

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!

Revelation 1:1-8

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Verses 1-3

1. The revelation consists of things which must “shortly come to pass” (v. 1) and declares: “For the time is at hand” (v. 3). Why is this significant? (cf. 22:6, 10).

- The book of Rev. begins and ends with these affirmations.
- This creates major problems for those who advocate that its fulfillment is two thousand or more years into the future.
- Those Christians who were suffering at the time of the writing were concerned about the things at hand and would have found no comfort in a description of events which would come hundreds of years later.

2. Did all the events described in Revelation happen in John’s day?

Not all: The judgment and the coming of Jesus as well as the new heaven and new earth did not happen during John’s day.

3. What is prophecy? (v. 3)

- Not only the prediction of future events.
- The word literally means “a forth telling” (speaking forth the word of God).
- Prophecy sets forth truths in which we are to abide or keep.
- May involve declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproof or admonition. A comforting of the afflicted or the revealing of things hidden.

4. What must people do to be blessed by this prophecy? (v. 3; cf. James 1:22)

- To be in God’s favor, fortunate, well off or happy. To be given the highest good.
- In this case, to be blessed is to receive insight into the workings of God and the spiritual riches that follow.
- Read, hear, and keep (heed) it: to attend carefully to it and observe it.
- Hearing and reading God’s word is not enough in order to be blessed by God. We must obey His word to benefit from His word.

Verses 4-8

- According to verse 4, this message is to John and the seven churches of Asia.
- Asia was a Roman province occupying the territory which today makes up the western part of modern Turkey.
- Though the seven churches are specifically named, they could very well stand representatively for the church at large (there were other churches in Asia).
- Of all the numbers found in Revelation, “seven” is used most often (about 54 times) and is the most important because *it symbolizes perfection, completeness, and wholeness* (not only in Revelation but also throughout the N.T.).
- As the number 7 is used symbolically, likewise “the seven churches of Asia” depict the Lord’s church as a whole. This message was needed by God’s people throughout the Roman world.

1. What does the description: “From Him which is, and which was, and which is to come” express about God? (vs. 4, Compare to v. 8; Ex. 3:14; Ps. 90:1-2; 1 Tim. 1:17).

2. In light of the symbolic meaning of the number “seven”, what does: “the seven Spirits” represent? (v. 4; cf. Rev. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6; cf. John 16:13)

3. Jesus is “the faithful witness.” What is the significance of this? (v. 5; Ps. 89:36-37; John 18:37)

4. Jesus is the first begotten (firstborn) of the dead. What does this mean? (v. 5; cf. Col. 1:18; Ps. 89:26-27).

5. What encouragement does this have for the saint to be killed for Jesus? (1 Cor. 15:20).

6. Jesus is “the Prince (or ruler) of the kings of the earth” (v. 5). How is this an encouragement to us (particularly for those Christians under the Roman empire)?

- Despite disturbing events and harsh earthly kings, the Lord is ultimately in charge (1 Pet. 3:22; Mat. 28:18).
- As prince over all the rulers of the world, His kingdom shall never fail.
- If indeed Domitian Caesar claimed deity during this time, this description would be especially significant (JESUS IS RULER YET!).
- Jesus is the Ruler and if Rome will not obey she will be destroyed.

7. Jesus “loved us and washed us” (i.e., released, loosed, freed) from our sins in His own blood (v. 5; cf. 1 John 3:16; Eph. 1:7). In what sense are we freed from our sins? (John 8:34-37; Rom. 6:6-7).

8. Jesus has “made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” (v. 6, NASB; cf. Exod. 19:6). John and the redeemed were in the kingdom (v. 9; 5:10; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:5).

How does this refute the “Premillennialism” theory about the kingdom of Christ?

9. “To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” (v. 6b): How does this contrast with the rule of Caesars or our rulers today? (cf. Eph. 1:20-23).

10. What does His coming of the clouds represent? (v. 7; cf. Acts 1:9-11; Mark 14:62; Compare also to Rev. 14:14; Dan. 7:13-14; Mat. 24:30; Isa. 19:1; Ps. 97:2).

- Other places in Scripture describes His coming as being “at hand” or “near” (**Mat. 24:30, 34; Jas. 5:8**) in reference to the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D).
- This may be applied to the immediate situation at hand. - The coming of Christ in judgment against the unrepentant churches and the evil forces which worked against His cause (e.g., Rome).

Note: This contradicts Premillennialism that claims that at Christ’s “rapture” that only a few shall be caught up in a *silent, secret* meeting with the Lord (cf. **1 Thes. 4:16-17**)

11. “Every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him” (v. 7). How does this compare to Zechariah’s prophecy? (Zech. 12:10).

Zechariah spoke of the good shepherd which the people of Israel had killed, and of the time when they would look in sorrow upon the one whom they had pierced (**Zech 12:10**).

12. Who is the “they” (v. 7) which pierced Him? (cf. Act 2:23).

13. Why will all kindreds of the earth wail (mourn) because of Him? (v. 7)

- People will regret having rejected Jesus when He comes again.
- For those during John’s day who rejected Christ and opposed His kingdom had to look upon Him as He appeared in terrible judgment (They will mourn because of Him).
- “Wail” or “mourn” (i.e., to beat the breast in grief. -- Wretched hopelessness for the wicked!

14. Why does the Lord describe Himself as the Alpha and Omega?

Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last. God’s fullness, perfection and completeness.

Revelation 1:1-8

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13. Why will all kindreds of the earth wail (mourn) because of Him? (v. 7)

14. Why does the Lord describe Himself as “the Alpha and Omega”? (v. 8)

Revelation 1:9-20
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Verses 9-11

1. How does John address his fellow Christians? How would this be an encouragement to them? (Rev. 1:9; cf. 1 Pet. 5:9; Acts 14:22; Rom. 12:12; John 16:33).

- John addresses his fellow Christians in such a way to gain their full confidence and to make them feel that he is standing on common ground with them (1 Pet. 5:9).
- To identify himself with his readers. / They were family in a spiritual sense; his kinsmen.
- John can relate to their struggles and understand their situation.
- Tribulation is to be expected along with the commitment of being a disciple of Christ (Acts 14:22; John 16:33)

2. John states that he is their companion in the kingdom. How does this refute the doctrine that teaches that the church is a substitute and that the kingdom is yet to be established? (Rev. 1:9; cf. Rev. 5:10; Acts 8:12; Col 1:13; Heb 12:28; Mat. 16:18-19).

3. John mentions that he was on the island of Patmos. Why was he at Patmos?

Note: Patmos was a barren, rocky island about ten miles long and six miles wide and lying about 65 miles southwest of Ephesus.

- The Roman government used Patmos as a place of banishment for political prisoners.
- According to Eusebius, tradition had it that the apostle John was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in A.D. 95 by the Emperor Domitian (in the 14th year of his reign).
- “*For the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.*” - It is very likely that John was on Patmos for the same reason that the souls of the slain were under the altar in Rev. 6:9. Because of his uncompromising stand for Christ.

4. John was “in the Spirit” (Rev. 1:10; cf. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10); Meaning? (e.g., Ezek. 3:12-14; 8:3; 11:24; 37:1; 43:5; Acts 10:10)

- The phrase “*in the Spirit*” is used three more times in Revelation (4:2; 17:3; 21:10) to denote something like a state of trance in which one is enabled by the Holy Spirit to see a vision from God (i.e. Acts 10:10).
- John does not come up with these visions or revelations on his own. Instead, he is empowered to see these visions from the Holy Spirit.

5. Why do you think John mentioned that he was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day? What did he mean by “the Lord’s day”? (Rev. 1:10; cf. Mat. 28:1; Mark 16:1-2; Luke 24:1; Jn. 20:1; Acts 20:7).

- The term for “Lord’s” is *kuriakos* which is defined here as “relating to the Lord.” “The day devoted to the Lord, sacred to the memory of Christ’s resurrection” (Thayer Lexicon).
- Just as “the Lord’s supper” (1 Cor. 11:20) was associated, belonged to, peculiar to the Lord, and distinguished from all other “suppers,” “the Lord’s day” is also unique.

6. How did John first discover the vision? What was done to get his attention?

- The voice spoke in a clear, commanding, loud sharp sound like a trumpet.
- During the Old Testament period whenever God had anything to make known to His people He gathered them together by means of trumpet-sound (**Ex. 19:16-19; Lev. 25:9; Josh. 6:5; Isa. 58:1**)
- When Ezekiel received his vision he heard the sound of a great earthquake (**Ezek. 3:12**).

7. What did the voice (belonging to Christ) say for John to do? What does this demonstrate concerning the book of Revelation? (Rev. 1:11; cf. Eph. 3:3-5; 1 Cor. 2:11-13).

- The book was God's idea not John's. The book was primarily written for the encouragement of the seven churches of Asia in the first century.

Verses 12-16

1. What do the seven lampstands (candlesticks) represent? Why is this symbol appropriate? (Rev. 1:12, 20; cf. Zech. 4:2; Mat. 5:14-16)

Note: "Candlesticks" or "Lampstands" (from LUCHNOS). The word denotes the portable lamp fed with oil.

7 churches

2. What does the title "Son of Man" emphasize about Jesus? (v. 13; cf. Dan. 7:13; Heb. 2:14-18).

- Jesus in His ministry often called Himself the Son of Man (82 times in the gospels, i.e. Mat. 8:20; 9:6).
- His humanity (a Semitism for man / used more than 90 x in Ezekiel) and Messianic character.

Examining the Vision of Jesus (Rev. 1:12-16; cf. Daniel 10:5-6):

3. Jesus was clothed with a garment down to the feet. What is the significance of Him being clothed in this way? (Exod. 28:3-4; Lev. 16:4; Heb. 7:26).

He was clothed like a priest (Ex. 28:3-4; 29:5; Lev. 16:4 / These garments were worn at the ordination service and on the day of atonement).

4. What about this golden band girded about His chest? What is the significance of this?

- The attire of one of high and royal rank like a king.
- Isaiah had symbolically described the garments of the Messiah this way: "*Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist; and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.*" (Isa. 11:5).
- The Levitical priests were girt about the breasts according to ancient historian Josephus.

5. What is the significance of His hair being as white as wool and snow? (cf. Isa. 1:18; Dan. 7:9)

- Suggests divine purity or holiness (Isa. 1:18) and perhaps also His wisdom and dignity.
- Daniel has a similar description of Christ or "the Ancient of Days" (Daniel 7:9).

6. What is the significance of His eyes being like a flame of fire? (cf. Rev. 2:18; 19:12)

- His eyes were sharp, and penetrating; discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
- During his earthly ministry, Jesus' looks had a way of penetrating those he looked at.

7. What is the significance of His feet being described in this way? (cf. Mal. 4:3; Dan. 10:6; Ezek. 1:7).

A symbol of strength; it shows Christ's ability to tread down opposition and enemies.

This is similar to the promise God made to His people in Malachi 4:3

The messenger in Daniel had "arms and feet like burnished bronze in color" (10:6).

The four living creatures that appeared unto the prophet Ezekiel had feet that "sparkled like the color of burnished bronze" (Ezek. 1:7).

8. What does a voice as of many waters suggest about the voice of Jesus? (e.g., Niagara Falls, crashing ocean in time of storm) (cf. Eze. 1:24; 43:2)

- It symbolizes a powerful and impressive voice as one having authority.
- A similar description of the time when Ezekiel heard the sound of the four living
- creatures (1:24). Later on, Ezekiel had witnessed the departure of the Lord from the temple and also saw the return of the glory of the Lord (43:2).

9. The seven stars represent the angels of the seven churches (v. 16, 20). Who are these angels?

- Angel (i.e. messenger): Human messengers (Mat. 11:10) or Divine messengers (Gen. 32:1-2)?
- Evangelists (messengers of good) (Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5)
- In Revelation the words "angel" or "angels" are used 76 times: 62 times in reference to heavenly servants of the Lord who minister to Him. 8 times in reference to angels of the church.

10. Out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword. What does this represent about Jesus? (cf. Heb. 4:12; Acts 2:37; Rev. 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21; Isa. 11:4; 49:2).

- This represents the correction or judgment of God's word (2:16 -- This is addressed to those who refused to repent).
- The sword is a symbol of His keen and accurate judgment and of His ability to protect.
- This sword is going to be used to make war against those unrepentant ones in the churches and against the beasts and dragon who opposed Him (2:12, 16; 19:15, 21).
- In prophesying about Christ, Isaiah described Him as One who would "*strike the earth with the rod of His mouth*" (Isa. 11:4).
- Isaiah spoke of his own prophetic mission by saying that the Lord made his mouth "*like a sharp sword*" (Isa. 59:2).

11. Jesus' countenance (face or total appearance) is described as the sun shining in its strength. What is it like to look at the sun? Why is His face described this way?

- It is blinding; too bright to look at directly.
- It designates Christ as having overwhelming power (just as the rays of the sun can be overwhelming).

Verses 17-20

1. What was John's first reaction after seeing Christ? How would you have reacted? (cf. Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17, 27).

John fell at His feet as one dead. He was no doubt in awe and terrified.

Wouldn't most of us (at least at first) react in the same way!?!]

[Many prophets had similar experiences: Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17, 27]

2. What assurance was John given not to fear? (v. 17; cf. Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12).

Christ laid His right hand upon John to comfort him and He assures Him by saying "Fear not; I am the First and the Last."

In giving assurance to Judah of His absolute divine power whereby He was able to drive out His enemies and redeem His people, the Lord had said, "I am the first and the last".

Verse 18:

- Jesus did not just survive death, he conquered it! -- God raised him from the dead.
- Jesus lives for ever more throughout the timeless ages forever and ever. Jesus is now alive, to never die again (**Heb. 9:26-28**).
- Christ had been in Hades (**Acts 2:27, 31**). But Hades was not able to hold Jesus Christ.
- Jesus says he has the keys of death and of hades. Keys typically represent in the New Testament power and authority: **Mat. 16:19; Luke 11:52; Rev. 3:7; 9:1; 20:1**)

3. How would these words in verse 18 be a comfort to the saints? (2 Cor. 4:14; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:55-57).

- Jesus was raised from the dead, Christians will also be raised from the dead (2 Cor. 4:14).
- Death can't truly hurt them (Heb. 2:14-15).
- Those already dead in Hades could be delivered by the key.
- Those being persecuted and dying for Christ would have much comfort and victory in Jesus (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

4. What does Jesus instruct John to write? (v. 19). What do these rules suggest about the contents of Revelation?

- What John writes will not come from his own imagination. -- He writes only what he saw, what he sees, and what he will see.
- Jesus expects him to be very thorough in recording all that He reveals unto him.

Verse 20 is helpful, in that it explains the mystery of what the seven stars and seven lampstands represent. Many of the symbols found in Revelation are not specifically explained.

Note: The word "mystery" here is not that which cannot be understood, but rather that which can be understood as it is revealed to us through the apostles and prophets (**Eph. 3:3-5**).