concludes with both an exhortation to “listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” and a promise of reward to the “victor,” the one who conquers by persevering in the cause of Christ. Each promise finds its source in the glorious consummation (see 19-22). The church in Ephesus (see 2:1-7) is told to return to its first love; the church in Smyrna (see 2:8-11), to be faithful to death. The churches of Pergamum (see 2:12-17) and Thyatira (see 2:18-29) must beware of false teaching and

immoral deeds accompanying erroneous theology. The church in Sardis (see 3:1-6) is told to wake up and complete its works of obedience. The church in Philadelphia (see 3:7-13) is promised, in the face of persecution, that faith in Jesus ensures access to the eternal kingdom. And the church at Laodicea (see 3:14-22) is told to turn from self-deception and to repent of lukewarmness.

The sovereignty of the Creator God committed to the crucified and now enthroned Lamb (4:1-5:14). Chapters 4–5 are pivotal, tying the risen Lord’s exhortations to the churches (chaps. 2–3) and to the judgments and final triumph of the Lamb (chaps. 6–22). These chapters provide the historical and theological basis of the risen Lord’s authority over both the church and the world by depicting His enthronement and power to carry out the judging and saving purposes of God. Chapter 4 asserts the sovereign authority of God the Father as Creator. Chapter 5 depicts the sovereign authority of God the Son as Redeemer. By creation and redemption God is righteous in exercising authority over all things. In Revelation 5 is a book of retribution, redemption, and restoration. This book, containing the remainder of the revelation (chaps. 6–22), is related to Ezekiel’s book of woes (2:9-10) and the sealed book of Daniel (12:4,9-10). The crucified Lord Jesus is the risen and exalted Lion and Lamb of God who is all-powerful, all knowing, and omnipresent (5:6). He and He alone is worthy to take the book and open its seven seals. When the Lamb begins to break the seals, the climactic events of history begin to unfold.

The enthroned Lamb’s judgments via the seven seals (6:1–8:5). The breaking of the first four seals brings forth the four horsemen (see 6:1-8). These riders, paralleling the chaos predicted in Matthew 24 (also see Mark 13; Luke 21), represent God’s judgments through war and its devastating consequences (violence, famine, pestilence, and death). The fifth seal (see 6:9-11) is the plea of martyred saints for divine justice on their oppressors. For now they must wait.

The sixth seal is important for understanding the literary structure and episodic sequence of Revelation. When broken, it brings forth the typical signs of the end: a great earthquake, blackening of the sun, ensanguining of the moon, and falling of the stars of heaven (see Matt. 24:29). At this point we are at the end of world history. The mighty and the lowly of the earth realize that the great day of God’s (and the Lamb’s) wrath has come, and nothing can save them (see 6:14-17). The description of the judgments initiated by the first six seals would overwhelm John’s audience, so he interrupted the sequence, leading to the seventh seal to remind them that the people of God need not despair, for as the “slaves of our God” (7:3), they have the promise of heaven.

A careful reading of Revelation shows that both the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet are empty of content. Some suggest that the three series of judgments (seals, trumpets, and bowls) have a telescopic relationship, so that the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets, and the seventh trumpet contains the seven bowls, accounting for the intensity and rapidity of the judgments toward the end. This also explains being brought to the close of history at the end of each series of judgments, at least in some respect.

Chapter 7 is two visions (see 7:1-8,9-17) and is something like a parenthesis. The sealing of the 144,000 (see 7:1-8) is understood by many to be a reference to actual Jewish people who come to Christ and perform a unique and special service during the tribulation period (see Rom. 11:25-29). Others believe John employs Jewish symbolism to represent all believers who have put their trust in Christ. The latter view is unlikely because in the second vision (see 7:9-17) John sees a great multitude and makes no distinctions among them. Using descriptions of heaven (21:3-4,23; 22:1-5), John tells us they are “coming out of the great tribulation” (7:14), now to experience the joys of heaven and relief from tribulations (compare 7:14-17 with 21:1-6; 22:1-5). To come “out of the great tribulation” (7:14) indicates these are most likely martyred saints who suffered death as witnesses to Jesus (see 6:9-11; 12:10-12; 20:4-6). In heaven they now enjoy the presence of God (7:15; 21:3). Christians (“the slaves of our God,” 7:3) have the seal of God. Refusing the mark of the beast (see 13:16-17; 14:11), they bear testimony to Jesus (see 14:12) in spite of persecution (see 12:17; 13:7) and therefore have the promise of final deliverance from great tribulation (see 7:14).

Revelation 8:1-5 gives the seventh seal and the sign of the very end of human history and the coming of the Lord, but the prophet is not yet ready to describe the Lord’s return. Still more must be fulfilled—additional judgments of God, the mission of God’s people, and the persecution of the beast. The seventh seal contains the seven trumpets. Using this symbolic vehicle, John reveals the second major series of judgments that move ever closer to the end.

The enthroned Lamb’s judgments via the seven trumpets (8:6–11:19). The first four trumpets describe partial judgments (a third) on the earth’s vegetation, the oceans, fresh waters, and the heavenly lights (see 8:6-13). The last three trumpets are grouped together and are described as three woes on the earth, emphasizing God’s judgment. These judgments have no redemptive effect, for the “rest of the people” (9:20) not killed by plagues do not repent of their immoralities (see 9:20-21).

The interlude between the sixth and seventh seals reminded us that the people of God are safe from the eternally destructive effects of God’s wrath, so also between the sixth and seventh trumpets we are reminded of God’s protective hand on His people (10:1–11:14). In the trumpet interlude we also learn that God’s protection during days of tribulation does not mean isolation, for the people of God must bear a prophetic witness to the world.

In 10:1-8 John’s call (see Ezek. 2:1–3:11) is reaffirmed. The note of God’s providence, protection, and witness is again struck in 11:1-13 with the measuring of the tribulation temple (see 11:1-2). Persecutions will last 42 months, but His people cannot be destroyed, for the two witnesses (11:3-13) must bear witness to the mercy and judgment of God. The two witnesses (two suggests confirmed, legal testimony) are also called “two lampstands” (11:4). Some believe they symbolize testifying believers (see 1:20). Others think they are two actual persons who will bear witness and be martyred. Like Moses and Elijah, they maintain a faithful prophetic witness to the world, even to death. Though the earth rejoices when their testimony is apparently brought to an end, the temporary triumph of evil (3½ days, see

11:9,11) will turn to heavenly vindication as the two witnesses are raised from the dead (see 11:11-12).

With the seventh trumpet (and third woe) comes the end of history again, the time “for the dead to be judged” and the saints to be rewarded (11:18). Yet John is not ready to describe the actual coming of the Lord. Sadly, he has more to relate about “the beast that comes up out of the abyss” to “make war” with the people of God (11:7). John now unfolds the 42 months, the period of persecution, protection, and witness.

The dragon’s persecution of the righteous (12:1–13:18). Chapter 12 is crucial for understanding John’s view of the sequence of history. Christians and Jews associated the number 3½ with times of evil and judgment. John variously referred to the 3½ years as either 42 months, 1,260 days, or “a time, times, and half a time” (12:14). During this time, a period when the powers of evil will do their works, God will protect His people (see 12:6,14) while they bear witness to their faith (see 11:3) and simultaneously suffer at the hands of evil powers (see 11:2,7; 12:13-17; 13:5-7). This terrible period of tribulation will end with the coming of the Lord. The critical question, however, is when the 3½-year period of persecution and witness begins. Some scholars locate the 3½ years at some time in the future. Others pinpoint its beginning with the ascension and enthronement of Christ (see 12:5). When the woman’s (Israel’s) offspring is “caught up to God and to His throne” (12:5), there is war in heaven, and the dragon is cast down to the earth.

Heaven rejoices because the offspring has been rescued from Satan, but the earth must mourn because the Devil has been cast down to earth, and his anger is great. He knows he has been defeated by the risen and exalted Christ and has only a short time (see 12:12). The woman, who (as Israel) brought forth the Christ (see 12:1-2) and also other offspring, those who “have the testimony about Jesus” (12:17), now receives the brunt of the frustrated dragon’s wrath. As the enraged dragon seeks to vent his wrath on the woman, she is nonetheless nourished and protected for 1,260 days (see 12:6), for a “time, times, and half a time” (12:14).

The dragon then brings forth two henchmen (see chap. 13) to help pursue those who believe in Jesus. Satan is embodied in a political ruler, the beast from the sea (13:1), who will blaspheme for 42 months (see 13:5). This is Paul’s man of lawlessness (see 2 Thess. 2:3-12) and the antichrist of John (see 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 7). He is both a person and the head of a political power. He will “wage war against the saints” (13:7), while the second beast (or false prophet, see 19:20), who comes up from the earth (see 13:11), seeks to deceive the earth so that its inhabitants worship the first beast.

Chapter 12 may be viewed as something of a panorama of redemptive history. Chapter 13 is to be understood in connection with Daniel 7 at the coming of the eschatological antichrist. In the dragon (Satan) the beast and the false prophet will encounter nothing less than a counterfeit trinity, as well as a counterfeit resurrection (see 13:3). Revelation is clear that Satan is the master deceiver and counterfeiter.

Summary of triumph, warning, and judgment (14:1-20). After depressing news of ongoing persecutions by the unholy trinity, John's readers need another word of encouragement and warning. Chapter 14 employs seven voices to relate again the hopes and warnings of heaven. First is another vision of the 144,000, the Jewish remnant. Faithful in their worship of the one true God through Jesus Christ and not seduced by the satanic deceptions of the first beast and his ally, the false prophet, they will be rescued and taken to heaven's throne (see 14:15).

An angel announces the eternal gospel and warns the earth of coming judgment (14:6-7). The remaining voices (or oracles) follow in rapid succession. The fall of "Babylon the Great" (14:8), an Old Testament symbol for a nation opposed to the people of God, is announced. The people of God are warned not to follow the beast so that they won't suffer separation from God (see 14:9-12). Finally, two voices call for harvest (see 14:14-20).

The enthroned Lamb's judgments via the seven bowls (15:1-16:21). Another dimension of His judgment is the seven bowls of wrath, similar to the seven trumpets and the seven seals but also different. The wrath of God is no longer partial or temporary but complete and everlasting, final and irrevocable. The partial judgments (a third) of the trumpets suggest that God uses sufferings and evil to draw humankind toward repentance and faith, but such tribulations also foreshadow the final hour of judgment when God's wrath is finished.

The seven bowls have no break between the sixth and seventh outpourings of judgment. Only wrath is left with no more delay. Babylon the Great, the symbol for all who have vaunted themselves against the Most High God, will fall. The end has come (see 16:17).

The fall and ruin of Babylon (17:1-18:24). Chapter 17 retells the sixth bowl, the fall of Babylon the Great, and chapter 18 gives a moving lament for the great city.

The marriage supper of the Lamb (19:1-10). Although John has withheld a description of the coming of the Lord on at least three earlier occasions (see 8:5; 11:15-19; 16:17-21), he is now prepared to describe the glories of the Lord's appearance. All of heaven rejoices over the righteous judgment of God on evil (see 19:16). The Lamb's bride, the people of God, has made herself ready by her faithfulness to her Lord through the hour of suffering (see 19:7-8).

The second coming of the Lord Jesus (19:11-21). Heaven is opened, and the One whose coming has been faithfully anticipated from ages past appears to battle the enemies of God, a conflict whose outcome is not in doubt (see 19:11-16). The first beast (the antichrist) and the second beast (the false prophet) are thrown into the lake of fire, from which there is no return (see 19:20), a place of everlasting punishment and torment, not annihilation.

The millennial kingdom (20:1-6). The dragon (Satan) is cast into the abyss, a prison for the demonic, which is shut and sealed for a thousand years (see 20:1-3). Christ will reign for a thousand years on the earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. The dead in Christ are raised to govern with Him (see 20:4-6), and God's rightful rule over the earth is vindicated.

Satan's final rebellion and the Great White Throne judgment (20:7-15). At the end of the thousand years, the final disposition of Satan will occur (see 20:7-10). Though Satan will have one last deception, his final insurrection will be short. In one final battle Satan and his followers are overcome, and the Devil joins the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire, where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10). Then the final judgment takes place, at which all not included in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire (see 20:11-15).

The rejoicing of heaven; the revelation of the Lamb; and the advent of the bride, the holy city (21:1-22:5). Chapter 21 refers to the eternal state ushered in by the Great White Throne judgment and describes the new heaven; new earth; and in particular, the new Jerusalem. It describes the glorification of the bride of the Lamb (see 21:1-22:5). To be the bride is to be the holy city, the new Jerusalem; to live in the presence of God and the Lamb; and to experience protection, joy, and the everlasting, life-giving light of God (see 21:9-27). The throne of God and of the Lamb is there, and there His bondservants will serve Him and reign with Him forever and ever (see 22:1-5). The new Jerusalem is both a people and a place.

Conclusion (22:6-21). John concluded his prophecy by declaring the utter faithfulness of his words. Those who heed his prophecy will receive the blessings of God. Those who ignore the warnings will be left outside the gates of God's presence (see 22:6-15). Solemnly and hopefully praying for the Lord to come, John closed his book (see 22:17,20). The churches must have ears to hear what the Spirit has said (see 22:16). The people of God must, by His grace (see 22:21), persevere in the hour of tribulation, knowing their enthroned Lord will return in triumph.

Daniel L. Akin and Robert B. Sloan, "Book of Revelation," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [online, cited 1 September 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.mystudybible.com.

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