

# Revelation: Introduction & Background

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The Book of Revelation is one of the most loved, feared, and misunderstood books of the Bible. Due to its unfamiliar language, some abuse it to predict the latest headlines on the evening news, while others avoid the book entirely. Although the text of Revelation is unfamiliar and somewhat strange, the message of the book is clear: God is in control. He will avenge His people and triumph over all who dare to go against Him. Though it may not seem like it, Christianity will reign victorious over everything that opposes it. Truly, if we remain faithful even to the point of death, we will receive a crown of life (Rev. 2:10).

## Theme

Victory, Vengeance, Judgment

## Key Verse(s)

Rev. 3:21; **17:14** (victory); 18:20 (vengeance); 6:17; 16:5,6 (judgment)

## Title: The Apocalypse

The first word of the title in Greek is *apokalupsis*, translated “The Revelation” and meaning “an uncovering or unveiling” (Ogden, p. 2). While the entire New Testament could be referred to as an apocalypse of sorts, or an unveiling of the Old Testament (Rom. 2:5; 16:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Eph. 3:3ff.), Revelation is different in that it sets forth to unveil a series of events that would shortly come to pass, which would result in the mystery of God being complete (Rev. 10:7). It does so in a highly symbolic way (1:1).

## The Style

The style of Revelation is very unique in that it is an apocalyptic, prophetic, epistle (letter).

- 1) **Apocalyptic** (1:1) – The first words of the book describe it as the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Apocalyptic literature was abundant during the last two centuries BC and first century AD (Roper, p. 9). It is characterized by use of strange and extravagant symbols to convey a message that could not be easily described verbally. This style of writing was familiar to the original audience (Rev. 1:3), and facilitated communication in troubled times (Roper, p. 10).

Other examples of apocalyptic language in Scripture can be found in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, written during the Babylonian captivity. Many believe apocalyptic literature to have had a twofold purpose: 1) to reveal the message to those to which it was familiar, and 2) to conceal the message from those to which it was not (Roper, p. 10). Much of the apocalyptic literature was predictive (prophetic).

- 2) **Prophetic** (1:3) – The book is also described as a prophecy, and foretells events that

must shortly come to pass (1:1). Those who would add to or take from the words of the prophecy would pay for it.

- 3) **Epistle** (1:4) – After the initial descriptions of the writing, John then proceeds in letter form to the seven churches in Asia, with encouragement and exhortation.

### **Purpose**

The Revelation was written to unveil events that must shortly take place (1:1). In describing the impending judgment of God (6:17), it warns of the consequences of impenitence (21:8), and comforts those suffering from persecution by promising a crown of life to the faithful (2:10). The book illustrates the vengeance and victory of God in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4:17; Rev. 11:15), and what awaits the Christian who overcomes these trials (Rev. 21:1ff)..

### **Audience**

The Revelation was written to seven churches in Asia at that time (1:4). Asia refers to the Roman province of Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. These seven churches were not the only ones in Asia at that time (Troas; Acts 20:6-7, Colosse; Col. 1:2, Hierapolis; Col. 4:13), but are representative of the church as a whole during the first century, and every century thereafter. The Revelation is applicable to all Christians in every age (2:7).

### **Why Asia?**

Besides the fact that these particular churches represented the spiritual states of all churches, Asia was a stronghold for both Judaism and Christianity during the first century, as can be deduced from that fact that much of the New Testament addresses Christians in this province (Ephesians, Colossians, 1, 2 Timothy, Galatians, 1, 2, 3 John (?)), and that the majority of churches mentioned by name are from Asia (cf. Acts 19:10). Five of the 15 nationalities mentioned on the day of Pentecost when the church was established were from Asia (Acts 2:9-11), showing a strong Jewish population in the region.

Those who view the Revelation as primarily referring to the fall of the Roman Empire also point out the strong ties to Rome and prevalence of emperor worship in this region, though pressures to participate in such activities were most likely empire-wide.

### **Interpretation**

How one approaches the Book of Revelation will dictate their interpretation. If one views it as only applicable to the first century church, then it will be interpreted with no regard to any message for today. If one approaches the book as entirely a prophecy of modern events, then it will be interpreted without regard to what it meant to those who first received the message. Before discussing the different approaches to the Book of Revelation, it is important to keep a few things in mind.

- 1) The bulk of the New Testament says what it means and means what it says. Due to the symbolic nature of Revelation (1:1), this rule does not always hold true. Always keep

the context in view.

- 2) If the text itself explains the meaning of a symbol, we can be sure that it is the correct interpretation. (e.g., the seven lampstands are the seven churches; 1:20)
- 3) If an interpretation of a symbol contradicts a clear passage elsewhere in Scripture, we can be sure that it is incorrect, such as the premillennial view of the 1000 year reign (i.e., earthly) as compared with 1 Thes. 4:17.
- 4) The book must have had meaning to the original audience (1:1).
- 5) The book must have meaning today (2:7).

### **Approaches to Interpretation**

Though there are many combinations of the following views, here are four ways the Book of Revelation is commonly approached:

- 1) **Futurist** – This view asserts that most of the book describes events far removed from the original audience, and even from the audience today. Most of the book describes the events surrounding the final coming of Jesus, and therefore refers to the end of time. One variation of this approach is called Premillennialism, “a term which refers to the belief that Jesus will return *before* (pre) His *thousand-year* (millennial) reign.” (Roper, p. 14-15)

Most who hold to the premillennial view believe that Revelation tells of Jesus being unable to establish His kingdom because of rejection by the Jews, and so set up the church as a temporary “band-aid” until His thousand year reign, at the conclusion of which will come the final battle of good and evil and the judgment.

This approach is problematic for several reasons, but it should suffice to mention two. First, the futurist view ignores the symbolic nature of the book by pressing most of the symbols literally. Second, the futurist view provides no application to those to whom the book was originally written. Revelation “signified” events that “must shortly come to pass” (1:1). Though some of the book may project events beyond the first century (ch. 19), and even beyond the present (ch. 20-22), the futurist ignores this primary focus of the book.

- 2) **Continuous-Historical** – This view asserts that the book gives a synopsis of history, namely the history of the church, from the first century to the end of time. Many who hold this view see much of the symbolism applying to the apostasy that became Roman Catholicism and the papacy. While this approach gives a clear message for today (though far more applicable to those during the infamous Dark Ages), the message would hardly be comforting to those suffering in the first century.

Some contend that the book does provide comfort to the original audience when speaking of the fall of Rome, but at the same time extends to the religious movement which grew out of Rome (i.e., the Catholic Church), comforting those today.

This view still ignores the fact that Revelation told of events that “must shortly come to pass” (1:1). This phrase, coupled with speaking of the time being “at hand” (1:3) surely must apply to something closer than both the fall of Rome, and the apostate church.

### **Does shortly really mean shortly?**

Some might contend that “shortly” is in terms of God's time, and not our own, citing passages like 2 Pet. 3:8 and/or Lk. 18:8. To prove that this phrase in Revelation does indeed refer to a literal short period of time, look at Dan. 8:26. Compare the language of Daniel, who was told to **seal up** his vision because it referred to **many days** in the future (which refers to events only a few hundred years away, approx. 400 years), to John, who was told **not to seal up** the words because the time was **at hand** (Rev. 22:10). If the (Western) Roman Empire did not fall until 476 AD (approx. 400 years after Revelation was written; the Eastern Empire, also called the Byzantine Empire, lasted another 1000 years), and the Catholic Church did not fully arise until after then, how can the **primary** focus of this book refer to either?

- 3) **Preterist** – This view, meaning “beyond” or “past,” (Roper, p. 22), holds the book as referring almost entirely to events of the early church. There is a wide variety of interpretation within this camp, especially depending on when the book was believed to have been written. Those who advocate a date prior to 70 AD assert the book was mostly fulfilled in that event, while those advocating the later date of 96 AD view the book as being mostly fulfilled in the first and early second centuries.

An extreme version of preterism is the “AD 70 Theory” that concludes all prophecy, including the final coming of Jesus, the resurrection, and the final judgment, was fulfilled at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Extremes aside, preterism has many more strengths than the other interpretations due to its emphasis on the past.

- 4) **Symbolic** – This view comes under many names, like the spiritual view (Ogden, p. 6), and the philosophy of history view (Summers, pp. 41-43). This approach advocates that the Book of Revelation is not so much concerned with historical events, as it is with “principles that are operating throughout the history of the world” (Hendriksen, p. 43). While this view avoids some of the dangers of dwelling too much on the details, it does a disservice to the text in which specific events are said to be unveiled. A strong point is that the principles symbolized in the book are relevant to the church in all ages.

For further discussion on these approaches see Roper pp. 13-27, Summers pp. 27-51, and Jackson pp. 5-8.

The approach taken in this set of lessons will be a combination of some of the above views, with particular emphasis on the preterist and symbolic, and throwing out the the bulk of the futurist view entirely. It might be called a “Select Wisely” approach (Roper, p. 25) that lets the Bible do as much interpretation for itself as possible (2 Tim. 2:15).

### **Author**

The author identifies himself simply as John. This was more than likely the apostle John for several reasons:

- 1) He must have been very well known to use the simple designation “John” (Roper, p. 3).
- 2) He was a Jewish Christian, as is evident by the style of writing, and many allusions to the Old Testament (Summers, pp. 55-56).
- 3) There are many similarities with the writer of the fourth gospel. Both designate Jesus as “The Word” (Jn. 1:1, 14; 1 Jn. 1:1; Rev. 19:13), and as “The Lamb” (Jn. 1:29, 36; 21:15; many passages in Rev.).
- 4) Tradition holds that the apostle John was exiled to Patmos by the Roman Emperor (Nero or Domitian), and remained in Ephesus upon being released.

For further discussion, see Summers pp. 53-79.

### **Canonicity**

The Revelation can be considered canonical, that is, part of the canon or standard of Scripture, for several reasons:

- 1) It claimed to be the Word of God (1:1-3; 22:18-19)
- 2) It was included in the early lists of New Testament books (Roper, p. 12)
- 3) It was accepted and quoted by the early church (Roper, p. 12)
- 4) It contains no contradictions with other passages of Scripture
- 5) It contains no errors
- 6) In all probability written by the **inspired** apostle John

### **Date**

Most books of the Bible do not require one to know the date at which it was written in order to understand its message. This is not entirely true with the Book of Revelation because the date has a great deal of bearing on the interpretation. While reading the book will convey the message of victory and vengeance for suffering Christians, the historical background will emphasize that message by applying it to real life events.

With the historical events surrounding this writing in our minds, we can appreciate what those early Christians were going through, as well as provide further proof of the faithfulness and justice of God. We will here examine the two most popular dates ascribed to the book, with a look at both the external and internal evidence supporting each.

### **The Late Date (94 - 96 AD)**

Those who advocate the late date hold that the Revelation was written during the end of the reign of Caesar Domitian (81 – 96 AD), and therefore the primary focus is emperor worship and the fall of the Roman Empire.

#### *External Evidence*

- 1) Irenaeus (180 AD) was a student of Polycarp (allegedly a disciple of John) and made the following statement in discussing of the number 666:

We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign. (Against Heresies, 5.30.3)

It is assumed that the translation of “that” in the last sentence is correct, although it has been pointed out that “he” is another possible alternative, in which case Irenaeus is stating that John, rather than the apocalypse, was seen at the end of Domitian's reign. (<http://mikeblume.com/revdate.htm>; Ogden, p. 9). Additionally, though he provides useful information, I hesitate to look to Irenaeus for dating information, especially since he claimed Jesus was over 50 years old when he died (Against Heresies, 2.22.5-6).

- 2) Clement of Alexandria (155 – 215 AD) claims that John returned from the isle of Patmos after the “tyrant” was dead (Who Is The Rich Man?, p. 42), while Eusebius (324 AD) identifies the “tyrant” as Domitian (Ecclesiastical History, III.23; Jackson, p. 142)
- 3) Eusebius claims that historical tradition places the writing during the reign of Domitian (Ecclesiastical History, III.18).

#### *Internal Evidence*

- 1) The spiritual conditions of the churches. The problems addressed in Revelation seem like they would be found in older churches, though this is not necessarily the case (regarding Ephesus, Eph. 1:15; Acts 20:29-30; 1 Tim. 1:3ff.; 2 Tim. 1:15; cf. Matt. 24:12; also 2 Thes. 2:7).
- 2) Laodicea is described as having great wealth, yet the city was destroyed in an

earthquake in 60 AD. It should be noted that Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians in 63 AD, where the church at Colosse was told to read it to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16). The city may have been destroyed but the church was not.

- 3) Emperor Worship – It is widely acknowledged that the persecuting sea beast of Rev. 13 is the Roman Empire (cf. Dan. 7) and Domitian is said to have greatly persecuted Christians for the purposes of enforcing emperor worship (Summers, p. 84). Those advocating this view point out that of the two persecuting emperors in the first century (Domitian and Nero), Nero's persecution was limited to Rome, and was for an entirely different reason than emperor worship. Other sources reveal that emperor worship was common since the beginnings of the Roman Empire, with temples being erected for Augustus (29 BC) and Tiberius (25 AD) (Ogden, p. 10).

To the contrary, support for Domitian persecuting Christians is lacking. For further discussion on this, see *Did Domitian Persecute Christians?*, a written debate between Arthur Ogden and Ferrell Jenkins (Available at <http://bibleworld.com/domper.pdf> and <http://www.aogden.com/download/domper.pdf>; cf. Ogden, p. 409-419). It seems that most information available regarding a persecution by Domitian is found in commentaries on Revelation, rather than in secular history. The fact that the sea beast refers to the empire under Domitian is cited as evidence for the late date, as is the late date cited as evidence for a persecution under Domitian. One has to be proven to get the other, but neither has been.

### **The Early Date (64 – 70 AD)**

Those who advocate the early date hold that the Revelation was written during the reign of Nero (54 – 68 AD), or shortly thereafter, before the destruction of Jerusalem (70 AD), and therefore the primary emphasis is that destruction as an act of vengeance and judgment that was the official end of the Jewish age (as God's chosen people).

#### *External Evidence*

- 1) The fact that Nero persecuted Christians is a historical fact. Tacitus (c. 109 AD) writes:

And in their deaths they were made the subjects of sport; for they were wrapped in the hides of wild beasts and torn to pieces by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set on fire, and when day declined, were burned to serve for nocturnal lights (Annals XV.44, quoted from Schaff, p. 238)
- 2) It has been said that Nero “boasted that no previous sovereign had ever realized the extent of his power” (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*), an attitude that is prevalent in the beast of Rev. 13.
- 3) The time of the destruction of Jerusalem was indeed a troubled time, as is made clear by the prophecies concerning it (cf. Matt. 24:21), and the testimony of the eye witness

Josephus, in his account of the Wars of the Jews. As both testimonies indicate, the troubles were not limited to Jerusalem either. After the death of Nero in 68 AD, the empire was in an uproar as a series of civil wars took place, placing four emperors on the throne in the same year (69 AD; cf. Matt. 24:6-8).

### *Internal Evidence*

- 1) Rev. 17:9-11 identifies seven kings, in which the sixth “is.” Starting with Julius Caesar as the first, there was Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula (Gaius), Claudius, and Nero, the sixth (Ogden, p. 14). There are those who assert that Julius was never given the title of emperor, and so counting would begin at Augustus (which would still give a date prior to 70 AD). Mark Copeland makes a convincing conclusion that this passage points to the time of Vespasian about 69-70 AD (p. 5). Still others claim that these kings should be interpreted as kingdoms, starting with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome as the sixth. It is probably not the best passage to base an entire teaching around.
- 2) The Temple and Jerusalem were still standing (11:1, 8). Many see the temple to be figurative here, though the reference to Jerusalem is very clear.
- 3) Jewish persecution of Christians was very rampant (Rev. 2:9; 3:9; Acts 7:57-60; 8:1-3; many other passages).
- 4) There are many parallels with Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, which refer to the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37ff.; Matt. 24:15, 34; Mk. 13:2, 14; Lk. 21:20-22):

Compare Rev. 1:7 with Matt. 24:30; Mk. 13:26; Lk. 21:27, and also Rev. 6:12 with Matt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24; Lk. 21:25

Rev. 7:14 - The great tribulation refers to events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:15-16, 21; cf. Dan. 12).

A comparison of Luke 21:22 with Rev. 10:7 indicates the same thing being discussed, the destruction of Jerusalem. The mystery of God being finished is clearly the complete unveiling of all Old Testament prophecy, while the things to be fulfilled mentioned in Luke also clearly refer to Old Testament prophecy since that was all that had been written at that time. Jerusalem's ultimate destruction was found in Old Testament prophecy (Deut. 28; Dan. 9:24-27; cf. Matt. 24:15; Mk. 13:14; Lk. 21:20).

- 5) The great city Babylon (14:8) makes the most sense as referring to Jerusalem rather than Rome (or any place else). Comparing the characteristics of Babylon the Great with those of Rome and Jerusalem will allow us to determine which city best fits the description, and therefore better determine the date and events taking place (and about to take place) at the time of writing.

The following table is slightly modified from Arthur Ogden's table in his survey of Revelation (<http://www.aogden.com/download/rev-surv.pdf>)

<b>Babylon The Great</b>	<b>Rome</b>	<b>Jerusalem</b>
Babylon sat upon many waters, which are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (languages) (17:1, 15)	Rome ruled over many kindreds, tongues, and nations (13:7)	Spiritually ruled over Jews scattered all over the world (Acts 2:5-11)
Inhabitants of the earth made drunk with wine of her fornication (14:8; 17:2; 18:3)	Like other cities, Rome would have been guilty of this (cf. Jer. 51:7; Isa. 23:17)	Jerusalem had been accused of this from of old (cf. 2 Chr. 21:11; Ezek. 16:15, 26, 29)
Babylon sat upon the beast and was carried by it (17:3, 7)	Rome was the beast and so does not fit, unless the city is considered to be riding the Empire, but the Empire did not destroy the city (17:16)	Jerusalem was tolerated by the Roman Empire and could be considered to have ridden it to its present glory (Josephus, Wars Preface)
Babylon was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, and a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication (17:4; 18:16)	Rome may have fit this picture	Jerusalem was described in similar terms (cf. Jer. 4:30; Ezek. 16:1-63; also Mk. 13:2)
Babylon's forehead is inscribed MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (17:5)	Of all the cities that could be called harlots, Rome was relatively young and would not be identified as MOTHER OF HARLOTS	The nation of Israel with Jerusalem as the capital is the oldest political and religious harlot identified in the Bible (cf. Jer. 3:1-3 "whore's forehead"; Ezek. 16; Isa. 1:21)
Babylon is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth (17:18)	Rome certainly ruled over the kings of the earth (17:9-16)	Jerusalem, home of the temple, ruled spiritually over all Jews scattered throughout the world, which rule superseded any earthly kings. Religiously, it was the great city where Jesus was crucified (Rev. 11:8; cf. 14:8)

Blood of saints, martyrs of Jesus, prophets, and ALL that were slain upon the earth (17:6; 18:24)	Blood of martyrs of Jesus, but no prophets (Lk. 13:33)	Blood of ALL righteous blood shed upon the earth (Matt. 23:34-39; Lk. 11:46-52; 13:34-35)
Babylon became the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit and a cage for every unclean and hateful bird (18:2)	May be true of Rome	Josephus records that such was the case in Jerusalem preceding its destruction (Wars 4.6.3; 5.10.5; 5.13.6; cf. Matt. 22:1-7)
God's people called to come out of her lest they partake of her sins and her plagues (18:4)	May be true in the sense of separating themselves from sinful people, but this idea doesn't seem to fit the passage. They were never called to leave the city of Rome	Jesus gave these instructions to the disciples (Matt. 24:15-22; Mk. 13:14-20; Lk. 21:20-24)
The ten horns of the beast were to hate the whore, make her desolate, naked, eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. Death, mourning, famine, and utter burning were the result (17:16). She was totally destroyed (18:21; 19:3)	The city of Rome has never been totally destroyed, which is why it is called the Eternal City.	The kings of the Roman provinces joined in battle with Vespasian and Titus in the war with the Jews. Jerusalem was totally destroyed (Mk. 13:2; Wars 7.1.1).
Babylon was to be rewarded double for her works (18:6)	The city of Rome has hardly been rewarded once, see above.	Jerusalem was destroyed twice, in 586 BC by Babylon and in 70 AD by Rome
The saints, apostles, and prophets were avenged on Babylon with her destruction (18:20; 19:2)	These were to be avenged on Jerusalem, and could not possibly be avenged on Rome	Jesus said this would happen regarding Jerusalem (Matt. 23:34-39; Lk. 11:46-52; 13:34-35; 21:22)

The strongest arguments for the late date seem to fall into the category of external evidence, whereas the early date has very compelling internal evidence and strong external evidence also. For a very detailed discussion of the early vs. late date, see Ogden, pp. 7-16; 449-475.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the Book of Revelation:

- 1) Is a book of symbols (Rev. 1:1)

- 2) Unveils events that must shortly take place (Rev. 1:1; 22:6; cf. Dan. 8:26; Rev. 22:10)
- 3) Speaks **primarily** of a coming day of wrath and judgment (1:7; 6:17; 16:5,6; 18:20)
- 4) Was written during troubled times (Rev. 2-3; 13:7)
- 5) Is a completion of the Old Testament mystery that was previously veiled (Rev. 10:7; cf. Rom. 16:25-27; Lk. 21:22)

If we allow the Bible to be its own best commentary, we see that the only day of wrath that took place even remotely near to the time of the apostle John is the desolation of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Therefore, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Book of Revelation was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, with its **primary** focus being that very subject, the desolation of God's chosen city (cf. 1 Kings 11:36), turned into a spiritual Babylon. This accords with what Josephus says:

...hath not its great antiquity, nor its vast riches, nor the diffusion of its nation over all the habitable earth, nor the greatness of the veneration paid to it on a religious account, been sufficient to preserve it from being destroyed (Wars 6.10.1)