

Welcome to the Apocalypse

REVELATION: YOUR STORY IN GOD'S STORY, Week 2

I. Author, Recipients, Location, Date

1. **Author:** John, either the Apostle John or another Christian prophet named John.

Most early Christians said the Apostle John wrote the book. For example, Justin Martyr in the second century:

“And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place” (Justin Martyr, *Dial. Tryph.* 81.4).

Yet some early Christians said it was written by a different John, since John never claims to be an apostle in Revelation, and because in Greek his style of writing is very different from the Gospel of John. Eusebius in the fourth century conveys the writings of Dionysius, third century Bishop of Alexandria:

“Therefore that he was called John, and that this book is the work of one John, I do not deny. And I agree also that it is the work of a holy and inspired man. But I cannot readily admit that he was the apostle, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, by whom the Gospel of John and the Catholic Epistle were written. For I judge from the character of both, and the forms of expression, and the entire execution of the book, that it is not his. For the evangelist nowhere gives his name, or proclaims himself, either in the Gospel or Epistle....I do not deny that the other writer saw a revelation and received knowledge and prophecy. I perceive, however, that his dialect and language are not accurate Greek, but that he uses barbarous idioms, and, in some places, solecisms” (Eusebius, *E. H.*, 7.25).

The grammar is indeed very different from the Gospel of John and from any other Greek writing we have. Yet this could have been a deliberate choice, based on either circumstance, genre, or another reason. We will proceed under the assumption that the traditional view is correct and it was written by the Apostle John, but we realize that if it was written by another Christian prophet named John, it really doesn't matter much.

2. **Recipients:** to seven key Christian churches in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey (see 1:4; 2:1-3:21).
3. **Location:** from the island of Patmos, where John is in exile because of his Christian faith (1:9).

4. **Date:** most likely during the reign of the emperor Domitian, around the year 95-96.

A minority argue for a date in the 60s (before the temple destruction). But the majority of evidence points to a later date. For example, Irenaeus writing in the second century, says this in the middle of a discussion on what is meant by the number of the beast and the name of the Antichrist:

“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**” (A. H. 5.30.3).

This late date makes more sense of the context of persecution, as well as the spiritually dismal state of the churches of Asia Minor than we get from reading Paul's letters in the 60s. Additionally, the church in Laodicea is called “rich” in Revelation 3:17, but that city was destroyed in the year 60-61. Ample time to rebuild and to again be called “rich” is allowable by a date in the 90s, but doubtful in the 60s.

II. Reason for Writing

1. The main purpose for Revelation is to encourage the recipients (and secondarily, us) to maintain allegiance to Jesus and not give in to potential idols competing for the heart.

The key challenge facing the recipients was the religious and economic setting that would put pressure on the Christians to compromise their worship of Jesus in order to participate in civic life and commerce (see, probably, 2:14-15, 20). Sacrifices to the emperor and various gods would be an expected part of civic and economic life. The recipients are undergoing some persecution already (see: 2:13), and John sees more persecution on the horizon (2:10).

“The focus of the book is exhortation to the church community to witness to Christ in the midst of a compromising, idolatrous church and world” (Beale, *Revelation*, 33).

2. One key means to accomplish this purpose is the disclosure of future events (1:19), including Christ's return and the restoration of the created order (21:1).

Exactly how much the visions of Revelation are symbolic drama to motivate faithfulness, and how much the visions are intended to communicate specific future events is debated.

What is clear is, that as interesting as timelines of future events may be, for John these prophecies are conveyed in order to serve the main purpose for writing—the Christians' faithfulness.

III. The Genre(s) of Revelation

One aspect of Revelation that makes it both interesting and challenging is that it actually makes use of three different genres. All three genres are signaled in the first five verses, and paying attention to how to read all three genres will be helpful for understanding.

1. **Letter**

Reasoning: Most obviously, Revelation is a circulating letter written to the seven churches in Asia Minor that are named. Thus it shares common conventions for letter writing in that time (see 1:5-5; 22:12-21).

Interpretive Pay-Off: This means we must not neglect the fact that this is a piece of communication written to actual people in Asia Minor in the first century. Whatever it says of the future or to us, it first and foremost is concerned with that actual first-century audience.

2. **Prophecy**

Reasoning: John specifically calls what he writes “the words of this prophecy” 1:3, and it is the prophetic element that John emphasizes the most in Revelation (see also 10:11; 22:7, 10, 18-19). John’s many allusions to Old Testament Scriptures and specifically the Prophets shows that he is consciously writing in Israel’s prophetic tradition (see 10:7; 11:18; 22:6, 9).

Interpretive Pay-Off: This means we should expect Revelation to be focused on the two main functions of scriptural prophecy: (1) fore-telling future events to God’s people; (2) forth-telling of God’s will to God’s people, usually with a focus on turning from sin and maintaining covenant loyalty to God. John also seems to understand Revelation as the “final word” in explaining and summing up the Old Testament prophets:

“John was writing what he understood to be a work of prophetic scripture, the climax of prophetic revelation, which gathered up the prophetic meaning of the Old Testament scriptures and disclosed the way in which it was being and was to be fulfilled in the last days” (Bauckham, *Climax*, xi).

3. **Apocalypse**

Reasoning: John describes this letter as an “apocalypse” (translated as “revelation” in 1:1), and in fact this is the first word of the book. This genre of apocalyptic makes Revelation unique as a whole book in the New Testament, but it has Old Testament precedents in parts of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Zechariah (and NT precedents in Mark 13, Matt 24, etc). Apocalypse as a type of writing style was popular between the years 200BC to 200AD, and many Jewish non-scriptural examples also survive (E.g., 1 Enoch, Sibylline Oracles, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch). Here is the most widely used definition of this genre:

“‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and special, insofar as it envisages another, supernatural world” (Collins, *Apocalypse*, 1979, 9).

Interpretive Pay-Off: We must tread carefully when interpreting symbolism. There is usually a mysterious element, with less info than we would like. And yet, the main purpose of Apocalyptic is clear—to powerfully “lift the veil” from the circumstances of the recipients and let them see how their situation “really is” in light of divine and demonic realities. Apocalypses may predict the future (where intervention is promised soon), but again, this is intended to impact the recipients and brace them for faithfulness. So:

“More than seeking to *be interpreted*, Revelation seeks to *interpret* the reality of the audience, showing them the true character of features of that landscape, identifying the true struggle that they must engage, naming the true stakes of the choices before the hearers” (DeSilva, *Seeing John’s Way*, 14).

IV. Interpretive Approaches to Revelation (4+1)

There are four traditional approaches to Revelation and one newer way. Most of these ways of reading have some value, and we will try to learn from several of these approaches.

1. **Preterist** (Revelation was largely fulfilled already in the first century, as the book is communicating in dramatic fashion events taking place in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.)

Strengths: this view rightly emphasizes the original first century audience and allows for a straightforward way of John’s language of “soon” (1:1).

Weaknesses: this view demands the more difficult early date in the 60s before the temple destruction. Additionally, the contents of Revelation do not seem to be fulfilled only by events in the first century (or any time period since).

My Grade: D

2. **Historicist:** (Revelation gives a history of the course of the world or church from John’s day until the end)

Strengths: This could be a plausible way to read the book as it starts with the seven first-century churches and ends with Christ’s return.

Weaknesses: It is very difficult to decode the book in any way that looks like a record of the last two millennia. Proponents don’t agree on what symbolizes what.

My Grade: F

3. **Idealist:** (Revelation largely does not predict the future but contains symbolic and timeless portrayals of the battle of good and evil in every era)

Strengths: the strange and confusing symbolism in Revelation lends itself to this view, as does the fact that the events did not take place despite saying they must happen “soon” (Rev 1:1).

Weaknesses: John certainly seems to write about events that he expects to actually take place in the future. To ignore this theme would be a mistake.

My Grade: C

4. **Futurist:** (Revelation lays out future events immediately before the return of Christ)

Strengths: this view is clearly at least partially true, and it makes good sense to see the book as focused on events right before Christ’s return.

Weaknesses: if the body of the book only concerns the time immediately before Christ’s return, then that content has no immediate relevance to the original audience who died before the events took place. It may also have no immediate relevance to us either, if we die before it happens (or if the rapture is pre-tribulational). It’s also difficult to make sense of John’s language of “soon” on a futurist reading (Rev 1:1).

My Grade: B

5. **Bonus: Contemporary-Historical:** (Revelation was intended for the Christians of the seven recipient churches in the first century, and we must strive to understand how *they* would interpret the symbols and how *they* would be motivated to respond in their religious and social setting.)

Strengths: this helps us get at the heart of what John probably intended to communicate to the actual recipients of the letter.

Weaknesses: Similar to problems with the idealist reading, we might miss some of what God wants to communicate about the final end times if we neglect a futurist reading completely.

My Grade: B+

Conclusion on Interpretive Approaches:

It seems to me we will best understand and apply the message of Revelation by using both the futurist and contemporary-historical lines of interpretation in a blended mix.

Like two lenses of 3-D glasses, this will hopefully help us see the depth of what God wants us to know about the future and how it applies to us now (after we think through how it applied to the first audience).

V. Outlines of Revelation

Like everything else about the book, outlines of Revelation are debated. Here are two helpful approaches that we will use as we move through the book. Both may be viewed as complementary.

A Chiastic Outline (Michelle Lee, “A Call to Martyrdom,” *Nov. Test.* XL:2, 174)

A chiasm orders items in mirrored pairs around a center section—with emphasis on that center.

A (1:1-20) *Prologue*: John’s introduction to his prophecy

B (2:1-3:22) *Present situation*: the message to the seven churches

C (4:1-5:14) *The fundamental paradigm*: eternal worship of God and the Lamb—worthiness of the Lamb through death

D (6:1-17) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (first pair)*: the seal judgments—focus on Christ

E (7:1-17) *The faithful believers*: the 144,000 and the great multitude from the tribulation

F (8:1-10:11) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (second pair)*: the trumpet judgments—the nature of judgment

G (11:1-19) *The fake power of the beast*: defeat through resurrection

H (12:1-6) *Two women*: salvation through the woman clothed with the sun

I (12:7-18) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (third pair)*: the dragon thrown down to the earth by Michael

J (13:1-18) *Moment of Decision*: the beast and its worshipers

J’ (14:1-20) *Moment of Decision*: the Lamb and his followers

I’ (15:1-16:21) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (third pair)*: the bowl judgments—focus on God

H’ (17:1-6) *Two women*: killing of the saints by Babylon

G’ (17:7-18) *The false power of the beast*: defeat by the King of Kings

F’ (18:1-24) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (second pair)*: lament over the fall of Babylon

E’ (19:1-10) *The faithful believers*: the bride of the Lamb

D’ (19:11-21) *Judgment and defeat of God’s enemies (first pair)*: Christ overcomes the beast and the false prophet

C (20:1-10) *The fundamental paradigm*: eternal damnation of Satan and his allies—worthiness of the saints through death

B’ (20:11-22:5) *Future situation*: the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem

A’ (22:6-21) *Epilogue*: Final exhortation to heed the prophecy

A More Familiar Outline (Adapted from Fanning, *Revelation*, 63-64)

- I. **Prologue** (1:1-8)
 - A. Superscription (1:1-3)
 - B. Epistolary Opening and Doxology (1:4-6)
 - C. Theme of the Book (1:7-8)
- II. **First Vision: The Exalted Christ and his Messages to the Churches** (1:9-3:22)
 - A. A Vision of the Exalted Christ (1:9-20)
 - B. Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
- III. **Second Vision: Heavenly Throne Room and Three Judgement Cycles** (4:1-16:21)
 - A. Vision of God in His Heavenly Throne Room (4:1-11)
 - B. The Seven-Sealed Scroll and the Slain Lamb (5:1-14)
 - C. The Seven Seals and the Interlude of the Two Multitudes (6:1-8:1)
 1. The First Six Seals (6:1-17)
 2. The Interlude of the Two Multitudes (6:1-8:1)
 3. The Seventh Seal (8:1)
 - D. The Seven Trumpets and Further Interludes (8:2-14:20)
 1. The First Four Trumpets (8:2-13)
 2. The Fifth Trumpet—First Woe (9:1-12)
 3. The Sixth Trumpet—Second Woe (9:13-21)
 4. Two Revelatory Interludes: God’s Prophets (10:1-11:14)
 - a) John and the little scroll (10:1-11)
 - b) Temple Measurements and the Two Witnesses (11:1-14)
 5. The Seventh Trumpet—Third Woe: Anticipating God’s Rule (11:15-19)
 6. Two Further Interludes: Anticipating Babylon’s Fall (12:1-14:20)
 - a) The Dragon’s War against the Woman (12:1-13:18)
 - b) Preview of Judgment and Victory for the Lamb (14:1-20)
 - E. The Seven Bowl Judgements (15:1-16:21)
 1. Heavenly Preparation for the Bowl Judgments (15:1-8)
 2. The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath Poured Out (16:1-21)
- IV. **Third Vision: The Destruction of Babylon the Great** (17:1-19:10)
 - A. Babylon, The Great Prostitute, and the Beast She Rides (17:1-18)
 - B. The Effects of Babylon’s Destruction (18:1-24)
 - C. Celebration of Babylon’s Judgment and Preparation of the Lamb’s Bride (19:1-10)
- V. **Intervening Events: From Babylon to the New Jerusalem** (19:11-21:8)
 - A. The Heavenly Warrior’s Overwhelming Victory (19:11-21)
 - B. The Millennial Reign and Judgment at the Great White Throne (20:1-15)
 - C. The New Heaven and the New Earth (21:1-8)
- VI. **Fourth Vision: The Coming of the New Jerusalem** (21:9-27)
 - A. God’s Glorious City, the Lamb’s Bride (21:9-27)
 - B. God’s Eden Restored and the Angel’s Instructions (22:1-9)
- VII. **Epilogue** (22:10-21)

VI. Main Themes of Revelation

1. A high view of Jesus, portrayed gloriously in ways appropriate only to God
1:12-18; 1:8 (God), compare with 22:13 (Jesus)
2. The reality of evil and suffering
12:13-13:10
3. The wrath of God upon the wicked
16:1-2; yet still intended to bring repentance (9:20-21; 16:8-11); some protected (7:3;
9:4); final judgment (20:10-15)
4. Faithfulness unto death and martyrdom
2:10; 12:10-11; 15:1-3; 20:4
5. The coming of the Kingdom of God and the eternal state
11:15; 19:17-21; 22:5;

The Bottom Line

**In your Imagination and in the Desires of Your Heart,
Place Yourself within God's Story as Portrayed in Revelation**

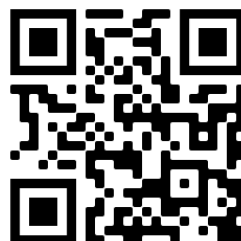
...by allowing Revelation to interpret your life and what idols pull at your heart.

...by seeking to grasp the whole of the book of Revelation this week. To help with this:

Watch the Intro Videos to Revelation by the Bible Project:

Rev 1-11: <https://youtu.be/5nvVVcYD-0w>

Rev 12-22: <https://youtu.be/QpnIrbq2bKo>



Read the Book of Revelation in One Sitting or Listen to An Audio Version

I suggest the Streetlights Audio Bible, available on their own Streetlights App, but also on Spotify or YouTube. Here is the YouTube Link to Revelation 1:

https://youtu.be/P5cv8v_j6cY

