

Introduction to Revelation – part 1

Let's PRAY and then listen to God's word in Revelation chapter 1.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him
to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,

² who bore witness to the word of God and
to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy,
and blessed are those who hear,
and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace

from him who is and who was and who is to come, and
from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness,
the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and
every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and
all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God,
"who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

⁹ I, John, your brother and partner

in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance
that are in Jesus,

was on the island called Patmos

on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and

I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying,

"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven
churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to
Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me,
and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,

¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man,
clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.

¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow.

His eyes were like a flame of fire,

¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace,
and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars,

from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and
his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

But he laid his right hand on me, saying,

"Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one.

I died, and behold I am alive forevermore,

and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen,
those that are and those that are to take place after this.

²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right
hand, and the seven golden lampstands,
the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and
the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Introduction

According to the scholar G.K. Beale, surveys tell us that the book of Revelation is the Bible book which ordinary Christians *most* want to study and which pastors *least* want to teach! That's a shame!

How do YOU feel in approaching the book of Revelation? Are you excited? Do you have questions? Are you nervous? What do you expect God to teach you?

There is a great **encouragement** for us as we commit to studying it together. We read in 1:3 that:

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”

As we give ourselves to Revelation – to its reading, hearing and obeying – God will bless us. He promises to. So, take him at his word.

As we begin these introductory sessions we're going to watch an **overview of Revelation** – courtesy of the good people at The Bible Project. Here are two excellent 12-minute videos and an accompanying infographic (to call it a cartoon doesn't quite do it justice!).

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#overview>

They are well worth watching and recommending to friends as a “way in” to the message of the whole book. (I have two small reservations about the commentary: first, it's not sufficient to describe the eternal judgement of the lost primarily as “quarantine” – this is to ignore the clearly retributive aspect of judgement which is significant in Revelation; secondly, the “bride” of Christ is not the new creation, but the church – which fits with Revelation's future focus upon Christ and his people. But they are two very small reservations).

In what follows we will survey the authorship and date of the book. Much of this material I've taken from the excellent notes in the *ESV Study Bible*.

1. Authorship

Who wrote the book of Revelation? The divine author and the human author are identified in the opening verses. There is Jesus the Christ, who “has authority from God to describe coming events to his servant John (see also Rev. 1:4, 9; 22:8) 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 he is numbered among the prophets (Rev. 22:9). And from the earliest days of the church people like Justin Martyr (writing c. A.D. 135–150), Melito of Sardis (mid-2nd century), and Irenaeus of Lyons (writing c. 185) “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 scholars think it was written by another John.” But clear “thematic links (e.g., Jesus as Lamb and Word of God [John 1:1, 14, 29; Rev. 5:6; 19:13]) and the earliest church tradition favour the traditional attribution of Revelation to John, the “beloved disciple,” who with Peter and James belonged to Jesus' inner circle (John 21:20, 24).”

2. Date

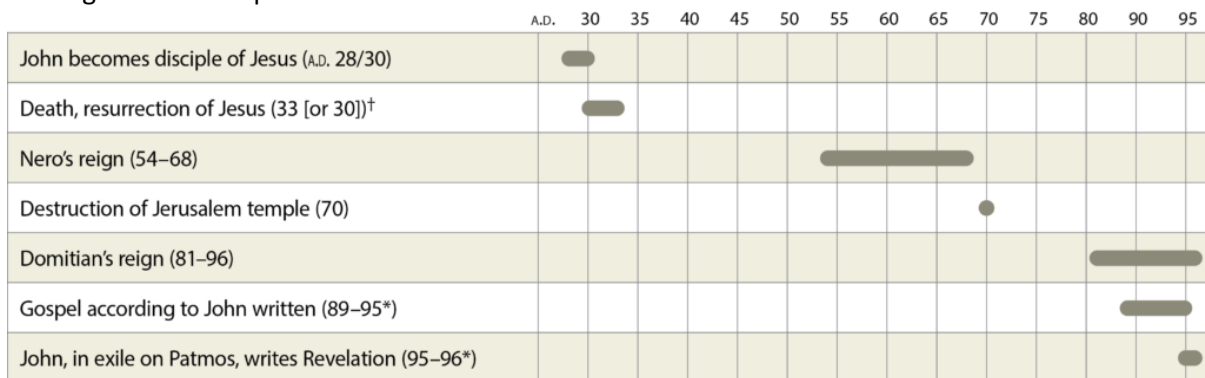
When was it written? And what difference does it make?

The church father Irenaeus 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 A.D. 96, most scholars date Revelation in the mid-90s.

Some, however, have argued for a date during Nero’s reign (A.D. 54–68) and before the fall of Jerusalem in 70, basing their conclusion on the fact that no mention is made of the destruction of the Temple as a past event.

It’s hard to judge between these two timeframes. Both were times of persecution which help make sense of much of the book’s contents. It’s probably best to follow the majority of the earliest witnesses who located Revelation during Domitian’s reign. “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.”

Again drawn from the ESV Study Bible this table helps relate key events in John’s life, Roman history and the writing of John’s Gospel and of Revelation.



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion, pp. 1809–1810

Taken from the [ESV® Study Bible](#)

3. Genre: What sort of book is Revelation?

The Bible is a library of 66 books, containing many different *types* of writing. It’s part of God’s wonderful gift to us that the Bible is enormously varied: it contains history, law, genealogy, poems and songs of many different kinds, prophecy, letters, etc. Identifying the type of writing – or “genre” – can help us to understand what God is saying to us in any given part of the Bible. Or at the very least genre alerts us to certain typical features which we otherwise might miss or misunderstand.

The opening verses of Revelation say something about what kind of book it is. It is “apocalyptic,” it is prophecy, and it is a letter.

(a) “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1)

The word “revelation” (note it is singular, *not* “Revelations”) translates the Greek noun *apokalypsis*. It means the disclosure or unveiling of unseen heavenly or future realities.

Probably the use of “apocalypse” in Revelation 1:1 is referring back to Daniel chapter 2 (see Dan. 2:22, 28, 29, 47 – where the Lord unveils a spiritual meaning to Daniel).

It’s a little clue that Revelation – like parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah – will contain “apocalyptic literature.” If Revelation is – partly – apocalyptic literature what difference does that make?

First: Often, there are visions of God’s *heavenly rule* which are designed to bring encouragement to the oppressed people of God. Apocalyptic writing in the Bible is not only or primarily about the end of all history – so we don’t assume that Revelation is all about the End.

Second: Very often, apocalyptic will use symbolism (more on that later). So, in reading Revelation we need to be careful to understand the symbols (usually with the help of the Old Testament), and not to pursue a literal interpretation.

(b) “this prophecy” (1:3)

Several times John calls his book a “prophecy” (1:3, 22:7,10,18-19). John is given a message by God, to pass on to the church. What he sees or hears, that is what he writes (1:11, 19). He doesn’t merely describe spiritual realities; he also calls God’s people to faithfulness, repentance and perseverance. In that respect, John is a classic prophet.

John writes in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets. And we’ll see – for example in his great oracle against Babylon (18:1-19:8) – that he echoes every single one of the oracles given against Babylon back in the Old Testament, as well as the oracles against Tyre. (See Isaiah 13:1-14:23, 21:1-10,47. Jeremiah 25:12-58,50-51. Isaiah 23. Ezekiel 26-28).

It’s as if John knows that all the eschatological – end-times – oracles of the prophets are about to be finally fulfilled. And that is what he sees and hears and describes.

(c) “John to the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4)

Revelation is also a letter. In the same way that Romans and 1 Peter were addressed initially to a specific church in a specific situation, so too Revelation had specific recipients in mind.

The book begins and ends with the standard features of NT letters.

We know there were other churches in the Roman province of Asia – like the church at Colossae. But Revelation was addressed to these seven churches (see the map – again drawn from the ESV Study Bible).



Genre: an interim conclusion. So, overall, we might view Revelation as *an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter*. That’s a fairly vague description! But it might help us as we study through the book.

4. How should we study Revelation?

Here are some TOP TIPS for studying Revelation. We’ll only mention them now very briefly. Each one we’ll return to in much more detail.

(a) Understand the Old Testament connections

The book of Revelation is the most “Biblical” book in the Bible! Almost every single verse contains an allusion to another part of the Bible – usually in the Old Testament, but sometimes parts of the New Testament too.

G.K. Beale’s top tip for understanding Revelation is to get a Bible with decent marginal cross references – so that you can see what Old Testament passages lie behind any given part of Revelation.

(b) Let the Bible interpret Revelation’s symbolism

Revelation is full of symbols. But it’s not up to us to define what we think they mean. The Bible tells us what Revelation’s symbols mean.

(c) Understand Revelation's structure and patterns

It's an incredibly carefully constructed book. When we pay attention to the big structure and to the little details we'll hear God's voice clearly (and we'll be kept from a range of errors).

(d) Work hard... and pray

Revelation itself encourages us towards prayerful hard work as we seek out how to interpret and to apply its message.

- Sometimes Revelation gives us clear interpretive comments, and we'd be daft not to follow them. (See 1:20, 4:5, 5:6,8, 7:13-14, 11:3-4, 14:3-4, 16:13-14, 17:9,10,11,12,15,16,18, 19:8, 20:4-5,14).
- But it also speaks about "mystery" (1:20, 17:5,7), and it says that some things must be understood "spiritually" (11:8); i.e. there are realities which we cannot understand unless their meaning is told to us by God.
- It tells us that some matters specifically require "wisdom" (13:18, 17:9).

2 Timothy 2:7 gives us a great encouragement as we approach our task: "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything."

We need both halves of that verse. We are to "think" – and that requires hard work – both on our own and in the company of the church. But "understanding" is the gift of the Lord – and so we ask him for it.

5. What will Revelation teach us?

Revelation may not teach us about what we WANT it to teach us. That's often the case when we come to the Bible: God has actually got something different for us!

Here's a spoiler: Revelation is mainly NOT about the end of time! If we think it is, we will miss much that in Revelation concerning Christian life and discipleship. Whilst there is reference to the future in Revelation, it is NOT a futurology. We should not read it next to the newspaper, trying to relate it to what is going on around us. In due course we'll see why that is the case.

Here are the three main theological messages (courtesy of G.K. Beale's helpful interview with Nancy Guthrie, in which he gives advice to Bible teachers on how best to approach the book of Revelation – see "Help me teach the Bible: Revelation" at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#teaching-preaching>)

(a) Willingness to suffer for Christ is the key to victory.

Revelation is a vision from the invisible heavenly realm, which typically we don't have access to. But it invades through the writing of the prophet John. Revelation is about the values of heaven which tend to be the opposite of the values of earth. So, there is to be no compromise for the Christian in his or her earthly warfare. Sin makes worldliness look normal, and righteousness extraordinary. Revelation wants to refute this. But it will be costly.

In 14:4 we're told of the faithful that, "It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes." In Revelation's story this almost becomes proverbial. John first hears of a Lion who has conquered (5:5); but then he turns and sees not a lion but "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (5:6). He conquered through the Cross, obtaining victory in the midst of suffering. We conquer in no other way. So, in 1:9 the apostle can write to the churches as "your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus." Are we willing to suffer for Christ?

(b) The sovereignty of God in human history.

It is a lofty thing to speak of, but it is also deeply personal. When we read of Christ opening the seals of God's plan for history – ushering in judgement and pain – we are helped to see that the Lord is NOT out of control – either of world history or of my history. One key character in Revelation is Satan aka the

Devil/Dragon/Serpent. It's challenging to many of us, who often think that God does the good stuff and Satan does the bad stuff. But Revelation teaches us that God sends trials on the earth through the working of his Satanic enemy. It's just what happened to Jesus, after all: God caused powers of evil to crucify him. And Jesus will send out evils to refine his people. It's a tough theology, but it's deep. And we need it. All suffering and evil are ultimately in the hands of God.

At the heart of it all (recorded for us in the grand vision of God's sovereignty in chapters 4 and 5) we are shown God on his throne, surrounded by the living creatures, four guarding cherubim, 24 elders representing the whole community of the redeemed, and then the rest of creation. He is sovereign over it all: over creation, and over redemption – and governs it all for his glory.

(c) The new creation as fulfilment of biblical prophecy.

The Bible begins with Adam as a king-priest who fails in his task to rule creation. But the whole Bible looks forward to the time when the whole heavens and earth will become like a new Eden, like the holy of holies, like God's city. This is accomplished in Jesus... and then in the End: a renewed creation. That's what we are looking forward to.

Resources on Revelation

- *ESV Study Bible*: notes and introduction [NB. The introduction is available online at The Gospel Coalition website: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#overview>]
- John Richardson, *Revelation Unwrapped* (82 page booklet)
- G.K.Beale, "Help me teach the Bible: Revelation" (1 hour interview with Nancy Guthrie – tips for Bibleteachers – at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/revelation/#teaching-preaching>)
- Leon Morris, *Revelation* (256 pages; Tyndale New Testament Commentary series)
- G.K. Beale, *The book of Revelation: a shorter exegetical commentary* (NB. It's still 500 pages.... But it's smaller than his 1,300 page classic!)