

## INTRODUCTION TO THE REVELATION

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Probably no other book of the Bible has produced more confusion, debate and theories of interpretation than the book of Revelation. In contrast to the narratives of the Old Testament and the Gospels, the logical argument of Paul, and the plain statements of facts we find elsewhere, in Revelation we enter a strange new world of angels, trumpets, earthquakes, strange beasts, dragons and bottomless pits. It's been called the "Jurassic Park" of the Bible. It seems more like "The Lord of the Rings" or the "Adventures of Harry Potter" than God's Word.

Historically, God's people have responded in one of two ways: either neglect the book in despair or take an exaggerated interest in it in hopes of deciphering the secret codes to the end of the world. Both responses are unfortunate and unhelpful. In order to understand Revelation, as with any piece of biblical literature, it is necessary to wrestle with both its historical context and genre of literature.

Revelation is a masterful piece of literature inspired by the Holy Spirit and an appropriate end to the Story of God's Salvation. The Story began in a garden paradise with humanity enjoying the abundant life of the Presence of God (Gen. 1 & 2). Appropriately, the Story ends with God's faithful rewarded with a city with a garden paradise enjoying the abundant life of God's Presence (Rev. 21-22).

In *Reversed Thunder*, Eugene Peterson wrote of Revelation – "I do not read Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. ... Everything in Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the Bible. ...I read Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination." I once heard my Old Testament professor, Bruce Waltke, say that "faith is living with an imagination sanctified by God's Word." May we have our imaginations sanctified and enlarged by the book of Revelation.

### Historical Context

The author is John the Apostle, who was exiled on the island of Patmos for his faith (1:9). The obvious allusions to suffering date the book most likely A.D. 92-96 under

the Emperor Domitian. The persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire began in A.D. 65 under Nero and intensified under Vespian. In A.D. 92 Domitian ordered all people in the Empire to worship him as “Lord and God.” He changed the name of the Empire to “Eternal Empire” and called himself “Everlasting King.” All people in the Empire were required to go to a temple built in his honor, take a pinch of incense, throw it into the fire of the altar and say, “Caesar is Lord.”

This placed the Church on a collision course with the empire. Christians were willing to honor Caesar, but they could not surrender absolute allegiance to him. John was viewed as an “atheist” and troublemaker, and he was banished to the island of Patmos (about 10 miles off the coast of Turkey). The Christian’s confession of Jesus’ lordship and their separation from normal Greco-Roman religious, social, and political activity was seen by pagan non-believers as unpatriotic and atheistic.

Almost all scholars understand Revelation to be a critique of the Roman Empire and of the cult of the emperor in the late first century. Although “Rome” does not appear in the book, the reference to “Babylon” is clearly a reference to Rome (Rev. 17:9). We know that “Babylon” was used in 1 Peter 5:13 and other Jewish literature after the destruction of Jerusalem to refer to Rome.

The story of Rome was one in which the empire was chosen and blessed by the gods. The emperor was semi-divine and an agent of the gods’ rule and salvation. It was said that “at Jupiter’s command he rules for him the blessed world.” Rome’s rule was a mixture of Roman ideology and pagan spirituality.

Michael Gorman writes – “Revelation is a theopolitical text. It makes claims about who is truly God and about right and wrong connections between God and the socio-political order; it challenges the political ideology of empire and the religious ideology that underwrites it; and it reveals God and the Lamb alone as the true Sovereign One, source of all blessings, and proper object of worship.” (Gorman, 43).

After John was arrested, the church was operating behind closed doors. The churches were dealing with both the external pressure of the empire as well as internal theological and ethical issues. False teaching and immorality were gaining footholds in some of the congregations. All Christians were wrestling with the sovereignty of God as the empire was increasing its hostility against Christians. Naturally questions were surfacing among the Christians – is God really in charge? Where is Jesus in all of this? How should we live in a culture of growing hostility towards the faith?

Having received a vision from the Lord, John wrote this letter to the seven churches in the province of Asia (1:4). John is writing to these seven churches to encourage them to remain faithful during the increasing pressure by the empire. He could see that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum was a forerunner of a more

widespread persecution (2:13). He writes to address both the external and internal pressures to compromise their faith and devotion to Jesus.

His letter is intended both as encouragement and challenge. He is encouraging them that Jesus, the slain Lamb, is reigning as King even over their challenging circumstances. Because Jesus is both loving and faithful, they can have hope that he will reward them for their faithfulness and even bring them through death. His rule will ultimately culminate in a new heaven and earth for his people (21-22).

John is also challenging them to remain faithful to Jesus in word and deed and not to prostitute themselves to the spirit of their age. It is a prophetic message from Jesus not to be seduced by power, whether political, ideological, or religious, that resists the rule of Jesus. John's vision and letter has continued to speak to followers of Jesus in every generation, especially in times of great external or internal pressure to compromise the faith or accommodate ourselves to unrighteous political power.

*Revelation is not about the antichrist, but about the living Christ. It is not about rapture out of this world but about faithful discipleship in this world. That is, like every other New Testament book, Revelation is about Jesus Christ – 'A revelation of Jesus Christ' (Rev. 1:1) – and about following him in obedience and love*

...

*The purpose of the book of Revelation is to persuade its hearers and readers, both ancient and contemporary, to remain faithful to God in spite of past, present, or future suffering – whatever form that suffering might take, and whatever source it may have – simply for being faithful.*

*Michael Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly, p. xv, 74*

### Genre of Literature

John received a prophetic word from God, communicated through apocalyptic imagery, which he in turn communicated to the seven churches by letter. Hence, Revelation is a hybrid of three different types of biblical literature. First, it is clearly written as a letter (1:4). Second, it is a prophetic word spoken from God to the seven churches (1:1; 22:6). God is enabling John to see something others could not see to both encourage and challenge them. Third, it is apocalyptic in its use of rich symbolism such as the "woman clothed with the sun" and a "beast with seven heads and ten horns" (Rev. 12 & 13). The title "Revelation" comes from the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which referred to the action of unveiling, uncovering or revealing something.

Apocalyptic literature was particularly popular from 200 BC to A.D. 200. The literature used rich symbolism to show that God would break into history to overthrow evil and vindicate the suffering of his people. The symbols and images were widely understood in ways like our political cartoons (think of the donkey and elephant, Uncle

Sam). The literature was used to offer the heavenly perspective on an earthly situation. It's as if God is pulling back the curtain or opening a door to reveal what's really going on (1:2,10-11; 4:1).

### Key Interpretive Guidelines

- A. It is the nature of apocalyptic literature to use rich symbolism to communicate spiritual realities, therefore we must be very cautious in assigning meaning to every detail in Revelation.

We find our first clue that this is true in the first verse where we are told that God “gave” or “made known” to John the contents of the book (1:1). The Greek verb *semaino* is used rather than the normal verb *gnorizo*. *Semaino* typically has the idea of symbolic communication when it is used. John's use of this particular verb is to make the point that symbolic visions and their interpretation are going to be the primary means of communication in the book.

Moreover, John also uses the verb *deiknumi* meaning “to show” what must happen (1:1). This is a word that refers to “a revelation through the medium of symbolic heavenly visions through an angel.” Sam Storms states “The essence of Revelation is symbolic imagery. The language is predominantly figurative and should be interpreted as such except where a literal understanding is required by the context” (Storms, 407).

Along with most commentators, John Stott reminds us, “It is important to remember that the imagery he uses is intended to be symbolic rather than pictorial. The various elements in the vision are significant symbols to be interpreted, rather than actual features to be imagined.”

Sometimes the text tells us the meaning of the symbolism (1:12-20; 7:14; 12:9; 17:9,18). Other times the symbolism is taken from Old Testament narratives such as the “seven spirits” as a reference to the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:1-6; Rev. 1:4). Still other symbols are more difficult to know their intended meaning although we should assume the original Christians most likely did know their meaning.

Mitchell Reddish says of Revelation – “The language of the book is primarily pictorial, symbolic language. It is not the language of science or logic. Rather, it is evocative, powerful, emotive language, at times more akin to poetry than prose.” (Gorman, 16).

- B. Related to the issue of symbolism is the symbolic use of numbers. As you read through the book, you will find reoccurring expressions of four, seven, ten,

and twelve along with multiples of these numbers. Theologian Michael Wilcock writes – “Numbers are much more likely to be symbols than statistics. And these symbolic number patterns clearly have great importance, or the drama would not include a lot of them.”

A clear example of this is the use of the number seven. There are six clearly defined series of sevens that run through Revelation:

- The Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
- The Seven Seals (4:1-8:1)
- The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19)
- The Seven Signs in Heaven (12:1-15:8)
- The Seven Bowls of Wrath (16:1-21)
- The Seven Final Visions (17:1-22:21)

- C. John’s series of visions do not progress in chronological order as they happen historically. Rather, they progress as he sees them in his vision. As an example, his vision of Rev. 12, which conveys the birth of Christ, obviously happened before the events depicted in Revelation 1-11.

Michael Gorman writes – “Rather than being one extended linear narrative, the sequence of short visions and narratives is somewhat repetitious, though also always intensifying, with seven seals and trumpets of judgment (6:1-11:19) paralleled by the seven angels and seven bowls (14:6 – 19:10). ... This narrative movement is called recapitulation.” (58).

Making the same point, Mitchell Reddish writes – “later events sometimes retell earlier events ... Instead of a straight linear progression, the structure of Revelation presents a movement that is spiral. Earlier events are presented in different forms and use different images.” (Gorman, 58).

- D. We should most likely understand the 1000 years of Revelation 20 to be symbolic rather than literal. Given the highly symbolic use of numbers in the vision, it is highly unlikely John intended this number to be taken literally. Since this is the only place in the entire Bible that speaks of Jesus reigning for a thousand years, we must be very careful to build a system of theology around a few verses in the Bible.

It is most likely that the number “1,000” is saying “everything is under God’s sovereign control.” This view is supported by the fact that John has already described Jesus as “the first-born from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). Furthermore, the rest of the New Testament speaks of Jesus as already having been crowned as King upon his resurrection and ascension into Heaven (Matthew 28:18; Acts 2:36; Ephesians 1:20-22).

### Key Characters

As with the entire Bible, especially the New Testament, Jesus is the hero. Revelation presents him as the “King of kings” presently reigning and promising to return to finally establish God’s rule on earth as it is in Heaven. Along with King Jesus, we see His people enduring suffering and persecution for their allegiance to Him. They are promised vindication and reward when they die or when Jesus finally returns.

There are other mysterious characters that are identifiable by doing careful exegesis.

- A. The Dragon (Rev. 12) = Satan.

*“Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red Dragon with seven heads and 10 horns and seven crowns on his heads.*

...

*The great dragon was hurled down - that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.” Rev. 12:3, 9*

- B. The Sea Beast (Rev. 13) = Rome & any political power manipulated by Satan. Like the dragon, the sea beast is a sign pointing beyond itself. The language comes from Daniel 7:1-14 referring to successive empires opposed to God’s people.

*“And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had 10 horns and seven heads, with 10 crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.” Rev. 13:1*

- C. The Land Beast/ False Prophet (Rev. 13; 16, 19 & 20). These are Satan-manipulated religious institutions and powers that lead people to put their trust in themselves and political powers (Sea beast) in rebellion against God.

*“Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men.” Rev. 13:11-13*

- D. Babylon (Rev. 17-19) = Rome and any political power manipulated by Satan. Babylon was code in apocalyptic literature for humanity seeking to

build a society without God. Babylon represents the world opposed to God. Babylon was recognized as any nation or power seeking to destroy God's people.

*"There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ... The title was written on her forehead:*

*Mystery*

*Babylon the Great*

*The Mother of Prostitutes*

*And of the Abominations of the Earth." Rev. 17:3,5)*

### Relevance to Us

The letter has brought a powerful message to the Church throughout the centuries. To God's people suffering persecution around the world, it reminds them that the Lord God Almighty still reigns from His throne. He is still in charge of the universe despite appearances, and He is aware of their suffering for the sake of His name. For those who persecute His people, judgment is sure and certain. For those who remain faithful to Him, the reward of paradise is sure and certain. To God's people who live in cultures that constantly seduce them to accommodate themselves to Godless values and practices (such as materialism, hedonism, relativism, totalitarianism, nationalism, etc), God still calls them to live holy lives while offering a counter-cultural witness.

At the heart of Revelation are key theological questions with which every generation of Christians must wrestle. What does it mean for the Lord to be the One and Only Sovereign King in a universe where others compete for His allegiance and worship? What does it mean for Christians to live faithfully in their generation as a counter-cultural community when their own culture is dominated by the power and influence of politics, ideologies, economics, advertising, sexuality etc? What does it mean for Christians to live the "Third Way" of the Gospel – not giving ultimate allegiance to the left or right of politics?

The Revelation reminds us that whatever issues our generation faces, the starting point and true compass for a faithful response is authentic worship. John wants us to see the reality of the One, True God, who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Christians everywhere are called to lift their eyes to the Heavenly Throne Room to worship the Eternal Holy One and His Son Jesus Christ, who has purchased people from every nation by his death on the cross (Rev. 4 & 5).

*"The central and centering vision of Revelation is a vision of God and the Lamb, and specifically of the worship of God and the Lamb. As a prophetic summons to first-commandment faithfulness, Revelation is both a call to worship the true God*

*and a call to forsake all false deities. ... Through worship one declares one's allegiance, one's loyalty. ...Public worship is a statement to the world that the church will bow to no other gods." Michael Gorman, Reading Revelation Responsibly*

*"The secret to freedom from enslaving patterns of sin is worship. You need worship. You need great worship. You need weeping worship. You need glorious worship. You need to sense God's greatness and to be moved by it – moved to tears and moved to laughter – moved by who God is and what He has done for you. And this needs to be happening all the time." Tim Keller*

We are living in a period of history of great potential upheaval and change. The Western Church is increasingly being marginalized in a post-Christian society. Biblical orthodoxy and values are increasingly seen not only as old fashioned, but as oppressive and dangerous. Increasingly people on the left and right are investing a religious zeal and importance to politics. Revelation is a source of hope for us as we face uncertain times. We are learning what it means to live in a period of history that may be more like the first three centuries than the 20th century.

With so many cultural shifts and uncertainty, we are having our sources of security and hope challenged. The Lord may be calling us to redirect our ultimate hope away from our usual earthly comforts and to allow Him to renew and strengthen our ultimate hope in Him. The Lord has unveiled to John and to us the reason for our hope. He is reigning over the universe, and He is faithful to bring His people into His promised inheritance.

The New Testament writers are united in their call to us to direct our ultimate hope in the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter exhorts us – *"Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your **hope** on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming" (1 Peter 1:13)*. Paul reminds us that the very purpose and power of God's grace in Christ is to teach us to *"say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives while we wait for the **blessed hope** – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:13-14)*. The writer of Hebrews explains the very nature of Biblical faith to be our future-oriented hope in God's rewards for His faithful people:

*"Now faith is being sure of what we **hope** for and certain of what we do not see. ...All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them from a distance. And they admitted they were strangers and aliens on earth. ... Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them." Hebrews 11:1, 13, 16b*

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13

### Recommended Resources

1. For a good introduction to apocalyptic literature, see [bibleproject.com/howtoreadthebible:apocalypticliterature](http://bibleproject.com/howtoreadthebible:apocalypticliterature).
2. *Unveiled Hope* by Scotty Smith & Michael Card (1997). This book is written on a popular level by a pastor and musician, and it would serve as a nice compliment to our preaching series.
3. *Reversed Thunder – The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* by Eugene Peterson (1988). Peterson was a pastor and theologian, who may be best known as the translator of the version of the Bible known as *The Message*. This book is less an exegetical study and more of a series of pastoral reflections on different theological themes.
4. *Discipleship on the Edge* by Darrell Johnson (2004). Johnson is a respected pastor and theologian, who writes for both the mind and heart. This book is the next level in terms of substance and challenge. This is an introductory commentary for the student of Scripture willing to dig deeper.
5. *Reading Revelation Responsibly – Uncivil Worship and Witness* by Michael Gorman (2011). Gorman emphasizes the mixture of political and religious power in the Roman Empire and challenges the modern Church, especially in America, about its potential for the same problem.
6. *Millennial Maze – Sorting Out the Evangelical Options* by Stan Grenz (1992). This is a solid introduction to the various views of the thousand- year reign of Revelation 20 including Dispensationalism.
7. *Kingdom Come* by Sam Storms (2013). Storms is a respected New Testament theologian and pastor. He offers an exhaustive interpretation of a range of Biblical texts to argue for the amillennial position. He also provides an in-depth critique of premillennial dispensationalism, which is popular in the American Church. This is the most in-depth and challenging of the recommended books (559 pages).

### Appendix – More on the Millennium

There are essentially three main schools of thought on how to understand the thousand years reference in Rev. 20:1-6. They are known by names relating to the Latin *millennium*

meaning thousand years (*mille = 1000; annus = years*). One of the schools (Pre-millennialism) has two main variations of thought within it.

### 1. Amillennialism.

This is the oldest position in the Church dating back to the second century A.D. This view contends the thousand years are symbolic like the other numbers in Revelation. It is stressed that the New Testament knows of only one future coming of Jesus at the end of history – “our blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

Jesus is reigning now as King of kings, and his Kingdom is present now spiritually through his faithful followers. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, Satan was bound, and he is unable to hold people in ignorance or gather a worldwide coalition against the Church. The Gospel now advances by the Spirit’s power through the Church’s witness, but always amid opposition and suffering.

Just as Jesus the Lamb conquered by being slain, so the victory of his Church consists in faithfulness even unto death (Rev. 5:9; 12:11). Although Jesus defeated Satan on the cross, Satan will be permitted one final onslaught just before Jesus returns and finally banishes him from God’s glorious new creation. This view understands Rev. 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 as two perspectives on the same last battle at the end of history when Jesus finally returns as conquering King (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

### 2. Post-millennialism.

This view sees Jesus returning only once as well, but it is after a thousand-year period in which Satan is bound. During this time, the gospel wins the day unlike any other time in history. Exactly when or how this thousand-year period begins is uncertain. Some see it in the future while others see it as a period beginning with Christ’s ascension and gradually improving conditions concluding with a glorious second coming (not a literal thousand years).

During this time, the Church finally lives the gospel of the Kingdom and the world is wonderfully transformed. Jesus is ruling from heaven while exercising his power through the Spirit and the Church preaching the Gospel. The fruit of Jesus’ victory will be plain for all to see, as political and legal systems are conformed to God’s righteousness, and labor and the arts are redeemed. After this thousand-year period, Satan is permitted one last assault, but fails. Jesus returns to vanquish Satan, and we enter the glorious new creation.

### 3. Pre-millennialism.

This position emerged in the late eighteenth century, and it was popularized in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century by the *Left Behind* fiction series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry

Jenkins. Because of this pop culture expression, many Christians assume this is the only way to understand the Bible.

Premillennialism is usually associated with the futurist view of the visions. This view teaches that Jesus physically and visibly returns to earth twice after his first resurrection and ascension into Heaven. Jesus comes again *before* the thousand years to literally rule on the earth for the thousand years. In classic premillennialism, believers are expected to go through a “great tribulation” before Jesus returns to establish his millennial reign on the earth.

When Jesus returns, he defeats the beast and the false prophet in the battle on “the great day of God Almighty ... to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon” (Rev. 16:14-16; 19:11-21). This great battle begins with Jesus’ binding (but not destroying) Satan, preventing him from deceiving the nations for the thousand years (Rev. 20:1-3).

During this time, Christ’s followers receive their immortal bodies either through resurrection from the dead or by transformation of the living (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). This is known as the “first resurrection,” and they reign with Jesus on the present earth, still infected by sin and death. The descendants of those who survive the battle of Armageddon will remain on earth, ruled by the resurrected saints, and they will live to extraordinary ages (Isaiah 65:20-25).

After this thousand- year period, Satan is released. Satan tries once more to destroy the saints and take over the world. Jesus ultimately defeats Satan, and the rest of humanity are resurrected and brought to judgment (Rev. 20:7-15). God replaces the old, curse-infected heaven and earth with a new heaven and earth (Rev. 21-22).

There is another version of premillennialism that comes from a theological tradition called dispensationalism. Dispensationalists also believe that Old Testament prophecies of Israel’s restoration to fidelity to the Lord and political and material blessings will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. They also expect that before Jesus returns to set up his millennial kingdom, he will come secretly take believers from the earth before the “great tribulation” of seven years (the rapture).