

Valley Bible Church – Book of Revelation

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Introductory Comments:

The book of Revelation is the only completely prophetic book in the New Testament.

It is fitting that the last book of the Bible should vividly picture the ultimate victory that God will achieve over all His enemies. It is distinctively an eschatological book (a book about the end times).

Revelation is written in Apocalyptic style.

Definition of apocalyptic style: The presentation of a message by means of symbols, visions, pictorial language; it speaks of sweeping cataclysmic events to occur in the end times. Old Testament examples of this style (genre) are Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. The Greek name for Revelation is *Apocalypses*, a revealing, unveiling, or uncovering of that which is otherwise hidden.

The value in studying Revelation:

- A special blessing is promised to the readers and hearers of this book and also to those who obey. (Rev. 1:3, 22:7)
- It reveals God's plan for the future. It has been the universal desire of man, particularly in days such as ours (coming to the end of a millennium) to show an interest in future events. Many people ask what the future holds for them. By studying the book of Revelation, God's future plan is revealed and we therefore should not be taken unaware.
- This book reveals clearer detail concerning elements of Bible prophecy than any other book. For example: the glorious appearing of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19), the governmental operation of the man of sin, the terrible events of the Tribulation Period, the ultimate end of Satan, the future glorification of the Church, and the future position of the saints.
- This book is a fitting completion of Biblical truth for it completes great truths begun in Genesis and other passages of the Bible:
 - Genesis shows man's beginning in a beautiful paradise while Revelation shows the wonderful paradise to come.
 - Genesis tells of man's first rebellion against God, while Revelation promises an end to man's rebellion against God.
 - Genesis records the first death (4:8), while Revelation promises that there shall be no more death (21:4).
 - Genesis shows the beginning of the curse (3:15-18), while Revelation shows the curse lifted (22:3).
 - Genesis introduces the devil for the first time as the tempter of men (3:1-18), while Revelation shows the final doom of Satan (20:10).

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* These are just a few examples.

There is great difficulty in studying the book of Revelation:

Two extreme attitudes that need to be avoided:

1. Some feel that it cannot be understood, therefore they avoid it completely. Calvin refused to write a commentary on Revelation, while Luther gave it very little attention.
2. Some feel that they have solved every nuance of thought suggested in every detail of every picture in Revelation. We will attempt to give it our best guess and yet realize not every question can be answered dogmatically.

There exist a variety of methods used in interpreting this book. Because of its apocalyptic nature, Revelation is approached in a manner different from any other New Testament book. There are four basic approaches to Revelation:

The Preterist Method: (from the Latin *praeter*, meaning past)

- *Basic Thesis:* All events of Revelation were fulfilled during the period of the Roman empire.
- They see Revelation, especially chapters 4-19 as a symbolic description of the conflicts of the church during the first century and thus fulfilled.
- It makes the book relevant to its own age, but it has the effect of making it of no use to any further generation.
- To overcome this defect the preterist also interprets the book from the idealist fashion as listed below.
- This position completely denies that any part of Revelation is prophetic. It does not speak of end time events.

The Idealist Method: Revelation is not seen as a series of facts or actual events, but is a symbolic or pictorial depiction of great ideals or principles, specifically between good and evil. (Spiritual warfare) This is also referred to as the *Spiritualizing Interpretation*.

- The words and symbols cannot be identified with any specific events of any age, but rather of cosmic truths relevant to all ages.
- The principles may emerge in many forms in many ages. Thus there is no one interpretation of Revelation that applies to any particular age, the principles are all being manifested in all ages.
- This also denies the claim of Revelation to be a book of prophecy.
- It is not consistent with normal historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture as is used in all other books of the Bible.

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- This is the method used by most amillennial interpreters because it fits best with their presuppositions and typical allegorizing eschatological passages of the Bible.

The Historicist Method: Revelation is a panorama of church history from all ages. From the time of the apostolic era to the consummation.

- Revelation a symbolic presentation of the entire course of the history of the church from the earliest of times to the last times.
- It deals entirely with the history of the Western Church, not world-wide. It does not include Israel.
- Historical dates and events are to be connected with the seals, trumpets, and bowl judgments.
- As in the other methods it resorts to a thorough allegorizing method of interpretation.
- Many problems exist with this view:

No two advocates of the view have ever agreed on the interpretation of a major point. If those who hold it can't agree with each other, it must not be valid.

It demands a knowledge of history before one can read and understand Scripture.

Revelation has no real relevance to its own day.

The Futurist Method: Beginning with chapter 4, Revelation describes the future events accompanying the end of the age.

- This view recognizes the prophetic character of the book. The events from chapter 4 and on are actual end time events.
 - This view is in harmony with the rest of the Bible in how Scripture is interpreted.
 - Although this view recognizes the symbolic language often used, the adherents of this view interpret the book as literally as possible.
- * This is the only sensible method of interpreting the book of Revelation. It treats the book with the same grammatical-historical interpretation as with every other book of the Bible. It seeks to treat it as literal as possible and using symbolism only where the book makes it apparent that it is using symbolism. This is the position of Valley Bible Church and the method that we will use as we study the passages of the book of Revelation.

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Authorship:

Four times the author calls himself John.

(1:1, 1:4, 1:9, 22:8)

The Apostle John was accepted very early by many of the church fathers.

- Justin Martyr (100-165)
 - Irenaeus (120-200)
 - Tertullian (150-220)
 - Clement of Alexandria (155-215)
- * All recognized Revelation as canonical and from the hand of John the Apostle.

There are many similarities to the Gospel of John

Particular words are used primarily or only by John: 1) *logos*, as a name for Christ used only in John's writings; 2) Lamb used as a title for Christ. Used 28 times in Revelation, and several times in the Gospel of John; 3) Other words that are common to both are: true, witness, overcome.

Similar ideas emphasized: Primary relationship is found in conflict between the powers of good and evil (Presented differently, yet idea is the same). Christ is the central figure of each book. His victory brings each book to its grand climax.

John was clearly exiled on the Island of Patmos during Domitian's reign.

Conclusion: John the Apostle was clearly the human author of the Book of Revelation.

The Recipients:

Particularly the Seven Churches in Asia Minor (1:4, 1:11).

1. Ephesus
2. Smyrna
3. Pergamum
4. Thyatira
5. Sardis
6. Philadelphia
7. Laodicea

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8. This is an Encyclical (circular) letter with particular messages for particular churches. All letters were to be read by all churches.

Ultimately All Churches of all times.

By choosing the number "7," it is thought that John is giving an indication that these are not only genuine local churches, but they also represent all churches of all times. Also, by the continuing refrain, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," John indicates that all who have spiritual hearing are included in his audience.

Why these seven churches?

They indicate the circular route the messenger would take in delivering the letter. Their strategic location as centers of communication. The character of these seven churches is a good representation of the church as a whole.

The Place and Date of Writing:

Place-The Island of Patmos (1:9), a barren island about 70 miles southwest of Ephesus.

It was a small rocky island in the Aegean Sea, regularly used by the Roman Government for banishment of political offenders because of its barren and desolate nature. The prisoners were compelled to work the mines of the island. Rev. 10:4 clearly indicates that John wrote this book while on the island, and not later. Rev. 22:6-19 gives the impression that the book has been completed.

Date- 95 to 96 AD

Irenaeus said that John wrote Revelation "no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign." Domitian was emperor of Rome from 81 to 96 AD. Eusebius dated the book of Revelation in "the fifteenth year of Domitian." (95 AD) Other early church fathers also declared Revelation to be written near the end of Emperor Domitian's reign. Those include: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Victorinus, and Jerome. In addition to early church testimony, the spiritual decline of the seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3 also argues for this date. These churches were strong and spiritually healthy during the 60's when Paul was last ministering in Asia Minor. There would need to be time for heretical groups such as the Nicolaitians to form. (Rev. 2:6,15) The historical record supports John's ministry in Ephesus. This date of 95 to 96 AD allows time for John's ministry in Asia Minor to reach the point where he would be exiled.

Occasion:

Direct command of the Lord. This is the only book in the Bible where the author states so clearly that the Lord told him to write. (Rev. 1:10-11, 19; 21:5)

Needs of the churches. The persecutions that had come earlier were about to be dwarfed by those on the horizon. Emperor worship was now being demanded of Christians.

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Some within the church were advocating compromise with Rome as a way to avoid persecution. A group called the "Nicolaitans" were advocating participation in pagan feasts to make life easier.

"Revelation begins with John, the last surviving apostle and an old man, in exile on the small, barren island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea southwest of Ephesus. The Roman authorities had banished him there because of his faithful preaching of the gospel (1:9). While on Patmos, John received a series of visions that laid out the future history of the world. When he was arrested, John was in Ephesus, ministering to the church there and in the surrounding cities. Seeking to strengthen those congregations, he could no longer minister to them in person and following the divine command (1:11), John addressed Revelation to them (1:4). The churches had begun to feel the effects of persecution; at least one man--probably a pastor--had already been martyred (2:13), and John himself had been exiled. But the storm of persecution was about to break in full fury upon the 7 churches so dear to the apostle's heart (2:10). To those churches, Revelation provided a message of hope: God is in sovereign control of all the events of human history, and though evil often seems pervasive and wicked men all powerful, their ultimate doom is certain. Christ will come in glory to judge and rule."¹

Purpose:

To show the things that must shortly take place. These are future things, which are immanent. They could begin to occur at any time. (Rev. 1:1)

To show Christ's ultimate victory for the purpose of encouraging the church. Christ is shown as the conqueror of all powers of darkness and as the coming King.

To correct problems within the church. Particularly the seven churches of Asia Minor. (Rev. 2-3)

A Review of Millennial Views:

Statement of the problem.

Revelation 20:1-10 mentions the term "a thousand years" six times. The Latin words for thousand years are *mille* and *annum*. Taken together they form the word *Millennium*. A millennium is a period of time at the end of this age when Christ sets up a kingdom on earth. Though the term appears nowhere else in Scripture, one's entire view of eschatology is usually determined by his interpretation of this expression. Three views are generally recognized: Postmillennial, Amillennial, and Premillennial. The prefixes *pre-* and *post-* refer to the coming of Christ in relation to the Millennium.

The Postmillennial view:

Christ will return to earth to reign after the Millennium is over. The Millennium will be brought about by the preaching of the Gospel and the gradual Christianizing of the world. Thus by our energetic work, we are instruments of "bringing in the Kingdom."

The Amillennial view:

The prefix *a-* is a negative. This means that there is not going to be a Millennial reign of Christ. The Millennium is occurring now, as believers experience the rule and reign of Christ in their hearts. All the prophecies to Israel are fulfilled spiritually in the church. There will be a general resurrection and a general judgment.

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The Premillennial view:

Christ will return in glory at the end of the Tribulation as a literal rendering of the book of Revelation explains, and will establish a literal kingdom on earth at that time. The promises to Israel will be fulfilled literally in the Millennium. Within this view exist various views on when the Rapture occurs in relation to the Tribulation. (Pre-trib., Mid-trib., & Post-trib.)

* These are the three major views. The first two views do an injustice in interpreting the Scriptures. They seek to treat eschatological passages differently from the rest of Scripture. They will spiritualize passages seeing an allegory where none is intended and seeing types where none are intended. The Premillennial view is the only eschatological view that follows the proper rules of interpretation all the way through the Scripture, treating all passages as literal as possible.

Special Features to the Book of Revelation:

Revelation is closely connected to the Old Testament. There are more references or allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation than in any other New Testament book. Approximately 400.

There exists a close connection between the book of Revelation and the book of Daniel. A good knowledge of the book of Daniel is helpful.

Revelation is the only book of the Bible that promises a blessing to one who reads, hears, and obeys the book. (1:3)

The Structure of the Book of Revelation:

The General Structure: (Revelation 1:19)

- The things which you have seen. (Chapter 1: The vision of Christ)
- The things which are. (Chapter 2: Messages to the 7 churches)
- The things which shall take place after these things. (Chapter 4-22: Judgments coming upon the earth prior to Christ's return and culminating in His Kingdom and eternal reign.)