

## REVELATION

**Introduction:** No book of the Bible is more puzzling to the average Bible reader than Revelation. It is a book filled with symbols, figures, and strange imagery. For that reason, many would-be students have become discouraged in their attempt to discern its message. In addition, many have been put off by its abuse as prophecy mongers *du jour* put their own spin on its contents.

Nonetheless God did not include this book for our confusion, but for our encouragement. In fact, consider a few good reasons why Revelation should be studied:<sup>1</sup>

1. It is a revelation given by Jesus Christ. (1:1)
2. A blessing is promised to those who read it. (1:3)
3. The book presents the Christian view of history.
4. The message centers on our savior. (1:12-13; 5:2, 9-10; 12:5; 20:11)
5. The book was written to encourage God's church.

**Name** — The book received its name because its contents came in the form of a revelation (i.e. - vision) to the apostle John.

**Author** — John (Revelation 1:1, 4, 9)

**Purpose** — The book of Revelation was written to:

1. Encourage first-century Christians to endure their persecution.
2. Let Christians of all generations know that God's good will triumph over Satan's evil as God is always in control.

### I. Background of the book

A. Revelation belongs to a style/class of writing known as "apocalyptic" literature, (from Greek. *apokalopsis*).

1. The Old Testament books of Daniel, Ezekiel and parts of Zechariah belong to the same genre.
2. This style of writing was used to make a message more vivid and pronounced through the use of dramatic figures and symbols.
3. Apocalyptic literature was typically used in time of turmoil to convey a message of optimism — specifically that God is in control of history.
4. This style of literature flourished among the Jews from 200 BC to 200 AD.

B. Some characteristics of an apocalypse include:

1. The message being transmitted by vision.
2. The personification of good vs evil in some form of conflict (e.g. woman vs. dragon — Revelation 12).
3. Symbolism.
  - a. Numbers are symbolic.
    - [1] The number 2 = something strengthened or fortified.
    - [2] The number 3 = the divine number.
    - [3] The number 4 = the world men inhabit.
    - [4] The number 6 = evil or imperfection.
    - [5] The number 7 = completion or divine perfection.
    - [6] The number 10 (and its multiples) = human completion.
    - [7] The number 12 = organized religion.
  - b. Colors have special meaning, e.g. —
    - [1] white = purity.
    - [2] red = blood.
    - [3] black = death.
  - c. Domesticated animals represent God's people, while wild animals represent evil forces.
4. It often being "sealed" for future generations.

C. The major question about Revelation is how this apocalypse is to be interpreted. There are four major schools of thought:

1. The *continuous* historical view holds that Revelation is a blueprint of church history from the time of its writing to the end of history.
2. The *futurist* school or view holds that the events of chapter four to the end of the book will take place in literal fashion just before the Lord returns for a 1000-year reign on earth.
3. The *idealist* view makes the entire book an allegory.
4. The *preterist* school interprets the book against the struggle that existed between Rome and the church at the time

of its writing.

5. I believe a moderate preterist view is appropriate.
  - a. It keeps the book in its historical context.
  - b. It is in keeping with the purpose of apocalyptic literature.
  - c. It keeps Revelation consistent with other scriptural teaching.
  - d. It permits the usefulness of the Revelation in any generation.

D. Revelation was penned at a time when Christians were facing intense empire-wide persecution.

1. Toward the end of Domitian's reign (AD 81-96) the emperor proclaimed himself "*dominus et deus*" (i.e. lord and god").
2. He erected statues of himself to be worshiped.
3. Christians who refused to participate in this worship were subject to economic boycott or even death. (cf. 13:5-10)
4. An aged apostle John was in exile on Patmos (an island in the Aegean Sea) when he received the Revelation. (1:9)

## II. The main message of the book

A. The main message is victory in Jesus.

1. This special book was designed to let persecuted Christians know that Christ's cause will ultimately triumph.
2. Undoubtedly, the use of apocalyptic symbols and imagery instead of straightforward prose allowed the circulation of the letter without government suppression.
3. The original recipients would have understood the symbols as easily as we interpret modern political cartoons.

B. The Revelation has become a catalyst for theological nonsense when interpreted apart from its historical context, writing style, and intended purpose.

C. "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must **soon** take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." (Revelation 1:1)

## III. Outline of the book

A. Introduction. (Revelation 1:1-20)

1. The purpose of the book is related and the original readers identified. (1:1-8)
2. John tells of his call to write the book and recalls his vision of the glorified Christ. (1:9-20)

B. The letters to the Seven Churches of Asia. (Revelation 2-3)

1. Ephesus. (2:1-7)
2. Smyrna. (2:8-11)
3. Pergamum. (2:12-17)
4. Thyatira. (2:18-29)
5. Sardis. (3:1-6)
6. Philadelphia. (3:7-13)
7. Laodicea. (3:14-22)

C. The Vision of God Enthroned and the Scroll with the 7 Seals. (4-7)

1. Almighty God is surrounded by a heavenly host. (4:1-11)
2. John saw a book containing the destiny of mankind in the Father's hand. (5:1-5)
3. The book was taken by the Lamb as all heaven praised him. (5:6-14)
4. As the seals of the book were opened, four forces are unleashed against the church:
  - a. Conquest. (6:1-2)
  - b. War. (6:3-4)
  - c. Famine. (6:5-6)
  - d. Death. (6:7-8)
5. As the sixth seal is opened, the martyrs cry out for vindication. (6:9-11)
6. The opening of the sixth seal begins the judgment of the church's enemies. (6:12-17)
7. Prior to that judgment there is a sealing of God's saints. (7:1-17)

D. The Sounding of the Seven Trumpets. (Revelation 8—11:19)

1. Seven trumpets are sounded. (8:1-6)
2. The first four are blown in rapid succession and the environment is affected. (8:7-12)
3. The fifth trumpet begins the torment against Rome. (9:1-12)
4. The sixth trumpet envisions external invasions on the empire. (9:13-21)
5. John sees an angel holding a scroll which John is told to eat. (10:1-10)
6. The "temple of God" (i.e. - His church) is measured as an assurance of her divine protection (11:1-14), and the seventh trumpet sounds to signify the overthrow of her enemies. (11:15-19)

#### E. Vision of the church and Her foes. (Revelation 12-14)

1. A new set of figures is introduced.
  - a. A woman, a child, and a dragon are the central characters. (12:1-6)
  - b. They represent Israel, Christ, and Satan, respectively.
2. Satan tries to destroy Christ and His people. (12:7-17)
3. He calls two allies:
  - a. A beast from the sea [Roman Empire]. (13:1-10)
  - b. A beast from the earth [Roman priesthood]. (13:11 -18)
4. The triumph of the saints is secured as the "144,000" are safe at home with the Lamb. (14:1-5)
5. A series of angels announce divine judgment against God's enemies. (14:6-20)

#### F. The Seven Bowls of Wrath. (Revelation 15-16)

1. Seven more angels unleash the last and most devastating plagues against the Roman Empire. (15:1-8)
2. The bowls of wrath are poured out on the:
  - a. Earth. (16:1-2)
  - b. Sea. (16:3)
  - c. Fresh waters. (16:4-7)
  - d. Sun. (16:8-9)
  - e. Throne of the beast. (16:10-11)
  - f. Euphrates River. (16:12-16)
  - g. Air. (16:17-21)

#### G. The Judgment and Fall of "Babylon." (Revelation 17 — 19:21)

1. Rome is pictured as a harlot. (17:1-6)
2. The mystery of the beast and harlot is explained. (17:7-18)
3. Rome (symbolically, Babylon) is overthrown. (18:1-24)
4. Heaven praises! (19:1-10)
5. The beast and the false prophet are destroyed. (19:11-21)

#### H. The Judgment of Satan and Humankind. (20)

1. The devil is bound for "1000 years." (20:1-3)
2. The martyrs are raised to reign with Christ. (20:4-6)
3. The final overthrow of Satan is pictured. (20:7-10)
4. The judgment of humanity is described. (20:11-15)

#### I. The Eternal Home. (Revelation 21-22)

1. John is allowed a glimpse of heaven. (21:1-22:5)
2. Conclusion. (22:6-21)

### **IV. Key Themes of the book.**

#### A. Common misunderstandings from the book.

1. Who are the 144,000? (Revelation 7:1-8)
  - a. Between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals 144,000 persons are "sealed" (i.e. - marked for identification and protection).
  - b. The seventh seal will usher a terrible judgment against the Roman Empire. (Revelation 8: If)
  - c. This is obviously a symbolic representation of the entire faithful church which would be subject to the persecution.
    - [1] The number is derived by using numerical symbols for organized religion (12X12= 144) and human completeness (10x10x10= 1000).
    - [2] The number 144,000 represents the totality of the faithful church on earth.
  - d. The 144,000 are seen again in Revelation 14, safe in heaven after the ordeal.
  - e. The concept that only 144,000 people will be ultimately saved (from all humanity) is refuted by the scene in

heaven of a "great multitude which no man could number." (Revelation 7:9)

2. The mark of the beast — "666".
  - a. Those who worship the "beast from the sea" (i.e. the Roman emperor) are marked with the number 666.
  - b. Numerous and bizarre attempts have been made to explain 666.
    - [1] Many have used *gematria*, a Jewish word game in which letters were assigned numerical values, to associate the mark of the beast with Nero, Hitler, etc.
    - [2] The speculations are as broad as one's imagination.
  - c. The mark of the beast is most likely a certificate given to those who worshiped at his shrines.
  - d. Non-participants suffered social and economic reprisals.
  - e. Another possibility is to simply see the "marking" of the beast as the opposite of the marking of God's people. (Revelation 7:3; 14:1)
    - [1] John says 666 is the "number of a man" or "man's number."
    - [2] Symbolically, 6 falls short of perfection, thus 666 is evil to the ultimate.
    - [3] The mark of the beast could refer to God's heavenly designation of the enemy's forces.
3. The binding of Satan and the millennium.
  - a. This is one of the most abused texts in the Bible and is central to the premillennial theory.
    - [1] This text nowhere speaks of Jesus' second coming, a reign from Jerusalem, a rapture, etc. - all of which are part of a premillennial interpretation.
    - [2] A proper interpretation can be found if the text is kept in context.
  - b. The "binding" of Satan refers to an abating of his power to continue devastating the early church through his imperial allies. (cf. Revelation 13:7)
    - [1] The two beasts and the dragon (i.e.—Satan) were an unholy trinity to destroy - the saints.
    - [2] Chapter 19 tells of the two beasts being slain.
    - [3] After their destruction, Satan is bound for 1000 years. (20:2)
      - (a) The number 1000 is sometimes used in scripture to represent a long, indefinite period of time. (Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 50:10; II Peter 3:8)
      - (b) In apocalyptic literature, it is a symbol of completeness.
    - [4] In this context the binding of Satan for 1000 years refers to the duration of the Christian age.
  - c. The "first resurrection" (Revelation 20:5) is not a physical resurrection, but a raising of the martyrs who died under Rome's persecution to their heavenly thrones.
  - d. The 1000-year reign of Christ is a reign shared by the exalted martyrs of Revelation; it is not an earthly experience still to come.
  - e. Revelation 20:6-7 is an intriguing conclusion to this section.
    - [1] It may indicate a final persecution of Christ's church near the end of time.
    - [2] It may simply be a dramatic description of Satan's release for the purpose of facing his final judgment.

## B. God is Victorious.

1. The greatest value of the Revelation is a vivid, dramatic reminder that our great God is in control of history.
2. While it is true that evil pervades our world in epidemic proportion, that will not always be the case.
3. Revelation assures us that God's goodness will prevail, and that those whose faith is in Him will be redeemed and vindicated.
4. The final two chapters of the book offer some of the most comforting and encouraging words in all scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> For an easy to read study on the Book of Revelation see [The Revelation of the Apostle John](#).