

An Introduction to the Book of Revelation

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I. Type of Book: Apocalyptic and Prophetic.

A. Apocalyptic literature.

- The very first verse of the book (1:1) tells us (in part) what type of book this is: “The *Revelation* (APOKALUPSIS) of Jesus Christ...”
- APOKALUPTO: “to uncover, to lay open what has been veiled or covered up, to disclose, to make bare.” (Thayer’s Greek Lexicon).
- **In apocalyptic literature, visions given by God are “uncovered”, revealed or “painted” into words of what the prophet saw.**
- There are several examples of apocalyptic literature that was written during Old Testament times (Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah).
 1. Apocalyptic literature was most often given when trials and persecutions were the most severe with the people of God.
 2. Apocalyptic writing prevented the enemies of God from understanding what the message said, whereas the children of God could understand.
 3. Apocalyptic literature was highly relevant to the historical situations of the day.
- Daniel and Ezekiel wrote during the Babylonian exile to comfort the chosen people in their faithfulness, and to prepare them for trials even far into the future extending to the time of the Roman Empire.
- Zechariah wrote during the Persian period and his mission was to encourage the people to rebuild the temple following the return from Babylonian captivity. After their traumatic ordeal of exile and persecution, the people of God needed encouragement and he provided it.
- The Revelation of Jesus Christ was written during a time of great persecution from the Roman Empire towards the disciples of Christ. Christians desperately needed encouragement and the assurance that victory was theirs as they remained faithful to Christ.

B. Prophetic literature (e.g., Rev. 1:3; 10:11; 22:7, 9, 10, 18,19).

1. The book is rightly classified as a combination of apocalypse and prophesy, for there are characteristics and styles of both interwoven in the book.

II. The Author

A. Four times the author refers to himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8).

1. He never states that he is an apostle, but he describes himself as a servant (1:1).
 2. The testimony of many early church writers considered the author to be John the apostle (Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, Origen, etc.).
 3. There is also internal evidence for the apostolic authorship.
- There are many similarities found in the gospel according to John, 1 John, and Revelation such as describing the identity of the Son as “the Word.” The use of the words “to overcome” or “conquer,” “true,” and “pierced.” Phrases such as “keep my word” and “keep my sayings” are common in all the books and as well as references made to Jesus as the Lamb.

B. The place where John wrote Revelation was on the island called Patmos (Rev. 1:9).

III. Date and Historical Background

A. Most scholars have determined the date of the writing to be either during the reign of Nero Caesar (64-68 A.D.) or the during the reign of Domitian Caesar (91-96 A.D.).

B. The external and internal evidence points to the later date (91-96 A.D.) to be the date in which the book was written.

1. The external evidence

- Domitian’s reign involved widespread persecution of the church. The imperial opposition against Christians at this time was much greater due to the fact that Christians rejected the state-enforced religion of Caesar worship. They refused to worship Domitian Caesar as Lord and this became the cause of severe persecution.

2. Internal evidence

- The conditions during the time John wrote Revelation fits the period of Domitian Caesar better than that of Nero, for it was an extended period of great tribulation for John as well as for the brethren who he wrote to.
- An examination of the conditions and attitudes of the seven churches of Asia reveals this to be true, especially in light of the earlier conditions of these churches when Paul wrote to them or wrote about them to others. Many of these churches were in much better shape spiritually and did not have as many problems with false teachers and prophets during the time of Paul’s writings as the time of John’s writing of Revelation.

- By reading Revelation throughout, it is quite evident that the visions address the spiritual conflict between the Lord and the adversary, Satan. In opposing those who would be Christians, Satan gives power to two allies: (1) a world government personified as “the beast,” and (2) “the false prophet” which enforces universal worship of this oppressive secular power. With such a background in view, we are able to examine specific verses within the book and determine that indeed the Domitian era of Roman history supplies the best setting for this conflict (As we will soon discover as we study various chapters in depth -- e.g. Rev. 13:15-17).

IV. Popular Methods of Interpretation

A. The Preterist View:

This approach makes all the symbols related only to the events of the day in which it was written. The imagery depicted altogether the Roman Empire and its emperor, Domitian. The seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath have no place in the future. They have all been fulfilled and the book, at the most, has only a literary interest for us today.

B. The Historical View:

Merril C. Tenney stated it well when he wrote, “The Historicist interpretation holds that Revelation outlines in symbolic form the entire course of history of the church from Pentecost to the advent of Christ. The symbols portray in sequence the great events that have taken place: that is the seals are the breakup of the Roman Empire; the eruption of locusts from the bottomless pit is a picture of the Mohammedan invasions, etc. Each major event in the history of Christendom was thus broadly foreshadowed, so that Revelation becomes a calendar of events written in advance.

C. The Futurist View:

This school advocates that Revelation is dealing with future events at the end of the world. The Futurists are literalists and millennialists. Revelation means literally what it says, they say, and chapters 4-19 are occurrences that will transpire in about seven years - - a period they call “the rapture” or “the Great Tribulation.” The first three chapters were applicable in the day that they were written or else the seven churches represent seven stages of church history. Chapters 20-22 are concerned with the millennial kingdom, judgment of the wicked dead and the eternal state. This school could be classified as almost wholly eschatological in its method of interpretation.

D. The Spiritual View:

This is also called the “Idealist” view. Charles R. Erdman wrote in his commentary that this theory finds “no reference to specific events or persons of the past or present or future, but only the presentation of great principles, intended to guide and encourage the followers of Christ throughout all the ages of the world. These principles are illustrated by the successive symbolic visions.

E. It is **best** to take an approach that *combines* three of these views: The Preterist View, the Futurist View, and the Spiritual View.

V. Important Rules for Study and Interpretation.

A. What did the book mean to the people of that day to whom it was written?

“Any interpretation that omits or overlooks this point is invalid. This approach involves (1) some understanding of the conditions under which the saints lived, and (2) the spiritual needs of the hour, which were: revelation and instruction of Christ’s present rule, and encouragement and assurance of victory in the midst of trials.”

– Homer Hailey’s Commentary on the book of Revelation

B. *An understanding of the Old Testament*, particularly the prophets and especially the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah and their use of symbols and signs.

“If one does not have an acquaintance with these, he should try to acquire some knowledge of them, or be directed by one who has made such a study. It is variously estimated by students of Revelation that the book contains from two hundred sixty to more than four hundred allusions to the Old Testament; but it is acknowledged by all that *there is not a single direct quotation from it*. In giving to the church a revelation of truth in visions and symbols, there would necessarily have to be some divine basis on which to interpret the message. The total Old Testament revelation and the writings of the New Testament is that basis...” - Homer Hailey

C. “All interpretations must be consistent and harmonious with the total teaching of the remainder of the New Testament. There must be no conflict or contradiction between the two.” – Homer Hailey

VI. The Theme, Message, and Purpose of the Book

Throughout our study let us keep in mind the key theme of Revelation which is the theme of warfare and conflict between good and evil following in victory for the righteous and overthrow for the wicked (See 17:14). This of course being a spiritual battle, not a carnal or military one, for the kingdom of God is spiritual not physical (“My kingdom is not of this world” John 18:36). This theme is an outstanding one for needed encouragement to the suffering, persecuted Christian.

The message of the book is a fantastic one that not only encouraged the saints of the first century but also can be a great encouragement to us today. Its message is our guarantee of victory and triumph -- the triumph of truth and righteousness for the children of God who are faithful to the truth, and the defeat and ultimate destruction of Satan the devil along with his followers and angelic helpers.

Let us be sure to never lose our focus on the purpose of the book which is to provide comfort to the church. Despite times of trial and heavy persecution, the saints of God can overcome and be victorious through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior!