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# REVELATION

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Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Revelation

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# REVELATION

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# ADVANCE PRAISE

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Reddish's commentary is based on solid research and is clearly written, bridging many of the gaps that separate historical meaning from contemporary church life. The author knows both sides of the bridge and how to bring them together. One can only hope that the book will be widely read in church study groups.

—*M. Eugene Boring*  
*Briscoe Professor of New Testament*  
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Enlightened and enlightening—Reddish's commentary is a reliable guide to an often misunderstood book—the product of over two decades of grappling with apocalyptic literature in general and the Apocalypse of John in particular.

—*Edgar V. McKnight*  
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Mitchell Reddish has given us a remarkably well-written and cogent explanation of the Apocalypse. He has balanced a careful reading of the text, provocative dialogue with other scholars, and an honest struggle with the ethical and theological issues the Apocalypse raises for modern readers. His reading is sharp, multidimensional, and sensible. This is a splendid introduction to John's Apocalypse.

—*David L. Barr*  
*Professor of Religion*  
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Though a plethora of commentaries and monographs on Revelation exists, few of them are as readable as Reddish's recent effort. His presentation of the material is well researched and carefully nuanced, reflecting a wide reading on the subject. Of the midlevel commentaries on this challenging book, Reddish's must rank among the best for pastors and teachers who want an accessible point of entry to discussing Revelation.

—*Ben Witherington III*  
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Reddish combines careful scholarship with thoughtful reflection, helping readers grasp the images Revelation's first readers would have envisioned and, most importantly, hear Revelation's message. While readers of Revelation commentaries rarely agree with any one on every detail, this commentary reflects the mainstream of contemporary Revelation scholarship and a happy alternative to the common "pop" prophetic speculation plaguing our era.

—*Craig S. Keener*  
*Professor of New Testament*  
*Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary*  
*Wynnewood, Pennsylvania*

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# ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS COMMENTARY

Books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament are generally abbreviated in the Sidebars, parenthetical references, and notes according to the following system.

## *The Old Testament*

Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Exod
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Deut
Joshua	Josh
Judges	Judg
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Samuel	1–2 Sam
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kgs
1–2 Chronicles	1–2 Chr
Ezra	Ezra
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Esth
Job	Job
Psalms (Psalms)	Ps (Pss)
Proverbs	Prov
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
or Qoheleth	Qoh
Song of Solomon	Song
or Song of Songs	Song
or Canticles	Cant
Isaiah	Isa
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ezek
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obadiah	Obad
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Mic

*Abbreviations*

Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zeph
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zech
Malachi	Mal

*The Apocrypha*

1–2 Esdras	1–2 Esdr
Tobit	Tob
Judith	Jdt
Additions to Esther	Add Esth
Wisdom of Solomon	Wis
Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach	Sir
Baruch	Bar
Epistle (or Letter) of Jeremiah	Ep Jer
Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three	Pr Azar
Daniel and Susanna	Sus
Daniel, Bel, and the Dragon	Bel
Prayer of Manasseh	Pr Man
1–2 Maccabees	1–2 Macc

*The New Testament*

Matthew	Matt
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Romans	Rom
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Cor
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Philippians	Phil
Colossians	Col
1–2 Thessalonians	1–2 Thess
1–2 Timothy	1–2 Tim
Titus	Titus
Philemon	Phlm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1–2 Peter	1–2 Pet
1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Revelation	Rev

Other commonly used abbreviations include:

BC	Before Christ
(also commonly referred to as BCE = Before the Common Era)	
AD	<i>Anno Domini</i> (“in the year of the Lord”)
(also commonly referred to as CE = the Common Era)	
v.	verse
vv.	verses
C.	century
c.	<i>circa</i> (around “that time”)
cf.	<i>confer</i> (compare)
ch.	chapter
chs.	chapters
d.	died
ed.	edition or edited by or editor
eds.	editors
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> (for example)
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
f./ff.	and the following one(s)
gen. ed.	general editor
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> (in the same place)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
lit.	literally
n.d.	no date
rev. and exp. ed.	revised and expanded edition
sg.	singular
trans.	translated by or translator(s)
vol(s).	volume(s)

Additional written works cited by abbreviations include:

1QM	<i>War Scroll</i>
2–3–4 Bar.	2–3–4 <i>Baruch</i>
1–2–3 En.	1–2–3 <i>Enoch</i>
4QTest	<i>Testimonia</i>
Alex.	Lucian, <i>Alexander (Pseudomantis)</i> , <i>Alexander the False Prophet</i>
Ant.	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
Ascen. Isa.	<i>Ascension of Isaiah</i>
CD	<i>Damascus Document</i> (Cairo)
CEV	Contemporary English Version of the Bible
Civ.	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i> , <i>The City of God</i>

<i>Conf.</i>	Augustine, <i>Confessionum libri XIII, Confessions</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin, <i>Dialogus cum Tryphone, Dialogue with Trypho</i>
<i>Dom.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Domitianus</i>
<i>Ep. Tra.</i>	Pliny the Younger, <i>Epistulae ad Trajanum, Epistles to Trajan</i>
<i>Epist.</i>	Jerome, <i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Refutatio omnium haeresium (Philosophoumena), Refutation of All Heresies</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses, Against Heresies</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica, Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>Hist. rom.</i>	Dio Cassius, <i>Historia romana, Roman History</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>Jub.</i>	<i>Jubilees</i>
KJV	King James Version of the Bible
LXX	Septuagint
<i>m. Ketub.</i>	Mishnah tractate <i>Ketubbot</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>
NAB	New American Bible
NIV	New International Version of the Bible
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
PMich	Michigan Papyrus
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version of the Bible
<i>Sib. Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oracles</i>
<i>T. Jud.</i>	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
<i>T. Levi</i>	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>Tract. ep. Jo.</i>	Augustine, <i>In epistulam Johannis ad Parthos tractatus, Tractates on the First Epistle of John</i>
<i>Vesp.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Vespasianus</i>

DEDICATED WITH GRATITUDE TO  
MY PARENTS, WARREN AND JUANITA REDDISH,  
AND TO  
THE ALTERNATIVE CLASS AT  
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, DELAND, FLORIDA



## PREFACE

In *The City of God*, Augustine wrote, “Now in this book called the Apocalypse there are, to be sure, many obscure statements, designed to exercise the mind.”<sup>1</sup> Most modern readers would agree with Augustine’s assessment. This writing by John of Patmos is the strangest and most puzzling literature in the New Testament. It is a work that teases and tantalizes the imagination, a work that often obscures as much as it reveals. Yet if Revelation is the most enigmatic of the New Testament writings, it is also one of the New Testament’s most powerful works. It challenges its readers to be faithful servants of God, demanding unswerving loyalty to the God “who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” John’s visions contain strong words of warning and judgment, reminding readers of the stringent demands placed upon those who would be followers of the Lamb. At the same time, Revelation presents a message of comfort, offering images of hope and assurance in the midst of uncertainty and despair.

Like many readers, ancient and modern, I too have been captivated by John’s dizzying array of symbols, images, and visions. No other work in the canon has intrigued and challenged me as has the book of Revelation. It has ignited my imagination, exhilarated my spirit, indicted my complacency, and sustained my hope. I have found my faith in God enriched, expanded, and reshaped by the eloquent visions of the Apocalypse. If this commentary can help others experience the profundity and power of John’s Revelation, then my labor will not have been in vain.

This commentary on Revelation, while written by an individual, is in many ways a community product. Various academic communities and faith communities have shaped my understanding of John’s Apocalypse. In addition, particular individuals have contributed in significant ways to the production of this work. In this modest way, I wish to pay tribute to them. With deepest appreciation, I acknowledge my indebtedness and gratitude to the following: to Stetson University for providing partial funding for travel to the cities of Revelation; to James Ridgway, Jr., of Educational Opportunities and Ünver Gazez of Azim Tours for their assistance in my research in Turkey and on Patmos; to Necdet (Net) Özeren, a good friend and excellent guide in Turkey; to Clyde Fant, my colleague and fellow

traveler “to the seven churches that are in Asia” and beyond; to my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies, Stetson University, for their encouragement; to my wife, Barbara, and our children, Tim, Beth, and Michael, for their patience, support, and understanding; and to Professor James R. Blevins, who more than two decades ago helped me appreciate the drama and creativity of the Apocalypse. A word of gratitude is also due to the special editors of this commentary project for their assistance, Scott Nash, Alan Culpepper, and Heidi Hornik, as well as to the publication staff at Smyth & Helwys (particularly Lex Horton, Jim Burt, and Erin Smith) who worked diligently to bring this work to completion.

Special acknowledgments are due to those to whom I dedicate this commentary: my parents, Warren and Juanita Reddish, who first nurtured me in the faith and introduced me to that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”; and the Alternative Class at First Baptist Church, DeLand, Florida, who have graciously allowed me to serve as their teacher, have opened my eyes to new meanings and insights, and have helped keep me honest in dealing with the Scriptures.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> *Civ.* 20.17, trans. Henry Bettenson; ed. David Knowles (New York: Penguin, 1972), 929.

## SERIES PREFACE

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is a visually stimulating and user-friendly series that is as close to multimedia in print as possible. Written by accomplished scholars with all students of Scripture in mind, the primary goal of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is to make available serious, credible biblical scholarship in an accessible and less intimidating format.

Far too many Bible commentaries fall short of bridging the gap between the insights of biblical scholars and the needs of students of God's written word. In an unprecedented way, the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* brings insightful commentary to bear on the lives of contemporary Christians. Using a multimedia format, the volumes employ a stunning array of art, photographs, maps, and drawings to illustrate the truths of the Bible for a visual generation of believers.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is built upon the idea that meaningful Bible study can occur when the insights of contemporary biblical scholars blend with sensitivity to the needs of lifelong students of Scripture. Some persons within local faith communities, however, struggle with potentially informative biblical scholarship for several reasons. Oftentimes, such scholarship is cast in technical language easily grasped by other scholars, but not by the general reader. For example, lengthy, technical discussions on every detail of a particular scriptural text can hinder the quest for a clear grasp of the whole. Also, the format for presenting scholarly insights has often been confusing to the general reader, rendering the work less than helpful. Unfortunately, responses to the hurdles of reading extensive commentaries have led some publishers to produce works for a general readership that merely skim the surface of the rich resources of biblical scholarship. This commentary series incorporates works of fine art in an accurate and scholarly manner, yet the format remains "user-friendly." An important facet is the presentation and explanation of images of art, which interpret the biblical material or illustrate how the biblical material has been understood and interpreted in the past. A visual generation of believers deserves a commentary series that contains not only the all-important textual commentary on Scripture, but images, photographs, maps, works of fine art, and drawings that bring the text to life.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* makes serious, credible biblical scholarship more accessible to a wider audience. Writers and editors alike present information in ways that encourage readers to gain a better understanding of the Bible. The editorial board has worked to develop a format that is useful and usable, informative and pleasing to the eye. Our writers are reputable scholars who participate in the community of faith and sense a calling to communicate the results of their scholarship to their faith community.

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* addresses Christians and the larger church. While both respect for and sensitivity to the needs and contributions of other faith communities are reflected in the work of the series authors, the authors speak primarily to Christians. Thus the reader can note a confessional tone throughout the volumes. No particular “confession of faith” guides the authors, and diverse perspectives are observed in the various volumes. Each writer, though, brings to the biblical text the best scholarly tools available and expresses the results of their studies in commentary and visuals that assist readers seeking a word from the Lord for the church.

To accomplish this goal, writers in this series have drawn from numerous streams in the rich tradition of biblical interpretation. The basic focus is the biblical text itself, and considerable attention is given to the wording and structure of texts. Each particular text, however, is also considered in the light of the entire canon of Christian Scriptures. Beyond this, attention is given to the cultural context of the biblical writings. Information from archaeology, ancient history, geography, comparative literature, history of religions, politics, sociology, and even economics is used to illuminate the culture of the people who produced the Bible. In addition, the writers have drawn from the history of interpretation, not only as it is found in traditional commentary on the Bible but also in literature, theater, church history, and the visual arts. Finally, the *Commentary* on Scripture is joined with *Connections* to the world of the contemporary church. Here again, the writers draw on scholarship in many fields as well as relevant issues in the popular culture.

This wealth of information might easily overwhelm a reader if not presented in a “user-friendly” format. Thus the heavier discussions of detail and the treatments of other helpful topics are presented in special-interest boxes, or Sidebars, clearly connected to the passages under discussion so as not to interrupt the flow of the basic interpretation. The result is a commentary on Scripture that focuses on the theological significance of a text while also offering

the reader a rich array of additional information related to the text and its interpretation.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource is a distinctive feature of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*.

Combining credible biblical scholarship, user-friendly study features, and sensitivity to the needs of a visually oriented generation of believers creates a unique and unprecedented type of commentary series. With insight from many of today's finest biblical scholars and a stunning visual format, it is our hope that the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* will be a welcome addition to the personal libraries of all students of Scripture.

*The Editors*



# HOW TO USE THIS COMMENTARY

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* is written by accomplished biblical scholars with a wide array of readers in mind. Whether engaged in the study of Scripture in a church setting or in a college or seminary classroom, all students of the Bible will find a number of useful features throughout the commentary that are helpful for interpreting the Bible.

## **Basic Design of the Volumes**

Each volume features an Introduction to a particular book of the Bible, providing a brief guide to information that is necessary for reading and interpreting the text: the historical setting, literary design, and theological significance. Each Introduction also includes a comprehensive outline of the particular book under study.

Each chapter of the commentary investigates the text according to logical divisions in a particular book of the Bible. Sometimes these divisions follow the traditional chapter segmentation, while at other times the textual units consist of sections of chapters or portions of more than one chapter. The divisions reflect the literary structure of a book and offer a guide for selecting passages that are useful in preaching and teaching.

An accompanying CD-ROM offers powerful searching and research tools. The commentary text, Sidebars, and visuals are all reproduced on a CD that is fully indexed and searchable. Pairing a text version with a digital resource also allows unprecedented flexibility and freedom for the reader. Carry the text version to locations you most enjoy doing research while knowing that the CD offers a portable alternative for travel from the office, church, classroom, and your home.

## **Commentary and Connections**

As each chapter explores a textual unit, the discussion centers around two basic sections: *Commentary* and *Connections*. The analysis of a passage, including the details of its language, the history reflected in the text, and the literary forms found in the text, are the main focus

of the *Commentary* section. The primary concern of the *Commentary* section is to explore the theological issues presented by the Scripture passage. *Connections* presents potential applications of the insights provided in the *Commentary* section. The *Connections* portion of each chapter considers what issues are relevant for teaching and suggests useful methods and resources. *Connections* also identifies themes suitable for sermon planning and suggests helpful approaches for preaching on the Scripture text.

### **Sidebars**

The *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* provides a unique hyper-link format that quickly guides the reader to additional insights. Since other more technical or supplementary information is vital for understanding a text and its implications, the volumes feature distinctive Sidebars, or special-interest boxes, that provide a wealth of information on such matters as:

- Historical information (such as chronological charts, lists of kings or rulers, maps, descriptions of monetary systems, descriptions of special groups, descriptions of archaeological sites or geographical settings).
- Graphic outlines of literary structure (including such items as poetry, chiasm, repetition, epistolary form).
- Definition or brief discussions of technical or theological terms and issues.
- Insightful quotations that are not integrated into the running text but are relevant to the passage under discussion.
- Notes on the history of interpretation (Augustine on the Good Samaritan, Luther on James, Stendahl on Romans, etc.).
- Line drawings, photographs, and other illustrations relevant for understanding the historical context or interpretive significance of the text.
- Presentation and discussion of works of fine art that have interpreted a Scripture passage.

Each Sidebar is printed in color and is referenced at the appropriate place in the *Commentary* or *Connections* section with a color-coded title that directs the reader to the relevant Sidebar. In addition, helpful icons appear in the Sidebars, which provide the reader with visual cues to the type of material that is explained in each Sidebar. Throughout the commentary, these four distinct hyperlinks provide useful links in an easily recognizable design.

## ΑΩ

### **Alpha & Omega Language**

This icon identifies the information as a language-based tool that offers further exploration of the Scripture selection. This could include syntactical information, word studies, popular or additional uses of the word(s) in question, additional contexts in which the term appears, and the history of the term's translation. All non-English terms are transliterated into the appropriate English characters.



### **Culture/Context**

This icon introduces further comment on contextual or cultural details that shed light on the Scripture selection. Describing the place and time to which a Scripture passage refers is often vital to the task of biblical interpretation. Sidebar items introduced with this icon could include geographical, historical, political, social, topographical, or economic information. Here, the reader may find an excerpt of an ancient text or inscription that sheds light on the text. Or one may find a description of some element of ancient religion such as Baalism in Canaan or the Hero cult in the Mystery Religions of the Greco-Roman world.



### **Interpretation**

Sidebars that appear under this icon serve a general interpretive function in terms of both historical and contemporary renderings. Under this heading, the reader might find a selection from classic or contemporary literature that illuminates the Scripture text or a significant quotation from a famous sermon that addresses the passage. Insights are drawn from various sources, including literature, worship, theater, church history, and sociology.



### **Additional Resources Study**

Here, the reader finds a convenient list of useful resources for further investigation of the selected Scripture text, including books, journals, websites, special collections, organizations, and societies. Specialized discussions of works not often associated with biblical studies may also appear here.

### **Additional Features**

Each volume also includes a basic Bibliography on the biblical book under study. Other bibliographies on selected issues are often included that point the reader to other helpful resources.

Notes at the end of each chapter provide full documentation of sources used and contain additional discussions of related matters.

Abbreviations used in each volume are explained in a list of abbreviations found after the Table of Contents.

Readers of the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* can regularly visit the Internet support site for news, information, updates, and enhancements to the series at <[www.helwys.com/commentary](http://www.helwys.com/commentary)>.

Several thorough indexes enable the reader to locate information quickly. These indexes include:

- An *Index of Sidebars* groups content from the special-interest boxes by category (maps, fine art, photographs, drawings, etc.).
- An *Index of Scriptures* lists citations to particular biblical texts.
- An *Index of Topics* lists alphabetically the major subjects, names, topics, and locations referenced or discussed in the volume.
- An *Index of Modern Authors* organizes contemporary authors whose works are cited in the volume.

# INTRODUCTION

No other writing in the New Testament evokes the wide range of reactions and emotions that the last book, the book of Revelation, does. This work (also called the Apocalypse) has offered comfort to the grieving, encouragement to the oppressed, hope to the down-trodden, and warning to the complacent. It has inspired painters (Albrecht Dürer, Jan van Eyck, and Michelangelo), musicians (George Handel, Olivier Messiaen, Pëtr Tchaikovsky), and writers (John Milton, William Blake, and Ernesto Cardenal). It has provided the texts for several of the great hymns of the church, including “Holy, Holy, Holy,” “For All the Saints,” and “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending.”

On the other hand, teachers and preachers, as well as ordinary readers, often avoid dealing with this work. Some find Revelation too confusing and difficult to understand. It seems to be poorly arranged; it uses strange symbols and images; and in spite of its name, it often conceals more than it reveals. Many readers would agree with the assessment of Jerome in the fourth century when he said, “Revelation has as many mysteries as it does words.”<sup>1</sup> [\[Acceptance of Revelation\]](#)

Some readers are repulsed by what they find in the book of Revelation, citing the work’s violent imagery, bloodshed, militaristic symbols, and cries for vengeance. This is, after all, a work that has given us the graphic imagery of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse and the martyrs under the altar who cry out to God in vengeance, “How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” (6:10). This is the book that describes the aftermath of God’s wrathful judgment with the gory description that “blood flowed as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles” (14:20) and depicts Rome as a great prostitute, the

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## Acceptance of Revelation



The book of Revelation has a checkered history in the church. Even though it was read and accepted as authoritative in some areas as early as the 2d century, the book just as quickly had its opponents. Marcion, the 2d-century church leader who was eventually declared heretical, rejected Revelation (as well as the entire Hebrew Bible and much of the New Testament). In the 4th century, Eusebius listed it as one of the “disputed” books. Churches in the eastern part of the empire frequently rejected the

authority of Revelation, while churches in the West generally accepted it. The official decrees of the church at the end of the 4th century and later did include Revelation as an authentic part of Scripture. Later, during the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther found the work objectionable, as did many other leaders of the Reformation. John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament, except the book of Revelation. For many modern Christians, the book is canonical in theory only. They seldom, if ever, read and study it.

mother of whores, “drunk with the blood of the saints” (17:6). The work seems to revel in the pain and suffering inflicted on others, inviting the reader to celebrate at the downfall of mighty Rome. It is no wonder that some readers have characterized Revelation as sub-Christian and even antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.

Still other Christians shy away from the book of Revelation because of its popular use as a source for futuristic scenarios. Sometimes sincere but misguided readers have distorted John’s message by turning it into a sensationalist game of “Match the Prediction,” in which events happening today are understood as literal fulfillment of events supposedly foretold in detail by the author of Revelation. Self-proclaimed “prophecy” experts warn of the signs of Armageddon, the mark of the beast, the antichrist, and the great tribulation. Some are even so brash as to predict the dates when certain “prophecies” will be fulfilled, usually couched in language vague enough to allow “reinterpretations” when events do not happen as predicted. Rather than be falsely identified with such embarrassing misreadings and abuses of the biblical texts, some people in the church avoid dealing with the book of Revelation at all. Functionally, it becomes a nonexistent part of their canon.

Why should the church be concerned about the book of Revelation, a work D. H. Lawrence described as “the most detestable of all these books of the Bible”?<sup>2</sup> Would we not be better off distancing ourselves from this book that has been the fertile field for fundamentalist soothsayers, that helped fuel the fires at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, and that to some people seems more of an embarrassment than a work to be taken seriously? One of the most obvious reasons that the church, and especially its leaders, needs to be reading the book of Revelation is that this work is a part of the church’s Bible. If we take seriously the claim that all the works in the canon function as bearers of the word of God, then we have a responsibility to read and understand this work, as well as to preach and teach from it.

Even more than simply for this formalistic reason, the church needs to embrace the Apocalypse because it is a powerful presentation of the message of our faith. Here is a work that challenges us to be faithful servants of God, regardless of the difficulties we may face. Here is a work that overwhelms us with its portrayal of a God “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty,” while at the same time comforting us with a picture of a God who cares for God’s people and who “will wipe every tear from their eyes.” Here is a work that holds before us a vision of the world as God intended it to be, and ultimately will be—and that challenges us to be

involved in bringing that world into reality now. [Preaching from Revelation]

Because the book of Revelation is different from other works in the New Testament, it may require more background studies and more serious grappling with the text itself than do other New Testament writings. Nevertheless, the reader who will spend the time and energy necessary to enter the world of the Apocalypse and to mine its treasures will be amply rewarded. Like no other work in the canon, the book of Revelation is filled with symbols and images that will titillate the imagination and cause the spirit to soar. It is a creative masterpiece that can invigorate, challenge, and inspire us. “Blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (1:3).

### Preaching from Revelation



“There is little [in Revelation] for the preacher who is in a hurry to get ‘something for Sunday.’ . . . But for the preacher who will linger in the text until the eyes adjust to the brilliant obscurity, the ears discern the words in trumpet blasts, and the heart is no longer a stranger amid terrible splendor, there is much to be seen and heard and to be proclaimed from the pulpit.”

Fred B. Craddock, “Preaching the Book of Revelation,” *Interpretation* 40/3 (July 1986): 271.

### Literary Genre

What kind of writing is the book of Revelation? That is a question that many readers would like answered. This work contains strange visions, gruesome monsters, perplexing numbers, and confusing repetitions. Readers familiar with the Gospels or the Letters in the New Testament soon discover that one cannot read the Apocalypse in the same way that one reads the other material in the New Testament. To a large degree, the seeming strangeness of the book of Revelation is due to its literary genre. According to most scholars, this work belongs to the category of writings known as apocalypses. Whereas apocalyptic ideas and images influenced other books in the New Testament, no New Testament writing other than Revelation belongs to the literary genre of an apocalypse. (The only example in the Hebrew Bible of an apocalypse is the book of Daniel.) Thus when readers encounter the book of Revelation, they are dealing with a type of writing that is generally unfamiliar to them.

The word “apocalypse” comes from the opening word in the Greek text of Revelation, *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation.” Apocalyptic literature, then, is revelatory literature; that is, it is literature that claims to reveal cosmic secrets to a human recipient. These secrets usually involve information about otherworldly regions (heaven, hell, the places of the dead, the outer regions of the earth) and/or events of the final days (the destruction of the

world, the Last Judgment, rewards for the righteous, and punishments for the wicked). Typically, apocalypses contain an otherworldly figure (such as an angel) who serves as a mediator of the revelation given to the earthly recipient. This otherworldly

### Definition of an Apocalypse

**AΩ** One of the most widely accepted definitions of an apocalypse is that proposed by John J.

Collins and other members of the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature's Genres Project. Their definition of an apocalypse states:

"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 spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.

John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

mediator sometimes delivers the revelation orally, sometimes discloses it through dreams or visions, sometimes interprets the dreams or visions for the recipient, and sometimes serves as a guide to lead the recipient on a journey to otherworldly regions. In Revelation, the Son of Man figure (the exalted Christ), angels, and an elder function as otherworldly mediators. [Definition of an Apocalypse]

In most apocalypses, the human recipient of the revelation is supposedly some important figure from the past (Abraham, Enoch, Daniel, Ezra, Adam, Elijah). In actuality, however, the author came later in history and wrote under an assumed name. The purpose of this literary technique of pseudo-

nymity was to lend the writing more credibility. By assuming the name of some venerable figure from antiquity, the writer gave the appearance that the work came from some respected, authoritative individual. As we shall see, the book of Revelation does not make use of pseudonymity.

Although the social and historical settings of many apocalypses are not known, in many cases apocalypses seem to have been written in response to some crisis, either real or imagined. The crisis may have been social, political, theological, or existential. For this reason, apocalyptic literature has often been described as crisis literature. The purpose of apocalypses was to give comfort and hope to people who were overwhelmed, confused, frightened, and beleaguered. The intended readers often suffered from "cognitive dissonance," meaning their preconceived notions about the world and reality did not match the actual situation as they experienced it. For example, the intended readers of Daniel were Jews living under the persecution of the Syrian ruler, Antiochus IV. Their theological understanding of the world was that God was dominant, not Antiochus. Their personal experience, however, was just the opposite—Antiochus appeared to be the supreme power as he persecuted and killed those who were faithful to God. The purpose of apocalyptic literature was to provide an alternative way of

understanding the world, a different worldview. Apocalyptic writings assured their readers that indeed God was ultimately in control of history and the universe, in spite of current appearances. Eventually God would intervene to defeat the wicked and reward the righteous. [Sources for Understanding Apocalyptic Literature]

Apocalyptic writings not only offered hope and comfort, but they also served as protest literature. They were a protest against the prevailing worldview of the dominant culture. Apocalyptic writers encouraged their readers not to accept the beliefs and lifestyles of the world around them, but to remain true to their own convictions. They encouraged their readers not to become subservient to human rulers or institutions, but to remain faithful to God. Because of their beliefs that history was in God's hands and that human action could do little to change that, apocalyptic writers did not call for social or political action. Yet their works were still forms of protest. They refused to accept the present social and historical reality. The transcendent world that had been revealed to them presented clear evidence that in God's ultimate design, evil, pain, suffering, violence, and injustice do not belong. Through their visionary writings, the apocalyptic authors encouraged their readers to resist any worldview that was in conflict with God's ultimate goal for the world.

Apocalyptic thought apparently arose within Judaism following the sixth-century Babylonian exile of the Jewish people. Although the book of Daniel is the only complete example of an apocalypse in the Hebrew Bible, other



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passages contain ideas that are either apocalyptic or similar to apocalyptic thought. Examples would include Zechariah 9–14, Ezekiel 38–39, and Isaiah 24–27. Apocalyptic literature flourished within Judaism between the third century BC and the second century AD. At least fourteen nonbiblical Jewish apocalypses were produced during this time. After the two disastrous revolts of the Jews in Palestine against the Romans (AD 66–74 and AD 132–135), both of which were at least partially fueled by apocalyptic expectations, apocalyptic literature fell into disfavor within Judaism.

Apocalyptic thought had a tremendous influence on the New Testament and Christianity. The ideas of a final judgment, resurrection, future rewards and punishments, destruction of the forces of evil, conflict between good and evil forces, angels, and demons are all ideas drawn from apocalyptic thought. In addition to the book of Revelation, Christian writers produced more than twenty apocalypses in the early centuries of the Christian church.

[Apocalyptic Writings]

### Apocalyptic Writings



Even though the Bible contains only two complete apocalypses (Daniel and Revelation), many Jewish and Christian works of this genre were produced. The dates given for these works are, in many cases, only approximate.

#### Jewish Apocalypses

1. The “Book of the Watchers” (1 En. 1–36)—3rd century BC
2. The “Book of the Heavenly Luminaries” (1 En. 73–82)—3rd century BC
3. The “Animal Apocalypse” (1 En. 85–90)—2d century BC
4. The “Apocalypse of Weeks” (1 En. 93:1–10; 91:11–17)—2d century BC
5. *Jubilees* 23—2d century BC
6. The *Testament of Levi* 2–5—2d century BC
7. The *Testament of Abraham*—1st century BC–2d century AD
8. The *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*—1st century BC–1st century AD
9. The “Similitudes of Enoch” (1 En. 37–71)—1st century AD
10. *2 Enoch*—1st century AD
11. *4 Ezra*—1st century AD
12. *2 Baruch*—1st century AD
13. The *Apocalypse of Abraham*—1st–2d century AD
14. *3 Baruch*—1st–2d century AD

**Christian Apocalypses** (Gnostic Christian works are not included in this list.)

1. The *Shepherd of Hermas*—1st or 2d century

2. The *Book of Elchasai*—2d century
3. The *Ascension of Isaiah* 6–11—1st or 2d century
4. The *Apocalypse of Peter*—2d century
5. 5 Ezra 2:42–48
6. *Jacob’s Ladder*—2d century?
7. The *Testament of the Lord* 1:1–14—3rd century?
8. The *Questions of Bartholomew*—3rd century?
9. The *Apocalypse of Sedrach*—2d–4th century?
10. The *Apocalypse of Paul*—4th century
11. The *Testament of Isaac* 2–3a—1st–5th century?
12. The *Testament of Isaac* 5–6—1st–5th century?
13. The *Testament of Jacob* 1–3a—2d–5th century?
14. The *Testament of Jacob* 2–5—2d–5th century?
15. The *Story of Zosimus*—3rd–5th century
16. The *Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian*—2d–9th century?
17. The *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle* 8b–14a—3rd–6th century?
18. The *Book of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ by Bartholomew the Apostle* 17b–19b—3rd–6th century?
19. The *Apocalypse of the Virgin Mary*—4th–9th century?
20. The *Apocalypse of Esdras*—5th–9th century?
21. The *Apocalypse of the Holy Mother of God Concerning the Punishments*—4th–11th century?
22. The *Apocalypse of James, the Brother of the Lord*—pre-11th century
23. The *Mysteries of St. John the Apostle and Holy Virgin*—pre-11th century

Whereas the dominant literary genre of Revelation is that of an apocalypse, the work exhibits characteristics of other literary genres as well. Elements of typical Hellenistic-Roman letters appear, such as the greeting (1:4-5a), blessing or thanksgiving (1:5b-6), body (1:7–22:20), and closing (22:21). Chapters 2 and 3 contain messages to seven churches that are cast in the form of imperial decrees. In addition, Revelation is similar to prophetic literature. The author himself refers to the work as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19) and refers to the prophets as his fellow servants (22:9). Some scholars have even proposed that Revelation was written in the form of an ancient drama and have arranged the text accordingly.<sup>3</sup> Although their arguments for reading the Apocalypse as an actual drama are not persuasive, they do point to the highly dramatic and creative aspects of this work. Furthermore, envisioning the work as a staged production helps the reader enter the visual and imaginative world of the Apocalypse.



#### Island of Patmos

A view across the island of Patmos.

(Credit: Mitchell Reddish)

### Provenance and Social Setting

John, the author of Revelation, claimed that he was on the island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea off the coast of western Asia Minor, when he received the revelation that he recorded in the Apocalypse (1:9). [Island of Patmos] The seven churches that were the recipients of the messages in chapters 2 and 3 were all located in cities of western Asia Minor. For these reasons, the place for the writing of Revelation was almost certainly in Asia Minor. This area, which today is part of Turkey, was an important center of culture, commerce, and agriculture in the ancient world. Asia Minor contained several major cities, including Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Laodicea, Aphrodisias, Perga, Tarsus, and Sardis. In fact, during the first century AD, Ephesus was likely the fourth largest city in the Roman world. The city of Pergamum boasted one of the largest libraries in the ancient world, reportedly containing more than 200,000 volumes. The setting out of which Revelation came, then, was no cultural backwater, but was at the crossroads of the ancient world.

By the end of the first century (apparently the time when Revelation was written), Christianity was well established in western Asia Minor. The book of Acts mentions several cities in Asia Minor in conjunction with the travels of Paul. (Paul's hometown of Tarsus, according to Acts, was also in Asia Minor.) Included among these would be Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Antioch (in Galatia), Ephesus, and Miletus. One of Paul's Letters was sent to the churches of Galatia, a region in Asia Minor. The New Testament contains a letter to the church at Colossae, also. This city in Asia Minor was likely the home of Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus (see Col 4:9 and Phlm 10). The Letter to the Colossians mentions Christians in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well (4:13, 15-16). The Letter of 1 Peter is addressed to Christians throughout Asia Minor (1:1); apparently 2 Peter was intended for the same people (3:1). The three Letters of John, and possibly the Gospel of John, likely originated in Asia Minor. Two of the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy) suggest a connection with Asia Minor (1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 4:13). The book of Revelation, then, is addressed to Christians in an area that was rich with Christian tradition. [Map: [First-Century Christian Churches](#)]

The evidence that we have about the situation of the Christian communities in Asia Minor during this period suggests that Christians, for the most part, were assimilated into the larger society with few problems. There seem to have been no systematic



persecutions of Christians nor widespread ostracism of them. Christians were a minority in Asia Minor, but not an oppressed and persecuted minority. Occasionally some conflicts with local magistrates or Roman authorities would occur, and some Christians lost their lives. Such situations seem to have been the exception rather than the norm. After examining the ancient sources, Leonard Thompson has concluded, “Sources other than the Book of Revelation portray Christians, for the most part, as sharing peacefully in urban Asian life alongside their non-Christian neighbors.”<sup>4</sup> On the basis of New Testament texts and evidence in non-Christian writers, Thompson claimed that Christians in Asia Minor represented almost all social classes.

He cited, for example, the words of Pliny the Younger (c. AD 112) in one of his letters to the emperor Trajan that Christians were “of every age and class, both men and women” (*Ep. Tra.* 10.96.9).<sup>5</sup> Some were wealthy enough to own slaves, host house churches, and travel extensively. The book of Revelation portrays some of the members of the church at Laodicea as saying, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3:17). On the other hand, some of the early Christians were slaves, and some were poor (Rev 2:9). The Christians in Asia Minor did not form separate communities or conventicles. They participated in the Hellenistic and Roman social world of which they were a part.

In spite of this picture of general assimilation to their culture, the early Christians experienced certain tensions between their beliefs and practices and those of the larger society. Their rigid monotheism meant that they could not participate in the worship of any of the state or local deities that permeated the world of their day. Even their belonging to civic associations and trade guilds was problematic because these were usually under the patronage of a particular god or goddess. Public banquets, festivals, and celebrations also had at least a veneer of religious tradition. Likewise, the veneration and homage that the people of the empire were expected to render to the emperor, if such were couched in divine terms, were serious issues for Christians. [\[Importance of Asia Minor in Church History\]](#)

Literary evidence suggests that some residents of the Roman Empire viewed their Christian neighbors with suspicion and distrust because they saw the Christians as being antisocial and even

#### Importance of Asia Minor in Church History



The area of Asia Minor was one of the most important areas for the development of the Christian church. In addition to its importance because of its connection to New Testament figures and writings, many important early church leaders were from Asia Minor, including Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna), Irenaeus (raised in Smyrna), Melito (bishop of Sardis), Polycrates (bishop of Ephesus), Marcion (born in Sinope), and Papias (bishop of Hierapolis). Ignatius traveled through the region on his way to his death in Rome, writing letters along the way to Polycarp and the churches in five cities in Asia Minor. Justin Martyr lived for a while in Ephesus before he went to Rome. The important councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedon (451) were in Asia Minor.

dangerous. Non-Christians (except Jews, of course) could not understand the exclusive, monotheistic belief of the Christians. Worship of the Christian God was acceptable, but why not worship the other gods as well? Failure to pay proper respect to all the gods and goddesses rendered the individual and the state vulnerable to divine displeasure and punishment. For this reason, the Christians were accused of atheism. In addition, their neighbors sometimes suspected the Christians of illegal activities. Misunderstandings of the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper led to accusations of cannibalism, whereas misunderstandings of their love-feasts (or *agapē* meals) and their custom of calling each other "brother" and "sister" caused some of their neighbors to accuse the Christians of incest and immorality. Such suspicions and disdain for Christians are reflected in the oft-quoted remarks of the Roman writer Tacitus, who said they were "loathed for their vices" and were guilty of "hatred of the human race" (*Annals* 15.44 [Jackson, LCL]). Similarly, Suetonius called Christianity a "mischievous superstition" (*Nero* 16.2 [Rolfe, LCL]).

These suspicions of Christians, however, did not lead to any prolonged, governmental persecution of the first-century church (see discussion below on emperor worship and persecution). Christians may have been in danger from the state if their neighbors denounced them for illegal activities. Even this danger, however, we should not exaggerate. Evidence of actual instances of persecution of Christians in the first century is scarce.

One of the major concerns for Christians in Asia Minor, as throughout the empire, was assimilation to the culture around them. How far could the church go in adapting and accepting the prevailing culture without losing its own distinctiveness and identity? New Testament writers answered that question in different ways. Paul was rather receptive to accepting cultural traditions, as long as they were not obvious violations of Christian principles (cf. 1 Cor 8; Phil 4:8). The author of 1 Peter also appeared to call for adaptation of cultural norms ("accept the authority of every human institution," 2:13-17; follow the household codes, 2:18-3:7). The author of Revelation, on the other hand, had a very harsh view of his cultural world. He saw the Roman Empire and the society of Asia Minor as basically antithetical to the Christian faith. He tended to view the world in rather rigid categories. The Roman Empire was the evil empire. It was the instrument of Satan and was to be resisted. John saw little room for compromise. In his view, cultural accommodation by Christians endangered their standing as a part of the people of God. In the messages to the seven

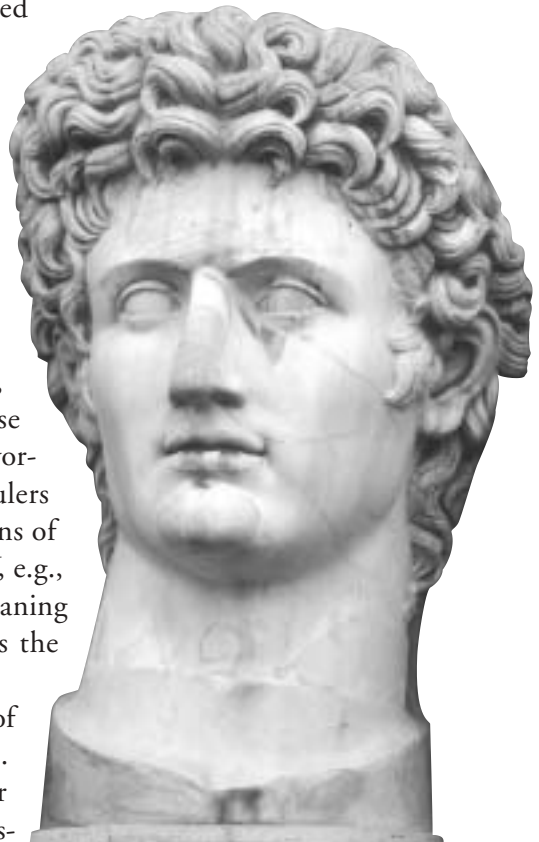
churches in chapters 2 and 3, the issue of cultural accommodation is paramount. John wrote to those individual churches to warn them of the dangers of their involvement with this “demonic” culture. His message throughout the book in regard to Christians and society is

“Come out of her, my people,  
so that you do not take part in her sins,  
and so that you do not share in her plagues.” (18:4)

### Emperor Worship and Persecution

Persecution and emperor worship are often cited as the primary problems addressed in Revelation. More precisely, these issues are specific instances of the larger problem of cultural accommodation. The cult of the emperor developed slowly in the Roman Empire. Emperor worship involved the offering of divine honors, including sacrifices, to the emperors, either living or dead. The early emperors were rather cautious in allowing much direct worship or divine honors, especially in Rome, during their lifetimes because Roman thought normally did not blur the distinction between humans and gods. The emperors were revered as superior to ordinary humans, but not divine. In the Hellenistic east, these same emperors were more accepting of such worship and adulation because in the East the rulers were often viewed as the earthly manifestations of the gods. (The Hellenistic ruler Antiochus IV, e.g., proclaimed himself Antiochus Epiphanes, meaning the “manifest one.” He asserted that he was the earthly manifestation of the god Zeus.)

Even in Rome, however, the understanding of the status of the emperor began to change. Although during his lifetime the emperor Augustus had tried to retain the old Roman distinction between human and divine, after his death he was officially declared divine by the Roman Senate, and a temple with its attendant priests was built in Rome. [Augustus] Tiberius, his successor, attempted to follow the lead of Augustus, resisting divine honors



#### Augustus

This marble bust of Caesar Augustus represents the portrait type used during the early Imperial period. The curly hair reflects more the style of Roman portraiture than a personal attribute of the emperor.

*Augustus.* 1st C. Marble. (Credit: Mitchell Reddish)

for himself. In contrast, the next emperor, Caligula, demanded that his statue be set up in temples of other gods throughout the empire. He claimed that he was the incarnation of the god Jupiter.

The situation with the emperors during the rest of the first century varied. Claudius, successor to his nephew Caligula, followed the practice of Augustus and Tiberius of discouraging divine accolades. Nero, his step-son, who became emperor after Claudius was poisoned by his own wife (the mother of Nero), was more willing to accept and believe the divine praises and honors bestowed on him by the public. Vespasian, on the other hand, joked about the belief in the divine status of the emperors. Poking fun at the practice of declaring the emperors divine after their death, Vespasian reportedly remarked on his deathbed, “Alas, I think I am becoming a god” (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 23.4 [author’s translation]). Titus likewise downplayed divine claims.

The situation with the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) is more difficult to assess. Certain later Roman writers, specifically Suetonius and Dio Cassius, presented Domitian as a ruler who, more than any before him, furthered the cult of emperor worship. For example, Dio Cassius described Domitian by saying, “He even insisted upon being regarded as a god and took vast pride in being called ‘master’ and ‘god’ ” (*Hist. rom.* 67.4.7 [Cary, LCL]). The traditional view of Domitian’s role in the propagation of the imperial cult is summed up by Kenneth Scott, who wrote,

Domitian himself became the object of worship. Such reverence of the reigning monarch was not new, for it was already manifest under Julius Caesar and Augustus. What Domitian did was to permit and encourage to an excessive degree homage which had been shown—generally with more restraint—to his predecessors. In other words, his reign marks a departure from the moderation of Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, and a return to the ways of Caligula and to some extent of Nero.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, scholars have begun to reassess these ancient descriptions of Domitian, pointing out that the ancient writers who described Domitian in these terms appear to have been trying to ingratiate themselves with his successors Trajan and Hadrian by portraying Domitian in extremely negative terms. Even though ancient writers claimed that Domitian demanded to be called “our lord and god,” it is significant that “the latter title has not been found on any coin, inscription, or manuscript.”<sup>7</sup>

A judicious reading of the evidence, then, suggests that at the end of the first century, emperor worship was widely established in the

Roman Empire, and particularly strong in Asia Minor. Yet this does not mean that there was any empire-wide enforcement of participation in the imperial cult. Where pressure was exerted on individuals to participate, such coercion was likely a local matter. Overzealous local officials, perhaps in an attempt to impress the emperor, may have emphasized emperor worship. There would certainly have been social pressure to participate, and in cases in which Christians were brought before the local authorities on other charges, they may have been required to offer a sacrifice to the emperor or to the Roman gods.

A letter from a provincial governor in Asia Minor early in the second century provides evidence for the precarious situation of Christians. Around AD 112, Pliny was sent by Trajan to Bithynia-Pontus in northwestern Asia Minor as governor, with the assigned task of setting in order the affairs of the province. In one of his letters to the emperor, Pliny inquired about the proper procedures to follow in the prosecution of Christians who were brought before him. He stated that his policy had been to give the accused a chance to renounce their faith and to make an offering to the emperor. Anyone who refused was to be executed. Trajan responded to Pliny that his practice seemed fair, requiring that he not seek out Christians, but when any were brought to his attention to deal with them in the prescribed manner.

[Roman Emperors of the First Century]

In the book of Revelation, the problem of emperor worship is most evident in chapter 13, in which the Roman Empire is pictured as a beast that demands to be worshiped and that exterminates those who refuse. Persecution of Christians for failure to honor the emperor may not have been widespread in John's day. Yet John was aware of some instances of persecution. He himself had been exiled to Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Antipas had been martyred in Pergamum (2:13). John warned the church of impending imprisonment and testing for some of its members (2:10), and saw martyrs under the heavenly altar crying out for vindication (6:9-11). Furthermore, Rome is described as the great whore, "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (17:6). These situations were likely sporadic, local instances of persecution and martyrdom. But for John, these few instances were enough to cause him to sound the alarm to the churches of Asia Minor. John expected the slow trickle of martyrs' blood to become soon a flowing river.



#### Roman Emperors of the First Century

Augustus (27 BC–AD 14)  
 Tiberius (14–37)  
 Caligula (37–41)  
 Claudius (41–54)  
 Nero (54–68)  
 Galba (June 68–January 69)  
 Otho (69)  
 Vitellius (69)  
 Vespasian (69–79)  
 Titus (79–81)  
 Domitian (81–96)  
 Nerva (96–98)  
 Trajan (98–117)

In actuality, how prevalent was governmental persecution of the church during the first century? Contrary to popular belief, no empire-wide persecution against Christians occurred in the first century. The first instance of any major persecution took place during the reign of Nero (54–68). When a fire broke out in Rome, popular opinion blamed Nero for the fire because it occurred in an area of the city that Nero had targeted for demolition and rebuilding. In order to shift blame away from himself, Nero blamed the Christians for the fire. As punishment, he had numerous Christians arrested and executed in rather gruesome ways. The details given by Tacitus are as follows:

First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man. (*Annals* 15.44 [Jackson, LCL])

As horrendous as this experience was for the church, it was a very limited persecution, both in its duration and its scope. It apparently did not last long, and it affected only Christians in Rome. Nero did not institute an empire-wide persecution of the Christian church. According to ancient Christian tradition, Peter and Paul both were martyred during the reign of Nero.

Popular thought made Emperor Domitian the next persecutor of the church. The fourth-century church historian Eusebius described Domitian as “the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us” (*Hist. eccl.* 3.17 [Lake, LCL]). The idea that Domitian was one of the first persecutors of Christianity is widespread. Evidence for such treatment by Domitian, however, is surprisingly scant. At most, one can point to isolated situations in which a few people were persecuted. The evidence suggests, however, that any Christians who were persecuted suffered this treatment because they in some way came into conflict with Domitian or his policies, not simply because they were Christians. The portrayal of

Domitian as a cruel despot by Roman and early Christian writers is likely due more to bias and imagination than to historical fact.

[Domitian]

Both the New Testament and other writings (Christian and non-Christian) mention persecution of Christians during the first and early second centuries. None of these references, however, provides evidence of any systematic, prolonged attack against the church. Even the evidence from the letters of Pliny and Trajan indicates that only when Christians were brought to the attention of the authorities were they to be punished. The early persecutions, then, were apparently isolated and few in number.

As noted above, the book of Revelation indicates that John expected a fresh onslaught of persecution to break out soon against the church that would be more severe than any the church had yet encountered. Whether a major persecution was actually imminent is beside the point. John perceived persecution to be a threat to the church and wrote his Apocalypse from that perception. Reality is a matter of perspective, and from the perspective of John and his audience, persecution was a present experience and a future threat. Although all Christians in Asia Minor likely did not view the social and historical situation as life-threatening, John certainly did. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has made the valid point that how we answer the question of whether or not the threat of persecution was real during John's time depends



#### Domitian

The right profile portrait both reveres and identifies the figure as Domitian, who reigned from AD 81–96. The inscription, IMP:CAES.DOMIT.AVG.GERM.PM.TR.POTV, and appearance of the laureate are in keeping with the customary coin of the first century.

*Domitian. Coin. AD 85, Rome (silver 5-denarius piece). British Museum. BMCRE 85. London, England. (Credit: ©The British Museum)*

on whose perspective we adopt. One could argue from the perspective of well-to-do white Americans that no harassment, denigration, discrimination, or oppression of blacks existed at the time of Martin Luther King, Jr., even though King was assassinated. The perspective and experience of blacks would be quite different! Similarly, the author of Rev. had adopted the “perspective from below” and expressed the experiences of those who were powerless, poor, and in constant fear of denunciation.<sup>8</sup>

**Date**

The most widely accepted date for the writing of Revelation is during the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). The statement of Irenaeus (c. AD 140–c. 202) that the vision of Revelation was seen at the end of the reign of Domitian is the earliest external evidence attesting the date of Revelation (*Haer.* 5.30.3). Several writers in the following centuries also supported a Domitianic dating for the book. Other early writers mentioned the reigns of Claudius, Nero, and Trajan as the setting for Revelation. Internal evidence lends additional support to the claim of Irenaeus. In Revelation, “Babylon” is used as a symbolic name for Rome (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21), a practice that would have been appropriate only after AD 70. As Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem in the sixth century BC and had persecuted the people of God, so Rome had also destroyed Jerusalem (AD 70) and was now persecuting God’s people. A further indication of dating appears in the use of the Nero *redivivus* myth in chapters 13 and 17. This belief in the return of Nero was popular during the last half of the first century, following the death of Nero in AD 66. Since the internal evidence coheres with Irenaeus’s dating of the book during the time of Domitian, most scholars place its composition around AD 95.

Some modern scholars still argue for dates other than during the reign of Domitian for the writing of the book. The times of Nero, Galba, Vespasian, and Trajan all have their proponents. Of these possibilities, the reign of Nero has the most supporters. In many cases the argument for dating the work is based on the enigmatic passage in 17:7–11, which describes the beast with seven heads. The seven heads symbolize Roman emperors; on this much there is agreement. A consensus disintegrates, however, concerning who the seven emperors were that are depicted. Most arguments are circular. Each interpreter sets out to prove that certain emperors were intended and, by manipulating the list of emperors, ends up with the anticipated individuals. Whereas John’s early audience may have understood his symbolism, it has become too ambiguous for the modern reader. J. P. M. Sweet has suggested that even John’s intended readers likely could not have identified the seven emperors. He said they “were as unlikely to have known the succession of emperors as readers now are unlikely to know that of the Presidents of the United States.”<sup>9</sup> Some commentators have argued that the number seven, in this instance as frequently elsewhere in the book, is to be understood symbolically and not literally. What becomes clear when one reads all the scholarly arguments for the

identification of the seven “heads” is that any attempt to date the book on this basis is unreliable.

The same holds true for arguments for dating the writing based on the persecution setting presupposed in the work. Some scholars have argued that the persecution mentioned in the book refers to the Neronian attack on the church in Rome. Others have seen the supposed persecution by Domitian as the backdrop for John’s writing. As noted above, however, not only is evidence for a Domitianic persecution of the church virtually nonexistent, but the reality of any major persecution affecting the church during John’s day is questionable. When all the evidence is weighed, a date near AD 95 appears most likely.

### Authorship

In contrast to most apocalypses, the author of Revelation did not claim to be some venerable figure from the past. Four times in the book he identified himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). There is no valid reason to doubt that John was the actual name of the author. The question is, which John? As early as the second century, Christian writers identified the author as John, the son of Zebedee, one of the disciples of Jesus. Justin Martyr was the earliest witness to this tradition. Writing c. AD 155, he said,

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 believe 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. (*Dial.* 81.4)

Various writers from the second century and later repeated this identification.

According to Eusebius, Dionysius of Alexandria challenged this view of authorship during the third century, arguing on the basis of language and stylistic differences that the writer of Revelation could not have been the same person as the one who wrote the Gospel of John and the Letters of John (whom he assumed was John the disciple). After suggesting and then rejecting the idea that the author might have been John Mark, the one-time traveling companion of Paul (see Acts 13:5, 13; 15:37-38), Dionysius concluded that the author of the Apocalypse was another, now unknown, John (*Hist. eccl.* 7.25 [Oulton, LCL]).

In the fourth century, Eusebius also disagreed with the attribution of authorship to the disciple John. Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.2-4 [Lake, LCL]) claimed that the author was a different John, called John the elder, basing his identification on a statement attributed to the early second-century church leader Papias of Hierapolis. In this statement, Papias appears to have differentiated between the Apostle John and “John the elder.” Many modern scholars have argued, however, that Eusebius misunderstood the statement of Papias and that Papias was not distinguishing two different people named John. Rather, he was describing the disciple John as an elder as well. Even if we were to accept Eusebius’s identification of the author as John the elder, we would be no better off, for absolutely nothing is known about this “elder” John. (Any connection with “the elder” mentioned in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 is highly speculative.) [Prochorus]

As this brief survey has indicated, the only viable, known candidate as author is the disciple John. This identification is almost certainly ruled out, however, by clues from the writing itself. In 21:14, the author referred to the twelve apostles whose names were written on the foundations of the new Jerusalem. The writer was looking back on a venerated group of heroes of the faith. This description would have been an odd way for the disciple John (if he were the author) to refer to himself. Furthermore, the author never claimed apostolic authority for his writing. He described his writing as a prophecy and himself simply as “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (1:9).

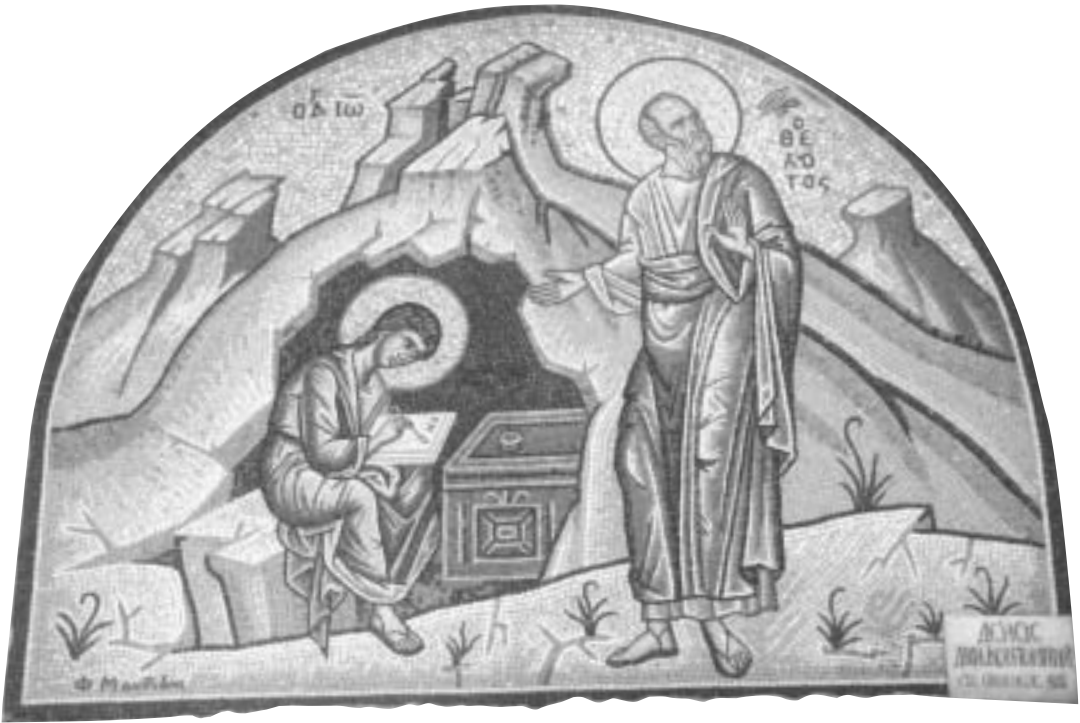
The author, then, is best understood as an unknown John living in Asia Minor in the closing years of the first century.<sup>10</sup> The authority with which he wrote indicates that he was obviously well known to the Christians in Asia Minor and knew the churches and their backgrounds intimately. Since he referred to his message as a prophecy (1:3), he viewed himself as a Christian prophet and had possibly functioned in this role among the Christians in Asia

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### Prochorus



According to a legendary 5th-century writing known as the *Acts of John by Prochorus*, John was accompanied to Asia Minor by Prochorus, one of the seven people chosen by the Jerusalem church to assist in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:5). In addition to describing other events in the life and work of John, this work narrates John’s exile to Patmos. Prochorus accompanied him there and served as his scribe, recording the visions dictated to him by John that became the book of Revelation. Although the story of Prochorus is likely nonhistorical, the traditions are strongly followed in some churches, particularly on the island of Patmos. The memory of Prochorus is celebrated on June 28 in Orthodox churches. For further information about the Prochorus legends, see R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 206-23.



Minor, perhaps as an itinerant prophet. His extensive use of the Hebrew Bible and the many Semitisms (Hebrew or Aramaic idioms expressed awkwardly in Greek) in the book suggest that he was a Jewish Christian, likely originally from Palestine. As an outspoken leader in the churches, John apparently ran into trouble with the government authorities and as a result was banished or exiled to the island of Patmos where he received a revelation from God. The duration of his stay on Patmos is unknown. Early Christian writers assigned various lengths of time to his exile, ranging from eighteen months to fifteen years. Christian tradition also claims that John was released from exile after the death of Domitian and returned to Ephesus (see, e.g., Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.20.8-9 [Lake, LCL]). The reliability of these traditions is questionable, however.<sup>11</sup> [John Dictating His Vision]

#### John Dictating His Vision

This mosaic is located above the door of the monastery enclosing the cave that is the traditional site where John received his revelation on Patmos. The style is reflective of the Byzantine period with its flattened forms, striated drapery, and black outlines. The scene depicts John dictating his vision to his legendary assistant, Prochorus.

*John on Patmos.* Mosaic. Monastery of the Apocalypse. Patmos.  
(Credit: Mitchell Reddish)

### Literary Structure

To many readers, one of the most perplexing problems in understanding the book of Revelation is trying to understand its

organization and arrangement. The novelist John Hersey, for example, described his impression of the text:

There remains a sense that the work, after it is introduced by the letter to the churches, has been broken into halves by two strong voices, and that parts within the two sections have been sewn together, sometimes with crude stitching.<sup>12</sup>

New Testament scholars, also, have been perplexed by the structure of John's work. Some scholars have found the arrangement of materials so confusing that they have used this as a major point in their argument that the book, as it presently exists, is a compilation from different sources or the product of multiple redactions or rewrites. R. H. Charles, for instance, claimed that most of the material in 1:1–20:3 was from John and that 20:4–22:21, along with some interpolated sections in the first part, came from a later editor.<sup>13</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford, on the other hand, saw a three-stage development behind the Apocalypse: Chapters 4–11 (in oral form) came from the circle of John the Baptist; 12–22 originated from the disciples of John the Baptist; and 1–3 and 22:16a, 20b, 21 were added later by a Jewish-Christian disciple of John the Baptist who had come to a more accurate knowledge of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> (Neither of these proposals has won many adherents among scholars.) Most recently, David Aune has proposed that Revelation reached its present form in two major stages. The "First Edition," as he called it, consists of approximately 1:7–12a and 4:1–22:5. The "Second Edition" adds 1:1–6, 1:12b–3:22, 22:6–21, and "several expansions or interpolations in the earlier sections of the text."<sup>15</sup>

All commentators recognize the importance of the number seven as a structuring device in the book—seven messages, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. How are these series of sevens related? The seven messages in 2:1–3:22 have sometimes been viewed as disconnected from the remainder of the work. A close examination, however, reveals otherwise. The clearest example of such connections occurs in the introductions to each of the seven messages, which borrow phrases from the description of the exalted Christ in chapter 1. Furthermore, the themes of persecution, faithfulness, endurance, rewards for the righteous, and the new Jerusalem, which are prominent in the seven messages, are also the major topics in the remainder of the book.

Some interpreters see the four series of sevens as consecutive series; that is, John presents in chronological order his vision of coming events. A progression is certainly intended in the events described, as evidenced by the opening of the seventh seal, which

introduces the seven trumpets. Yet the progression is not strictly linear. Rather, later events sometimes retell earlier events. For example, the plagues and calamities of the seven trumpets describe in a new way the punishments and judgments of the end times depicted by the seven seals. This view of the arrangement of the material in Revelation is called recapitulation and is the approach to understanding the work that is followed in this commentary. 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. Various analogies have been used to explain this arrangement of the material in Revelation. In one sense, it is like looking through a kaleidoscope in which one sees the colors and shapes arranged in a certain pattern. As one turns the kaleidoscope, the pieces rearrange themselves in a different pattern, presenting the viewer with a different perspective on the same objects. Reading Revelation is also like listening to a musical composition in which certain themes of the piece are repeated, but with variations and new interpretations, each variation moving the piece forward. [The Power of Revelation]

John structured the book of Revelation in a similar manner. The writing presents visions of judgment and destruction, as well as scenes of hope and reward, in a variety of ways. Each new scene provides the reader/hearer a different and fuller picture of John's message, while at the same time moving forward in the telling of John's story. In Revelation, the movement of the work is from John's historical situation to the arrival of the new Jerusalem, the fulfillment of God's ultimate plan for creation. Within that overall forward movement, however, are numerous instances of overlapping and parallel scenes.

A part of the reason for John's use of recapitulation in structuring the book of Revelation was likely due to the auditory nature of this work. Contrary to the manner in which most people today encounter the Apocalypse, the original recipients of John's message heard the text read aloud. They did not have a copy to read themselves. Thus by repeating his message in new images, John reinforced what his audience heard and remembered. Repetition functioned as an aid to understanding as well as to memory.

#### The Power of Revelation



"Exegetes and theologians still have to discover what artists have long understood: the strength of the language and composition of Rev. lies not in its theological argumentation or historical information but in its evocative power inviting imaginative participation. The language and narrative flow of Rev. elicit emotions, reactions, and convictions that cannot and should not be fully conceptualized and phrased in propositional-logical language."

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 22.

Finally, Revelation operates impressionistically rather than logically. John attempted to convey his message through imagination, symbols, and metaphors. The reader should remember that this is revelatory literature, presented as visions. It is not tightly organized, rational arguments. For the modern reader to analyze and dissect the work, instead of experiencing it, is to do an injustice to the work. We should avoid the temptation to impose too rigid a structure or order on John's writing. The accompanying outline suggests one way in which the reader may understand the arrangement of the Apocalypse. [\[Outline of Revelation\]](#)

### Theological Themes and Emphases

Preachers and teachers who avoid the book of Revelation are missing a rich resource of theological treasures. As powerful and influential as the images and motifs of Revelation have been for artists, writers, and musicians, these do not explain the persistent popularity of this writing throughout the centuries. Rather, the Apocalypse has maintained its appeal because its powerful words

and images speak to some of the deepest fears, joys, and yearnings of the human spirit. The book of Revelation is a book of hope, warning, encouragement, critique, and motivation. The following paragraphs will briefly highlight some of the more important theological issues that Revelation addresses. The commentary will explore these themes more fully. [\[Transcendent World\]](#)

#### Transcendent World

**ΑΩ** “The language of the apocalypses is not descriptive, referential newspaper language, but the expressive language of poetry, which uses symbols and imagery to articulate a sense or feeling about the world. Their abiding value does not lie in the pseudo-information they provide about cosmology or future history, but in their affirmation of a transcendent world. Even if the physical universe were to endure forever, there is no doubt that the social and cultural worlds we inhabit are constantly crumbling. Christianity inherited from the Jewish apocalypses a way of affirming transcendent values, those things we should affirm even when the world around us collapses. Beyond the thresholds of life and of this world we can only see as in a glass darkly. The apocalyptic revelations are symbolic attempts to penetrate the darkness, which provide ways of imagining the unknown, not factual knowledge.”

John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 214.

1. *The sovereignty of God.* Of all the themes in Revelation, none is more central to John's theology than his conviction that God is the ultimate power in the universe. God's sovereignty is comprehensive, for God is “Alpha and Omega,” the creator of the world and the one who will bring it to completion. Modern theologians and philosophers have strongly attacked the idea of the sovereignty of God, claiming that this belief has fostered patriarchal domination, violence, and abuse of power. A careful reading of the Apocalypse, however, reveals that, for John, God's control over the universe is exemplified in the sacrificial, suffering work of the Lamb, not in coercive domination.

# OUTLINE OF REVELATION

## The Book of Revelation

- I. Prologue—1:1-8
  
- II. The Vision of the Son of Man—1:9–3:22
  - A. The Commissioning of John—1:9-20
  - B. The Messages to the Seven Churches—2:1–3:22
    - 1. Ephesus—2:1-7
    - 2. Smyrna—2:8-11
    - 3. Pergamum—2:12-17
    - 4. Thyatira—2:18-29
    - 5. Sardis—3:1-6
    - 6. Philadelphia—3:7-13
    - 7. Laodicea—3:14-22
  
- III. Visions of the Future—4:1–22:5
  - A. The Heavenly Throne Room—4:1–5:14
    - 1. The Throne of God—4:1-11
    - 2. The Lamb and the Scroll—5:1-14
  - B. The Seven Seals—6:1–8:5
    - 1. The First Four Seals—6:1-8
    - 2. The Fifth Seal—6:9-11
    - 3. The Sixth Seal—6:12-17
    - 4. Interlude—7:1-17
      - a. The Sealing of the 144,000—7:1-8
      - b. The Multitude from Every Nation—7:9-17
    - 5. The Seventh Seal—8:1-5
  - C. The Seven Trumpets—8:6–11:19
    - 1. The First Four Trumpets—8:6-13
    - 2. The Fifth Trumpet—9:1-12
    - 3. The Sixth Trumpet—9:13-21
    - 4. Interlude—10:1–11:14
      - a. The Mighty Angel and the Little Scroll—10:1-11
      - b. The Temple and the Two Witnesses—11:1-14
    - 5. The Seventh Trumpet—11:15-19
  - D. The Great Conflict—12:1–14:20
    - 1. The Vision of the Great Dragon—12:1-18
    - 2. The Two Beasts—13:1-18
    - 3. Interlude—14:1-20
      - a. The 144,000 with the Lamb—14:1-5
      - b. The Messages of the Three Angels—14:6-13
      - c. The Harvests of the Earth—14:14-20
  - E. The Seven Bowl Plagues—15:1–16:21
    - 1. Introduction of the Seven Angels—15:1
    - 2. The Martyrs on the Heavenly Shore—15:2-4
    - 3. The Seven Angels with Bowls—15:5-8
    - 4. The Pouring of the Seven Bowls—16:1-21
  - F. The Fall of Babylon—17:1–19:10
    - 1. The Great Whore—17:1-18
    - 2. Laments on Earth—18:1-24
    - 3. Celebration in Heaven—19:1-10
  - G. The Final Victory—19:11–20:15
    - 1. The Triumphant Christ—19:11-21
      - a. The Rider on the White Horse—19:11-16
      - b. The Defeat of God’s Enemies—19:17-21
    - 2. The Millennial Reign and the Defeat of Satan—20:1-10
      - a. The Imprisonment of Satan—20:1-3
      - b. The Millennial Reign—20:4-6
      - c. The Final Conflict—20:7-10
    - 3. The Last Judgment—20:11-15
  - H. The New Jerusalem—21:1–22:5
    - 1. New Heaven and New Earth—21:1-8
    - 2. The Holy City—21:9-27
    - 3. The River of Life—22:1-5
  
- IV. Epilogue—22:6-21

2. *Radical monotheism.* A corollary to John’s belief that all of history and the universe is under the control of God is his staunch commitment to the idea that no power on earth or heaven is worthy of ultimate allegiance but God alone. This is not simply an abstract theological concept for John, but a belief that has strong pastoral relevance. It is the basis for John’s warnings about participation in emperor worship and entanglement in the quasireligious practices of his day. This belief serves as a reminder to all readers of the

Apocalypse that all institutions, people, systems, and power structures are relativized by the reality of the one true God. Governments, economic systems, occupations, and even religious organizations stand under the judgment of God. Christians might render partial allegiance to these entities, but such allegiance must always be secondary and subservient to one's ultimate allegiance to God.

3. *Exalted Christology.* The book of Revelation presents an exalted view of Christ that few New Testament writings match. John applied several of God's titles to Christ (Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, Lord). Christ shares the heavenly throne with God and, like God, is the object of heavenly and earthly worship. God and the Lamb (Christ) receive almost identical words of praise in chapters 4, 5, and 7. Furthermore, Revelation states that just as salvation belongs to both God and to the Lamb (7:10), so does divine judgment (6:16-17). John applied imagery to Christ's defeat of God's enemies that the Hebrew Bible had reserved for God alone (19:11-21). Clearly, in Revelation, the work and nature of God and Christ are closely intertwined. What Christ does, God does. But in spite of this close identification of God and Christ, John never called Jesus "God." John's thoroughgoing monotheism does not allow the idea of two separate deities for the Christian church. Jesus carries out the will and desires of God; he reveals in himself the true nature of God; he acts on behalf of God. John might well have affirmed that Christ partakes of the very nature or being of God. Yet he stopped short of identifying Christ with God. We may wish that John had written with more clarity or specificity about the relationship between Christ and God. But there is no Nicene Creed in Revelation. That will come a few centuries later.

[Imagery in Revelation]

### Imagery in Revelation



"The images  
[in Revelation]

should be taken seriously as images. One should not rush to a commentary to decode the images and focus on their probable historical referents alone. Rather, one should take the time to feel the impact of the image and to adopt a receptive attitude in which feelings play as great a role as thinking."

Adela Yarbro Collins, "What the Spirit Says to the Churches': Preaching the Apocalypse," *Quarterly Review* 4/3 (Fall 1984): 79.

4. *Salvation.* For many people, the word "apocalyptic" has a harsh ring to it, connoting judgment, destruction, and punishment. While such events do comprise a part of most apocalyptic writings, they are only a part of the message of apocalypses and definitely are not the primary focus of Revelation. John presents God, through Christ, as actively bringing salvation to the world. The description of Jesus in the opening chapter of Revelation is the one "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5). The primary image of Christ in Revelation is the slain Lamb, a reminder of the sacrificial, atoning work of Christ. The hymns in chapters 7, 11, and 19 praise God specifically for God's saving activity. The God of

the Apocalypse cares for the world and its inhabitants and yearns to provide health, wholeness, peace, and security—in short, salvation—for all of creation. The visions of the new heaven and new earth (ch. 21) and the new Jerusalem (ch. 22) are ample evidence of this. Whereas these visions describe the eschatological dimension of salvation, John views God’s salvific work as operative in the present as well. The Son of Man figure in chapter 1 already stands among the lampstands (the churches), signifying the presence of Christ with God’s people in their present situation.

5. *Judgment and warning.* From the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 to the final judgment scene in chapter 20, John warns his readers that all the universe comes under the judgment of God. Although the God of Revelation is a God who loves us, shepherds us, comforts us, and provides for us, God also stands in judgment over our failures and sins. The Apocalypse serves as a powerful warning that those who would be the people of God must be obedient to God. John’s imagery of the lake of fire, reserved for eternal torment for the opponents of God, is as much figurative, nonliteral language as his description of Christ as a Lamb and the new Jerusalem as streets of gold and gates of pearls. The truth of the imagery, however, is that God and evil cannot coexist in God’s ultimate design for the world.

6. *Nonviolent lifestyle.* The book of Revelation can function as a call to a nonviolent lifestyle. That may seem like a strange statement, given the extensive use of militaristic and even violent imagery in the book itself. Yet one must distinguish between texts that use language and imagery to encourage or endorse violence and those that use traditional imagery to subvert violence. The Apocalypse belongs in the latter category. The book of Revelation exhibits a creative transformation of traditional symbols and language, what Austin Farrer has called a “rebirth of images.”<sup>16</sup> In the Apocalypse, Jesus is indeed the mighty conqueror, the warrior on the white horse (19:11-21). He conquers not by violence, however, but by his own death, for John sees Christ’s robe dipped in blood. The blood is likely Christ’s own blood, a visual reminder that he conquered by his own death. His weapon was not a sword, but a cross. John’s interplay of lion-lamb imagery in chapter 5 is also a reminder that Christ’s conquering is martyrological. Through this imagery, John declares that the only “conquering” that is consistent with the values of God is conquering that occurs through self-sacrifice and love, not through violence.

7. *Hope.* One of the ways that the book of Revelation has spoken most forcefully to its readers through the years has been to offer a message of hope. John's confident assertions that God is in control, that evil will be defeated, that death will not have the last word, and that God will always be present with God's people have provided the necessary assurances to allow people to face the most difficult and demanding situations in life. John did not take a "Pollyanna" approach to life. He knew that all too often suffering and pain wreak havoc with human lives. He had himself suffered persecution. In spite of those experiences, John was confident that ultimately "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (21:4). John reassures us that the way things are is not the way that things always will be.

The reader will notice that missing from this list of important ideas in the book of Revelation is any discussion about specific end-time events. That omission is intentional. The book of Revelation addressed the concerns of its original readers. John's purpose was to help them live as faithful Christians in the present world, not to provide them with details about the future. That is still the way the Apocalypse functions today. Any use of the book of Revelation to fill out charts and timetables of the future, to predict the date or time of the end of the world, or to prove the fulfillment of biblical "prophecies" in contemporary happenings in the world (Russia, the Gulf War, the European Community, etc.) is a gross misuse and distortion of John's message. Its vision of God's ultimate goal for history uses not descriptive, but evocative language. It is intended to evoke hope and comfort, not because it can predict the events of the future, but because it is certain of the one who is in charge of that future.

### **Interpreting Revelation**

As early as the end of the second century, people began writing commentaries on the book of Revelation. Melito, bishop of Sardis (one of the cities addressed in Revelation), wrote a work on the Apocalypse c. AD 175. Unfortunately, all that has survived is a brief reference to it in Eusebius.<sup>17</sup> A century later, Victorinus of Pettau (d. c. 304) produced a commentary on Revelation, portions of which are still extant today. Since those early years, there has been no shortage of works attempting to explain the meaning of John's visionary writing. As one might suppose, a book as mysterious as

Revelation has spawned numerous, sometimes contradictory, even absurd, interpretations.<sup>18</sup> [Recommended Resources on Revelation]

One of the most widely popularized approaches today to interpreting Revelation understands the messages to the seven churches

### Recommended Resources on Revelation

- Aune, David E. *Revelation 1–5*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word Books, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Revelation 6–16*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word Books, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Revelation 17–22*. Word Biblical Commentary. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.
- Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Beasley-Murray, George R. *The Book of Revelation*. New Century Bible. Greenwood SC: Attic, 1974.
- Beckwith, Isbon T. *The Apocalypse of John*. Macmillan, 1919. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.
- Blevins, James L. *Revelation*. Knox Preaching Guides. Atlanta: John Knox, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Revelation as Drama*. Nashville: Broadman, 1984.
- Boesak, Allan A. *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987.
- Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 1989.
- Caird, G. B. *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*. Harper's New Testament Commentaries. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Charles, R. H. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*. 2 vols. The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920.
- Collins, Adela Yarbro. *The Apocalypse*. New Testament Message. Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*. Proclamation Commentaries. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.
- Ford, J. Massyngberde. *Revelation*. Anchor Bible. Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co., 1975.
- González, Catherine Gunsalus and Justo L. González. *Revelation*. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997.
- Harrington, Wilfrid J. *Revelation*. Sacra Pagina. Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 1993.
- Jeske, Richard. *Revelation for Today: Images of Hope*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.
- Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Murphy, Frederick J. *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John*. The New Testament in Context. Harrisburg PA: Trinity, 1998.
- Richard, Pablo. *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Rogers, Cornish R. and Joseph R. Jeter Jr. *Preaching Through the Apocalypse: Sermons from Revelation*. St. Louis: Chalice, 1992.
- Roloff, Jürgen. *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary*. Continental Commentaries. Translated by John E. Alsup. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.
- Sweet, J. P. M. *Revelation*. Westminster Pelican Commentaries. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979.
- Swete, Henry Barclay. *Commentary on Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977; reprint of the 3rd ed. published by Macmillan, London, 1911, under the title, *The Apocalypse of St. John*.
- Talbert, Charles H. *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.
- Thompson, Leonard L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Wainwright, Arthur W. *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.
- Issues of two journals designed at least partially for ministers were devoted to the book of Revelation: *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 15/2 (Spring 1995). *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 40/3 (July 1986).

(chs. 2–3) not as actual messages to churches in the first century but as descriptions of and warnings to the church in general during seven specific periods of its history. The first church (Ephesus) represents the apostolic period. The remaining churches represent the succeeding stages of church history, with the last church (Laodicea) representing the present situation of the church. According to this view, the remainder of the Apocalypse describes the events that are to occur during the very last years of world history. The proponents of this approach to Revelation always locate their present time as immediately prior to the final events supposedly depicted in Revelation. According to them, the world is currently at the edge of the last days. By creative manipulation of texts from Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible (especially Daniel and Ezekiel), these interpreters are able to “prove” how events taking place today were predicted in the Bible. Wars, earthquakes, political troubles, and economic disasters are interpreted as events foretold in the Bible. The fulfillment of these “prophecies” is evidence that we are the “final generation” before Armageddon takes place and the world is brought to an end.

This understanding of the book of Revelation has been popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, Hal Lindsey, John Walvoord, and a host of radio and television evangelists. Such an approach has a strong appeal to many people because it appears to be biblically based; it provides a framework for understanding the events and condition of the world today; and it claims to give information about the future. Unfortunately, it is merely an attempt at “biblical” fortune-telling. This approach to Revelation is based on a misuse of biblical texts and a failure to understand the nature and function of apocalyptic writings.

While differences of opinion will always exist among interpreters of Revelation, a proper understanding of the Apocalypse must take into consideration the sociohistorical setting of the work and its literary genre. Written to Christian communities in Asia Minor at the end of the first century, Revelation was intended to address the needs and concerns of those believers. To interpret Revelation as primarily concerned with end-time events is to divorce it from its first-century context. The work then becomes incomprehensible and meaningless to the very people to whom it was originally addressed. Furthermore, to interpret the work as detailed prophecies waiting to be fulfilled some two thousand years later is to misunderstand the nature of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is not predictive literature in the sense that it offers detailed scenarios for the distant future. Apocalyptic writings deal with their

contemporary situations by means of the general affirmation that the future belongs to God.

To read and appreciate the book of Revelation, one must be aware of how the language and symbols of Revelation function. The book of Revelation uses visions, symbols, and ancient myths to convey its message. 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 to prose. Like the language of poetry, the language of Revelation sometimes is mysterious and slippery, teasing its reader to make connections and see possibilities that one has never made or seen before. The language of Revelation “works” not by imparting information, but by helping the reader to experience what John experienced. The reader is taken up with John, sees the visions, hears the commands, smells the incense. By the end of the work, John’s revelation has become our revelation. With the “Hallelujah Chorus” still ringing in our ears, we feel as if we have been in the very throne room of God.

To understand the Apocalypse, one must read it imaginatively—with eyes, ears, and mind wide open. Revelation is a fantasia of sights, sounds, smells, and action. In addition, the work has a strong dramatic quality to it. It is no wonder that artists of all types have been inspired by this work. The reader would do well to heed the advice of one commentator who wrote that anyone “who has not, or has and refuses to use, a fertile imagination, will do well to leave this book alone.”<sup>19</sup>

The book of Revelation does not have one meaning, or even a list of meanings that when comprehended exhausts the value of this work. Revelation is open-ended. It continues to speak in fresh ways to different readers. That is the beauty and power of its symbols and images. It addresses us anew as the word of God, reminding us that the beasts of Revelation are continually rising up in our lives and in our society. The beasts of pride, idolatry, greed, hatred, and abuse of power may take on new forms and new identities, but they are still manifestations of evil. Revelation challenges us to name those beasts and to resist them. Even more importantly, the voices of hope and assurance that reverberate throughout the Apocalypse still echo in our lives to remind us that in spite of what difficulties we might face, “the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.” With the heavenly host, we can then sing, “Amen! Hallelujah!”

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Epist.* 53.8. Cited by Bernard McGinn, "Revelation," *A Literary Companion to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1987), 523.

<sup>2</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, in *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, The Cambridge Edition of D. H. Lawrence, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 61.

<sup>3</sup> See John Wick Bowman, *The First Christian Drama* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955); and James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama* (Nashville: Broadman, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 172.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Scott, *The Imperial Cult Under the Flavians* (New York: Arno, 1975), 89.

<sup>7</sup> Brian W. Jones, "Domitian," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1992), 2:221.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 9.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 257.

<sup>10</sup> A rather strange, subsidiary argument against the disciple John being the author is given by Jürgen Roloff. He has written, "One must consider, moreover, that John of Zebedee would have had to be ninety years old at the time Revelation was written. With its dazzling colors and sharp contrasts, this powerful book does not bear traces of a work of old age" (*The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary*, Continental Commentaries, trans. John E. Alsup [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 11).

<sup>11</sup> That John was released after the death of Domitian is not in itself improbable. David Aune (*Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary [Dallas: Word Books, 1997], 77) has pointed out that "those banished by a particular emperor could be recalled or given amnesty upon that emperor's death."

<sup>12</sup> John Hersey, "The Revelation of Saint John the Divine," *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. Alfred Corn (New York: Viking, 1990), 349.

<sup>13</sup> R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, The International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:l-iv.

<sup>14</sup> J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co., 1975), 3-4, 50-57.

<sup>15</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, cxx-cxxxiv.

<sup>16</sup> Austin M. Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images* (Boston: Beacon, 1949).

<sup>17</sup> *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.2.

<sup>18</sup> For good summaries of the four major "schools" of interpretation of Revelation, see M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 47-51; and Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 1993), 14-17. A book by Arthur W. Wainwright (*Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993]) provides a very readable account of the history of interpretation and uses of the book of Revelation.

<sup>19</sup> Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951), 51.