

## The Book of Revelation

### Lesson 1 - Introduction

1. Introduction
  - 1.1. To successfully study the book of Revelation you must understand an important fact. This fact is reinforced by the following passages:
    - 1.1.1. Matthew 24:35-39
    - 1.1.2. Mark 13:31-37
    - 1.1.3. 1 Thes. 5:2
  - 1.2. Man has seemingly always been fascinated with how and when the world will end. Today, this fixation with the end-times is as strong as it has ever been, perhaps even stronger. This curious interest in earth's climatic "doomsday" has produced many sensationalistic speculations concerning the end-times—many of which come from misapplying the language found in the book Revelation.
  - 1.3. There is much to be gained from a study of Revelation but we cannot surmise that which the Bible does not reveal.
2. The Bible is full of messages for its readers
  - 2.1. Jesus is coming
  - 2.2. Jesus has come
  - 2.3. Jesus is coming again
  - 2.4. Be ready
    - 2.4.1. Matthew 25:1-13
3. Why was Revelation written in the manner it was?
  - 3.1. The word [apokalupsis] (Revelation) merely means an uncovering. It is from [apokalupto], "to uncover, unveil ([apo], from, [kalupto], to cover)." Thayer says it means "a laying bare, making naked." The Book of Revelation got its name from the use of the word in **Rev. 1:1**. Mounce says it is "derived from **Rev. 1:1** where it designates the supernatural unveiling of that which is about to take place." Yes, it is the unveiling of the scheme of God's plan of redemptive history. We will see the church under attack by deadly enemies. Yet we will see the church, under the banner of the Messiah, conquer and conquer again, until the ultimate victory of all time.
  - 3.2. Language is symbolized in order to conceal its meaning to all but to whom it is intended. The Christians at the time Revelation was written were undergoing severe persecution from their enemies. Just about everybody that was not a Christian was their enemy. Their enemies were viciously brutal and their lives hung in the balance on a daily basis. It was a crime against the laws of the government under which they lived to even be a Christian and the penalty for transgressing this law was often death.
    - 3.2.1. Think about in a war, or maybe a war movie you have seen. Messages are written in code so that if the enemy intercepts them, they will not be understood. Letters, words, or maybe even pictures are used to represent other things. The one for whom the message is intended knows the code and understands the message as it is written.

- 3.2.2. This is the way Revelation is written. If someone is not familiar with the Old and New Testament Scriptures, they will not understand The Revelation.
- 3.2.3. In the book of Revelation, Christians are told by God that they will be victorious in the end, that their enemies will be crushed in defeat, not to give in to their enemies and worship who they wanted them to worship, and to continue to worship the True and Living God. Imagine what would have happened if this letter had spelled out these things without the use of symbolism. Since the Roman government, in general, was not familiar with the Scripture, they didn't understand what was being said.
- 3.3. Apocalyptic writings encouraged God's people in times of severe persecution and prepared them for possible future trials.
  - 3.3.1. 3 Old Testament Books contain apocalyptic writings: Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.
- 4. Why was the book of Revelation written?
  - 4.1. The contents of the book and the conditions confronting the churches furnish the information on the nature and design of Revelation.
  - 4.2. The church was comparatively weak, subjected to terrible persecutions from the Roman Empire, and in great danger of heavy apostasies. Warnings against evil and many promises to the faithful definitely indicate that the main purpose of the book is to encourage saints to steadfastness in their struggles against enemies of the truth. Paul had predicted a complete apostasy in **Acts 20:29-30** and **2 Thes. 2:3-12**. Revelation provides more details.
    - 4.2.1. Christians came into conflict with Rome AND fellow countryman. Several reasons Christianity became increasingly persecuted:
      - 4.2.1.1. Discipleship – due to this it became an “illegal religion”
      - 4.2.1.2. Universality – available to all; Rome saw that as a threat to their power
      - 4.2.1.3. Christianity was “exclusive” – refused to accept anyone as “brother” and rejected the more common heathen and pagan traditions and customs
      - 4.2.1.4. Converts were often the poor and outcasts
      - 4.2.1.5. Christians refused to compromise their faith in Christ and Rome HATED that!
      - 4.2.1.6. Christians would not worship the emperor.
  - 4.3. Revelation contains the same great teaching in a large measure that is found in other New Testament books, but differs from them in two particular points
    - 4.3.1. It points out significant changes that would affect the church in the future.
    - 4.3.2. It describes the changes in dramatic scenes and highly symbolic language.
  - 4.4. The latter point furnishes the difficulty in interpreting Revelation, yet it evidently has some merit or it would have not been chosen for the purpose.
  - 4.5. The most plausible explanation for this occurring seems to lie in the nature of the church's enemies. Under the Jewish system the prophets named Israel's enemies in plain terms, but the Israelites were an earthly kingdom with the

material means of defense, and had to understand plainly who their foes were. The church, being a spiritual kingdom, does not defend itself with an earthly sword of war (**John 18:36**), and we would stand no chance in meeting earthly powers with physical force.

- 4.6. If the book had condemned the church's foes by name, it might have created more desperate opposition than what they already faced. Expressed in symbols, wise Christians would be able to know whom to watch, while their enemies, being ignorant of the true facts, would be less exasperated.
  - 4.7. Symbolism is nothing new in the scriptures. The Old Testament prophets were much given to use of such language as the following passages will show: **Isa. 4:1-13; 11:6-9; 28:20; 65:17-19; Ezek. 37:1-23.**
  - 4.8. This book begins and ends with a blessing pronounced upon those who hear and keep the "things that are written therein (**Rev. 1:3; 22:7**). This would be quite impossible, unless there is some measure of understanding.
5. Authorship
- 5.1. The book itself declares that Jesus made known this revelation to his servant John. The preponderance of the evidence points to the apostle John as author. He was in the right situation, both as to time and place, to have been writer. Even if some other John wrote the book, it would not change God's purpose in making this revelation.
  - 5.2. External Evidence:
    - 5.2.1. Barnes says: "Now Irenaeus (a close friend of Polycarp) on all occasions and in the most positive manner gives his clear testimony that the Apocalypse was written by the apostle John. It is impossible to suppose that he would do this if Polycarp (a close friend to John) had not believed it to be true."
    - 5.2.2. Irenaeus is not the only one; Barnes lists more: Hippolytus (220 A.D.), Nepos, Origen, Cyprian (246 A.D.), Methodius, Tertullian (220 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria (192-220 A.D.), Melito (170 A.D.), Theophilus (169-180 A.D.).
    - 5.2.3. How do we consider external evidence? It is simply overwhelming. Mounce sums it up well: "Early tradition is unanimous in its opinion that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle." McClintock and Strong agree: "The historical testimonies in favor of John's authorship are singularly distinct and numerous, and there is very little to weigh against them." But what of the internal evidence? Does it argue for John?
  - 5.3. Internal Evidence:
    - 5.3.1. The internal evidence that Revelation was written by John is overwhelming. Summers lists the evidence.
    - 5.3.2. The author calls himself John in four places (**Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8**). Even though there are 13 John's in the New Testament. There is only one John who was so well known that he needed not to distinguish himself.
    - 5.3.3. There are similarities in Revelation and the Gospel of John: (a) both claim to bear true witness (**Rev. 22:8; John 21:24**). (b) both mention the spear wound (**John 19:34; Rev. 1:7**). (c) Both use lamb for Jesus (**John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5**).

- 5.3.4. The characteristics of the author of Revelation fit John. For example? He was a Jewish Christian who knew Greek. He had authority over churches in Asia Minor, and he had a keen spiritual insight.
- 5.3.5. There is additional evidence. Ellicott points out that the two have similar terminology, and both often use these words and phrases: witness (martyr), overcome, keep the word, sign, dwell (tabernacle).
- 5.3.6. Besides the above, he points out that the two books use similar language to describe the Lord, or in connection with the Lord:
  - 5.3.6.1. Shepherd (**John 10:11, 14, 16; Rev. 7:17**).
  - 5.3.6.2. Bridegroom (**John 3:29; Rev. 19:7; 21:21**).
  - 5.3.6.3. Living water (**John 4:10; Rev. 7:17; 21:6; 22:17**).
  - 5.3.6.4. Bread or manna (**John 6:32-58; Rev. 2:17**).
- 5.3.7. The book reveals further evidences as to the apostle John's authorship. This is seen in some uses of various Greek words that are almost exclusive to John.
  - 5.3.7.1. For example, it is John who identifies Jesus as "the Word" using the Greek word logos, doing so in his gospel, his first epistle, and in Revelation (Jn. 1:1, 14; 1 Jn. 1:1; Rev. 19:13).
  - 5.3.7.2. It is John who is the only N.T. writer to use the Greek word arnion, translated: "lamb" (Jn. 21:15; Rev. 5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3).

## 6. Location

- 6.1. John wrote from Patmos (**Rev. 1:9**). It was an island about 60 miles southwest of Ephesus, and was about 20 miles in circumference. It was also called Sporades, and was a good place for banishment, being, in the words of Barnes, "lonely, desolate, barren of trees, probably uninhabited, and seldom visited." Barclay adds: "Jerome says that John was banished in the fourteenth year after Nero and liberated on the death of Domitian ... This would mean that John was banished to Patmos about A.D. 94 and that he was liberated about A.D. 96."
- 6.2. Gill points out that Ignatius and Irenaeus agree, saying he was banished by Domitian about 95 or 96 A.D. Gill also mentions that Tertullian states he was banished after surviving with no hurt, a plunge into a vessel of burning oil.
- 6.3. Cook says the historical evidence indicates that he was recalled by the Emperor Nerva in the year 96 A.D. Whether he worked in the mines there, or whether he was too old to work is a question for which history leaves no answer. Barnes says only the lowest criminals were required to work. But the evidence points to the fact that he was banished there, and that he did not go there to preach. Barclay quotes Ramsey as saying banishment included scourging, constant chains, scanty clothing, poor food, sleeping on the ground, and often work under a military overseer. That is probably true, for it is difficult to listen to preaching on endurance (like that in Revelation) from an arm-chair Christian writing from "a little nest in the west."

## 7. Date

- 7.1. The date in which you believe Revelation was written depends a great deal on the method of interpretation you follow (these will be discussed later). Most

scholars believe that John wrote the book of Revelation from the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea about 60 miles southwest of Ephesus, during the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96). Ancient testimony (Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Victorinus, Eusebius, etc.) is virtually unanimous in this conviction.

- 7.2. Others embrace the date of A.D. 70, which holds with the view of those that feel this book dealt exclusively with the destruction of Jerusalem. Let us look at arguments for both lines of thought.
- 7.3. Some arguments for the early date theory date presented and answered:
  - 7.3.1. **There was impending persecution according to the visions of Revelation.** Certainly this would occur with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. This is more true of Domitian, however, than of Nero. Domitian's persecutions were pressed into the provinces.
  - 7.3.2. **Much persecution was Jewish instigated. They would not instigate persecution after the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.** The synagogues instigated persecution, and they were left in the provinces where the persecutions described in Revelation would take place.
  - 7.3.3. **Judaizers (Rev. 2:1-6; 11:13) would have been non-existent after A.D. 70.** No, they were not confined to Jerusalem. That they would be non-existent is merely unproved assertion.
  - 7.3.4. **Rev. 6 and Rev. 9 agree that the Jewish state was in existence.** I cannot see how. One talks of persecution which will be existent until the end of the world, the other merely speaks of judgments of God on the entire world.
  - 7.3.5. **Rev. 11:1-19 shows the Jewish temple as standing.** No, it is patterned after **Ezekiel 40-48**, which is not Herod's temple, and the temple in **Revelation 11** is the church, not the Jewish temple.
  - 7.3.6. **Rev. 17:10-12 says the book was written in the time of the sixth Roman Emperor, which would be Nero.** Read **Rev. 17:10-12** and notice that the above position has several difficulties and problems: (1) Are these really kings or are they secular empires, as some suggest? (2) Are the numbers symbolic? (3) Which emperor do you start with? Many start with Augustus (the first legal emperor), rather than Julius, which brother Wallace begins with. This would make it written in the days of Vespasian. (4) It is highly possible that **Rev. 17:10-12** is a throwback in time to the days of Vespasian as the time when the vision is viewed. This would put the vision in the form of prophecy. Too, it would protect John and the readers from current threats from Domitian, which would surely come if he knew he was the eighth one described as going into perdition. The throwback into the past would throw the Romans off the scent, but not the Christians.
  - 7.3.7. **The language of exhortation in the book fits the time of Nero.** I believe it better fits the time of Domitian. There is no proof Nero persecuted in the provinces of Asia.
  - 7.3.8. John was to leave Patmos and relate the visions to nations and kings (**Rev. 10:11**). In A.D. 96 he would be too weak and infirm, and it would be impossible for him to do so. John would/could do so through his writings,

just as Jesus preached to the Gentiles through his missionaries (**Eph. 2:17**).  
And as with Abel, John being dead yet speaketh (**Heb. 11:4**).

7.3.9. **The harlot of Rev. 17:5 represents Jerusalem, so it must still be standing when the letter is written. It was not destroyed before A.D. 70.**

First, Jerusalem could be depicted in a vision after it was destroyed. Second, I agree with most who think that the woman merely represents the worldliness of Rome, and, I believe, worldliness in general.

7.3.10. **The “coming of the Lord” at the destruction of Jerusalem (Zech. 14:1-2) fits Rev. 1:7.** Read **Rev. 1:7**. It better fits the second coming of Christ at the end of the world than a “minor coming in A.D. 70.”

7.3.11. **Code languages mean there were living emperors and existing governments at the time the book was written.** Yes, it is true. Domitian was alive and Rome still existed.

#### 7.4. Arguments for the late date

7.4.1. Most scholars today are agreed that the later date is to be preferred.

There is not a single, really convincing argument in support of the earlier date. The verdict of modern scholarship is that the book was written during the reign of Emperor Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96.

#### 7.4.2. External Evidence

7.4.2.1. Irenaeus, a student of the renowned Polycarp (who was a disciple of the apostle John), declared that the Apocalyptic vision “was seen not very long ago, almost in our own generation, at the close of the reign of Domitian.” The testimony of Irenaeus, not far removed from the apostolic age, is exceptional, and he places the book near the end of Domitian’s reign.

7.4.2.1.1. This reign was from A.D. 81-96. Irenaeus was an intimate associate of Polycarp, who died in A.D. 155. He was contemporary with the apostle John for more than fifty years.

There is little chance for Polycarp not to have known the true date, or for Irenaeus to have misrepresented his information.

7.4.2.2. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-215) says that John returned from the isle of Patmos after the tyrant was dead. Eusebius, known as the father of church history, identifies the tyrant as Domitian.

7.4.2.3. Victorinus (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century), author of the earliest commentary on the book of Revelation wrote: “When John said these things, he was on the island of Patmos, condemned to the mines by Caesar Domitian. There he saw the Apocalypse; and when at length grown old, he thought he should receive his release by suffering; but Domitian being killed, he was liberated.

7.4.2.4. Jerome (A.D. 340-420) said, “In the fourteenth then after Nero, Domitian having raised up a second persecution, he (John) was banished to the island of Patmos and wrote the Apocalypse

7.4.2.5. There is **NO** mention in any writer of the first three centuries of any other time or place.

7.4.2.6. When you lay the above down beside the utter lack of external evidence for the early date, the point is overwhelmingly decisive for the late date.

7.4.3. Internal Evidence:

7.4.3.1. The book was penned while John was banished to Patmos. It is well-known that Domitian had a fondness for this type of persecution. Besides, it hardly appears reasonable that Nero, who is reported to have beheaded Paul and crucified Peter (Eusebius, II. 25), would have been content merely to banish their co-apostle to isolation.

7.4.3.2. There was a current myth that Nero would rise from the dead and persecute the church. **Rev. 13** and **Rev. 17** seem to acknowledge the myth's existence, but the myth could not have developed until the end of the century.

7.4.3.3. In **Rev. 2** and **Rev. 3** there is a spiritual decline of Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea. It would have taken years for their fervor to cool down.

7.4.3.4. There is a new sect, the "Nicolaitans." They were not yet in evidence when the rest of the New Testament was written.

7.4.3.5. There is an absence of mention in Revelation of the pioneer work of Paul, as if it was long over.

7.4.3.6. Evidence indicates that the church at Smyrna may not have existed until after A.D. 60-64. In Revelation it is well established.

7.4.3.6.1. Robertson adds some additional arguments. There is a little general overlap, but new features listed.

7.4.3.7. A careful reading shows that the churches of Revelation are not like the churches of Acts during the 50's and 60's. There are new compromisers (Jezebel), new hazards (emperor worship), and references to growing cold (Laodicea), etc.

7.4.3.8. The church at Laodicea is represented as existing under conditions of great wealth. "Thou sayest, I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing" (**Rev. 3:17**). In A.D. 60, Laodicea had been almost entirely destroyed by an earthquake. It seems likely that it would have required more than 8-9 years to once again rise to the description conveyed in Revelation.

7.4.3.9. McDowell points out that Nero persecuted the church at Rome while Domitian extended it to the provinces. The persecution in Revelation is in the provinces (Asia Minor, **Rev. 2:13; 6:9; 20:4**).

7.4.3.10. Barclay thinks that Caesar worship is conclusive. Nero did nothing to insist on Caesar worship, while Domitian was the first emperor to take his "divinity" seriously. He demanded Caesar worship. All announcements from him were to state that he was a god. Anyone who addressed him was to address him as a god. In the time of Acts and the reign of Nero there is none of this. But there it is in the Book of Revelation. I believe the late date to be correct.

8. Methods of Interpretation

8.1. **The Preterist view** – The book was written and fulfilled in John's day.

- 8.2. **Late Preterism** – Advocates of this idea see the Apocalypse as being mostly fulfilled when Constantine legalized Christianity (A.D. 313), or by the time Rome fell (A.D. 476), thus stemming the tide of Roman oppression.
- 8.2.1. This concept fails to recognize the correlation of Revelation with other prophetic literature (such as Daniel).
- 8.2.2. Further, it implies that the final New Testament book totally ignores that that great apostasy from the faith, which is clearly prophesied elsewhere in the New Testament (**2 Thes. 2:1; 1 Tim. 4:1**). This force became a church-state organism that viciously persecuted those attempting to practice Christianity.
- 8.2.3. Another major flaw is that the decisive victory portrayed in the latter chapters of the Apocalypse was never achieved with any proximity to the fall of Rome.
- 8.3. **The Liberal view** – This is a so called historical-critical approach that alleges John was predicting the fall of Rome and the end of the world in immediate future, but that he was mistaken. It rejects the concept of biblical inspiration.
- 8.4. **The “Realized Eschatology” view** – This theory is commonly called the A.D. 70 doctrine. It alleges that all Bible prophecy was fulfilled by A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed. This theory contends that the millennium was that period of time between the cross and the destruction of Jerusalem.
- 8.4.1. According to this notion, the “thousand years” of Revelation 20 symbolizes a mere forty year span. This is contrary to the basic pattern concerning the symbolic use of numbers.
- 8.4.2. The use of definite round numbers is frequently designed to convey the concept of the indefinite – i.e. from the lesser to the greater. Thus forgiving a person 70 times seven means forgiving limitlessly (Matt. 18:22). The expression 10,000 times 10,000 signifies a numberless multitude (Rev. 5:11). 1,000 does not mean 40.
- 8.5. **The Historical view** – this approach sees all of the symbols as specific historical happenings throughout the Christian Age. The proponents of this approach usually assign historical dates to each symbol. This approach has been very popular since the Reformation Period and is usually anti-Catholic. This approach tends to make the present time the last generation or two as all of the symbols have been explained.
- 8.6. **The Futurist view** – This theory alleges that most of the book of Revelation is yet unfulfilled; events occurring immediately before the second coming of Christ. Chapters 4-22 supposedly pertain to events associated with the second coming of Christ, and so are still believed to be future. This is the view of premillennialists and dispensationalists.
- 8.6.1. This concept is characterized by extreme literalism. The earthquake, the stars falling, and other items are taken as literal events. This includes the return of fleshly Israel to Palestine, the rebuilding of the material temple, and the personal reign of Christ upon David’s throne here on earth for 1,000 years.

8.6.2. Futurists hold that chapters 14-19 describe events which will take place in a three and one-half year period immediately preceding the second coming of Christ.

8.7. **The Idealist view** – This view suggests that the document is unrelated to specific historical events; rather, the symbols merely deal with the ongoing struggle between the church and her foes, whoever they may be, throughout Christian history.

8.7.1. This concept ignores the book's claim that it contains actual prophecy (**Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 10-19**), which was to commence (though not conclude) its fulfillment in the near future (**Rev. 1:1-3, 19**).

8.8. **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND** – The book was written for people in John's day with principles applicable to the end of time. This approach sees the book of Revelation as laying down the basic principles by which God operates. This approach advocates that these principles applied to the first century and to every generation until the end of time. It teaches that these things happen repeatedly always looking forward to the Second Coming of Jesus. It has room for all of the enemies of the church through the ages whether they are anti-Christian governments, false religions or the world.

8.8.1. We certainly understand the great persecution that tormented Christians not long after this book was written. That does not take away from the fact that the events in this book apply to Christians throughout the ages.

8.8.1.1. There are those who will be persecuted, even to the point of death.

8.8.1.2. Governments will try to diminish Christianity even to the point of intimidation.

8.8.1.3. Those in the world will ridicule, reject, and denounce Christians and Christianity causing loss of job, income, promotions, friends, family, etc.

8.8.1.4. Worldliness will continue to lure Christians away.

8.8.2. The invitation of the Lord is to come to him. Live for a purpose higher than the things of this life and obtain an eternal home in heaven. Always be prepared for His return.

Our study will be from the viewpoint of the historical background approach.