



## Introduction to Revelation

### Author and Title

Revelation 1:1 announces both the book's title; it is a revelation, and its divine author, Jesus Christ. The book is an unveiling of unseen spiritual forces operating behind the scenes in history and controlling its events and outcome. This disclosure is conveyed in a series of symbolic visions that exhibit the influence of OT prophecies, especially those received by Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. The book is also prophecy as John records in Revelation 1:3 and 22:7, not only as divine prediction of future events but also as divine diagnosis of the present state of affairs.

The divine author identified in the opening verse, Jesus Christ, has authority from God to describe coming events to his servant John for communication to the church.

Without denying his own role in the composition of the book, John presents himself more as a recipient and recorder of visions than as the author of Revelation's message. Although John does not call himself an apostle and is numbered among the prophets (22:9), early church fathers – notably Justin Martyr, writing circa AD135-150; Melito of Sardis, mid-2<sup>nd</sup> Century; and Irenæus of Lyons, writing circa AD185 – consistently identified him as John the son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple who authored the Fourth Gospel and three NT epistles. Because Revelation's Greek style differs markedly from other Johannine literature and its theological emphases are distinctive, a number of contemporary scholars think it was written by another John, called 'John the elder', someone otherwise unknown, but who also wrote 2 and 3 John. These scholars give weight to another early tradition, beginning with Dionysius of Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, which attributes Revelation to 'John the elder'. Nevertheless, both thematic links, e.g. Jesus as the Lamb and Word of God in John 1:29 and Revelation 5:6; and John 11:1 and Revelation 19:13 respectively, and the earliest church tradition favour the traditional attribution of Revelation to the apostle John, who with Peter and James belonged to Jesus' inner circle.

### Date

Irenæus reports, on the basis of earlier sources, that 'John received the Revelation almost in our own time, toward the end of the reign of Domitian' (Against Heresies

5.30.3). Since Domitian's reign ended in AD96, most scholars date Revelation in the mid-90s. Some, however, have argued for a date during Nero's reign (AD54-68) and before the fall of Jerusalem in AD70, basing their conclusion in part on the belief that Revelation 11:1-2 is a predictive prophecy of the Roman siege and destruction of the earthly Jerusalem during the Jewish War. However, the conditions in the churches of Chapters 2-3 and their cities favour a date around AD95-96, and in Revelation 'the holy city' does not seem to refer to the earthly Jerusalem. Assuming this later date, events relating to Nero's reign and Jerusalem's destruction, both of which would now have been in the past, are woven into John's visions as portents and prototypes of present pressures and coming traumas in the world's assault on Christ's church.

### Writing Style

The book of Revelation identifies itself both as apocalypse or revelation and as prophecy.

Apocalypse is derived from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, meaning revelation, disclosure or unveiling; that is, the disclosure of unseen heavenly or future realities. Jewish apocalyptic literature flourished in the centuries following the completion of the OT canon, perhaps in part to help the oppressed people of God find purpose in their sufferings and hope for their future in the absence of genuine prophetic words from God. Apocalyptic literature inherited and magnified features appearing in such OT books as Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. These features include visions that dramatise the prophet's admission to God's heavenly council and that convey meaning through symbolism, promising an end-time intervention of God to reverse present injustices.

Yet Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period between the OT and NT differs from OT prophecy in important respects. Apocalyptic authors remained anonymous and attributed their works to prominent figures of the distant past, e.g. Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Baruch and Ezra, using this literary device to invest their message with the weight of antiquity and to suggest that those ancients foretold events in the readers' past and present. Whereas OT prophecy was primarily preached orally and only secondarily preserved in writing, apocalyptic works were crafted literary pieces from their inception. OT prophecy not only comforted a righteous remnant but also called faithless Israel to repent and anticipated the gracious ingathering of Gentiles. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, divided humanity into two immutable camps:

1. The holy minority who await God's deliverance.
2. Their persecutors, destined for wrath and beyond the reach of redemption.

Finally, although OT prophets pointed ahead to the Lord's future coming, they also emphasised his present involvement with his people in their sins and trials; but apocalyptic literature saw the present as so pervaded by corruption that no saving work of God could be expected before his cataclysmic intervention at the end.

Like Jewish apocalyptic literature and some OT prophecy, the Revelation to John is imparted in symbolic visions and conveyed not in oral preaching but in literary form. Unlike extra-biblical apocalyptic authors, however, John writes in his own name, not that of an ancient saint, and he brings a balanced message of comfort, warning and rebuke. Because Christ's death has already won the decisive victory

over evil, Revelation does not share the pessimism of Jewish apocalyptic literature regarding the present age, transient and sin-infected though it is. Rather, Revelation sees believers as conquerors even now through endurance under suffering and fidelity to the testimony of Jesus, through which even their persecutors are called to salvation through repentance and faith.

Revelation therefore stands in the apocalyptic wing of authentic, divinely inspired prophecy, emphasising visionary experience, symbolism and literary art, along with such NT texts as Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21), and Paul's discussion of the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2.

### Theme

Revelation unveils the unseen spiritual war in which the church is engaged: the cosmic conflict between God and his Christ on the one hand, and Satan and his evil allies, both demonic and human, on the other. In this conflict, Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through his sacrificial death, but his church continues to be assaulted by the dragon, in its death-throes, through persecution, false teaching, and the allure of material affluence and cultural approval. By revealing the spiritual realities lying behind the church's trials and temptations during the time between Christ's First and Second Coming, and by dramatically affirming the certainty of Christ's triumph in the new heaven and earth, the visions granted to John both warn the church and fortify it to endure suffering and to stay pure from the defiling enticements of the present world order.

### Purpose

Revelation is addressed to 1<sup>st</sup> Century churches in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia, now western Turkey, as representative of all Christ's churches. These churches were threatened by false teaching, such as that of the Nicolaitans, by persecution, by compromise with surrounding paganism through idolatry and immorality, and by spiritual complacency. Jesus sent his revelation to John to fortify his churches to resist the wiles of the devil, whether in the form of intimidating violence from the beast, deceptive heresy through the false prophet, or the beguiling affluence of the prostitute.

### The Setting of Revelation circa AD95

John addressed the book of Revelation 'to the seven churches that are in Asia', namely Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, although there were undoubtedly other churches elsewhere in the province of Asia, e.g. Miletus and Colossæ. John had apparently been exiled from Ephesus to the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, southwest of Ephesus, and it was there that he received and recorded his visions.



Regional Map showing Patmos and the seven churches of Revelation

### History of Salvation Summary

Christians are called to be faithful to Christ amid spiritual war against Satan and sin as they await Christ's Second Coming.

## Key Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>References</u>
1. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has conquered Satan, the accuser, and has ransomed people from every nation to become a kingdom of priests, gladly serving in God's presence.	1:5, 1:18; 5:5-10; 12:1-11.
2. Jesus Christ is present among his churches on earth through his Holy Spirit, and he knows their trials, triumphs, and failures.	1:12-3:22.
3. World history, including its woes and disasters, is firmly in the control of Jesus, the victorious Lamb.	5:1-8:1.
4. God is presently restraining his own wrath and his enemies' efforts to destroy the church as he patiently gathers his redeemed people through the testimony that his suffering people proclaim about Jesus.	6:5-11; 7:1-3; 8:6-12; 9:4-6, 9:18; 11:3-7; 12:6, 12:13-17.
5. Present disasters (war, drought, famine, epidemic disease), although limited in scope by God's restraint, are foreshadows and warnings of escalating judgments to come.	6:3-17; 8:6-13; 11:13; 16:1-21; 20:11-15.
6. By maintaining their faithful testimony to the death, believers in Jesus will conquer both the dragon and the beast. The martyrs' victory, now hidden, will be manifest in their vindication at Christ's return.	2:10-11, 2:26-29; 3:11-13; 6:9-11; 7:9-17; 11:7-12, 11:17-18; 12:10-11; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; 20:4-6.
7. Satan attacks the church's perseverance and purity through violent persecution, through deceptive teaching, and through affluence and sensual pleasure.	2:1-3:22; 13:1-18; 17:1-18:24.
8. At the end of the age, the church's opponents will intensify persecution, but Jesus, the triumphant Word of God, will defeat and destroy all his enemies; the old heaven and earth, stained by sin and suffering, will be replaced by the new heaven and earth; and the church will be presented as a bride in luminous purity to her husband, the Lamb.	16:12-16; 19:11-21; 20:7-22:5.

## Literary Features

Numerous literary genres converge in the book of Revelation, one of the most complex books in the Bible. The overall genre is prophecy. Like biblical prophecy generally, the actual medium is visionary writing; the book unfolds as a pageant of visions, much like modern cinematic effects. Furthermore, the way in which real persons and events are actually portrayed is the way of imagination, with

unlifelike details. The title of the book indicates further that it belongs to the genre of apocalyptic writing. Additionally, at every turn the author uses the resources of poetry: imagery, metaphor, simile and allusion. The book begins and ends with the standard features of NT epistles. The overall shape of the book, following the introductory letters from Christ to the churches, is narrative or story, with the usual ingredients of setting, characters and plot, including plot conflict, progression and resolution. Greek drama was also an influence, seen in the attention John gives to the staging of events, positioning of characters in settings, crowd scenes and costuming of characters.

The most important thing to know about the literary form of the book of Revelation is that it uses the technique of symbolism from start to finish. Instead of portraying characters and events directly, much of the time the author portrays them indirectly by means of symbols. For example, Jesus is portrayed as a lamb, churches are portrayed as lamps on lamp stands, and Satan is portrayed as a dragon with seven heads and ten horns. The symbols are sometimes familiar, and sometimes original and strange. Whenever a work of literature presents a preponderance of symbols instead of realistic details, readers should recognise the technique of symbolic reality, meaning that as they enter the work in their imaginations, information is presented primarily through symbols. The book of Revelation is one of the most sustained examples of symbolic reality in existence.

The chief interpretative question is what the symbols refer to. In many cases, historical background studies can help in understanding the way in which the symbols were understandable to John's contemporaries, but in any case one cannot go wrong by simply relating the strange symbolic details to familiar NT images of the end times, with Jesus' Olivet discourse as a good frame of reference. This includes the following: moral degeneration; cataclysmic natural and military disasters; tribulation, including persecution of believers; the *parousia*, i.e. the Second Coming of Christ; the millennium; intermediate and final judgment; final dissolution of the earth; and glorification of believers in heaven. With an awareness of these eschatological realities, it is usually easy to see that the symbols of Revelation are referring to one or another of them.

### **Structure and Outline**

Revelation is composed of a prologue (1:1-8), a main body (1:9-22:7), and an epilogue (22:8-21). The prologue and epilogue are linked by repeated themes: an angel sent to show God's servants what must soon take place, blessings on those who keep the prophecy, John's self-identification, and the designation of God as Alpha and Omega. The body contains four enumerated series of seven messages or visions: letters to churches in Chapters 2-3, seals on a scroll (4:1-8:1), trumpets (8:2-11:19), and bowls of wrath in Chapters 15-16.

The general movement of the book is from 'the things that are' – the 1<sup>st</sup> Century churches' present situation (Chapters 2-3) – to 'the things that are to take place after this', climaxing with the destruction of the enemies of God and his church, and the presentation of the church as the Lamb's bride in a new heaven and earth. Within this general temporal movement, however, visions double back to present distinct, complementary perspectives on the same event or phase of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. For example, 12:1-6 portrays the defeat of the dragon in its desire to destroy the child of the heavenly woman (vv.1-5), followed by her flight for safety into the wilderness (v.6); then 12:7-17 again portrays the

defeat of the dragon, now in its desire to accuse believers (vv.7-12), followed by the heavenly woman's flight for safety into the wilderness (vv.13-17). Earlier visions sometimes portray later events, and later visions portray earlier conditions. For example, 6:12-17 shows the shaking of earth and sky, so that the stars are cast to earth as by a great wind; then 7:1-8 shows angels restraining the winds of woe until God's people are sealed; and still later, John sees sun, moon and stars still in the sky and only partially darkened (8:12). This principle of repetition or recapitulation to elaborate God's purposes and confirm their certainty is seen in earlier Scripture: refer to Genesis 1:1-2:25, 37:5-11 and 41:1-32; Daniel 2:1-45 with Daniel 7:1-28; and Acts 10:10-16. In Revelation, recapitulation means that the order in which John received visions does not necessarily indicate the order of the events they symbolise. These observations regarding the structure intrinsic to Revelation are reflected in this outline:

- I. **Prologue: Introduction and Salutation (1:1-8)**
  - a. Title, transmission, promise of blessing (1:1-3)
  - b. Epistolary opening (1:4-6)
  - c. Announcement of the coming King (1:7-8)
- II. **Things that are: Christ's presence with and knowledge of his churches (1:9-3:22)**
  - a. A Vision of Christ (1:9-20)
  - b. Christ's edict-letters to his seven churches (2:1-3:22)
    - i. The message to Ephesus (2:1-7)
    - ii. The message to Smyrna (2:8-11)
    - iii. The message to Pergamum (2:12-17)
    - iv. The message to Thyatira (2:18-29)
    - v. The message to Sardis (3:1-6)
    - vi. The message to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
    - vii. The message to Laodicea (3:14-22)
- III. **The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (4:1-7:17)**
  - a. Heaven opened: the Lamb receives the scroll (4:1-5:14)
    - i. The Heavenly Worship (4:1-11)
    - ii. The Scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14)
  - b. The Lamb starts to open the scroll's seven seals (6:1-7:17)
    - i. The First Six Seals (6:1-17)
    - ii. Interlude: the sealing of God's international Israel (7:1-17)
      1. The 144,000 of Israel Sealed (7:1-8)
      2. The Multitude from Every Nation (7:9-17)
- IV. **The angels and the trumpets: warnings of coming wrath (8:1-11:19)**
  - a. The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer (8:1-5)
  - b. Angels sound seven trumpets (8:6-11:19)
    - i. The First Six Trumpets (8:6-9:21)
    - ii. Interlude: the safety and suffering of God's city-sanctuary, his witnessing church (10:1-11:14)
      1. The Angel with the Little Scroll (10:1-11)
      2. The Two Witnesses (11:1-14)
    - iii. The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

- V. The cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan (12:1-14:20)
  - a. Revelation 12:1-17 - Two signs in heaven
    - i. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-6)
    - ii. Michael Defeats the Dragon (12:7-12)
    - iii. The Dragon Fights Again on Earth (12:13-17)
  - b. The First Beast (12:18-13:10)
  - c. The Second Beast (13:11-18)
  - d. The Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1-5)
  - e. The Messages of the Three Angels (14:6-13)
  - f. Reaping the Earth's Harvest (14:14-20)
- VI. God's final wrath (15:1-16:21)
  - a. The Angels with the Seven Last Plagues (15:1-8)
  - b. The Bowls of God's Wrath (16:1-21)
- VII. Babylon the prostitute (17:1-19:10)
  - a. The Great Whore and the Beast (17:1-18)
  - b. The Fall of Babylon (18:1-24)
  - c. The Rejoicing in Heaven (19:1-10)
- VIII. The defeat and destruction of the beasts, the dragon, and death (19:11-20:15)
  - a. The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-16)
  - b. The Beast and Its Armies Defeated (19:17-21)
  - c. Interlude: The thousand years (20:1-6)
  - d. Satan's Doom (20:7-10)
  - e. The Dead Are Judged (20:11-15)
- IX. All things new (21:1-22:7)
  - a. The New Heaven and the New Earth (21:1-8)
  - b. Vision of the New Jerusalem (21:9-17)
  - c. The River of Life (22:1-7)
- X. Epilogue and Benediction (22:8-21)