

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1-3)

The Book of Revelation is one that has mystified and fascinated many of God’s saints down the centuries with its colourful images, terrible judgments, elusive symbolism, and apocalyptic prophecies. As a consequence it has been misunderstood, misrepresented or ignored as too cryptic. John Calvin avoided writing a commentary on it and Luther found it an impenetrable mystery that he initially doubted it was even in the canon of Scripture. That is a tragedy as, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

There is something of great blessing in every book of the Bible. However, Revelation we are explicitly told has a special blessing for those who even read it, *“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that bear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein...”* (Rev. 1:3a; cf. 22:7) This is not a book to be avoided but eagerly studied by the child of God in a spirit of humility and expectation. Revelation was not given to feed our imaginations in entertainment or to be a piece of literature for theologians to speculate and debate over. God wants us all to study and understand this wonderful book. It warns us of the dangers of sin and compromise in the church and it is an encouraging reminder that God will ultimately triumph over the forces of hell.

BACKGROUND TO THE BOOK

The Apostle John is the author of this book (cf. Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Most commentators date the book around 95-96 A.D. when John was exiled to the isle of Patmos about 40 miles from Ephesus (West Coast of Modern Turkey). Likely all the other apostles were dead. Paul was likely martyred some 30-35 years previously. John gives us the historical context in the opening chapter, *“I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.”* (Rev. 1:9) So Revelation was penned at a time of persecution for the Church. More trouble was predicted on the horizon (cf. Rev. 2:10).

7 Churches of Revelation



A strong Church tradition is that John the Apostle pastored the church at Ephesus, which is near to Patmos. The Virgin Mary was said to have lived in John's home in Ephesus. Previously both Paul and Timothy were the pastors of the Ephesus Church. Most of the early church writers clearly identify John as the author of this book and make clear that he was teaching a future Great Tribulation Period and Millennium kingdom to come. Justin Martyr (100–165) was a member of the Ephesus Church and wrote around 135 AD (about 40 years after John penned Revelation) the following insight,

“And further, 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 believed 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.”

A native of Smyrna, Irenaeus (early 2nd century – c. 202 AD) wrote a famous work *Against Heresies* in which he affirmed that the Apostle John was the author of Revelation and also stated that he understood from the Scriptures that the Great Tribulation Period would bring great judgment on the nations of the earth,

“And if any one will devote a close attention to those things which are stated by the prophets with regard to the time of the end, and those which John the disciple of the Lord saw in the Apocalypse he will find that the nations are to receive the same plagues universally, as Egypt then did particularly.”

Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240 AD) also noted, “But we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth, although before heaven, only in another state of existence; inasmuch as it will be after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem...This both Ezekiel had knowledge of and the Apostle John beheld.”

THEME OF THE BOOK

A great tragedy in studying this book is that so many focus on the awesome apocalyptic judgments detailed and the rise of the antichrist that they miss the central figure of the Book – the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must not love the prophecies more than the Christ of the prophecies. These chapters must not become a battleground for fleshly arguments, as it so often is, but must be a place where we think much about Jesus Christ. We must not lose the big picture by missing Him.

The name of the book is taken from the theme as the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which simply means “to unveil” or to “take the cover” something that has been hidden. This is set forth from the very first verse, “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him...*” (Rev. 1:1a) So the theme of this book is tied to this purpose. It is a book that seeks to direct the attention of the reader to the Person and Work of the Conquering Saviour in the past, present, and the future. We see a different picture of Jesus Christ from His First Coming when His glory was veiled. That time He came as the Suffering Servant to die in shame on the Cross. This second time He is coming to be crowned and to reign as the glorious King of Kings and Judge of all. John MacArthur gives us a good summary when he noted,

“The first time Jesus came to earth, He came as a servant. The next time He will come as the sovereign King. The first time Jesus came, He came as one obeying. The next time

He will come as one commanding. The first time Jesus came, He came alone to live with a Jewish couple in a small obscure town. The next time He will come with all His holy angels to take over the whole earth. The first time Jesus came He came in humility. The next time He will come in glorious majesty and splendor. The first time Jesus came, He came to seek and to save the lost. And the next time He will come to judge and sentence the lost. Or, to put the contrast in the terms of our text, the first time Jesus came He came as the sower. Next time He will come as the reaper. He came in grace, He comes in wrath.”

Jesus Christ is seen preserving, providing, and purifying His people in the early chapters and then directing the consummation of all things into the Eternal Golden Age of Revelation 21-22, where the saints of God are fully purified. We see Christ unveiled, the glorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords coming to eternally triumph over evil. In this book we see the final fulfillment of the promise given to Mary preceding the Incarnation, “*He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.*” (Luke 1:32-33) Many titles are used to describe Jesus Christ in the Book of Revelation:

- (1) Faithful Witness (Rev 1:5)
- (2) First Begotten of the Dead (Rev 1:5)
- (3) Prince of the Kings of the Earth (Rev 1:5)
- (4) Alpha and Omega (Rev 1:8-13)
- (5) First and Last (Rev 1:8, 11, 13)
- (6) Son of Man (Rev 1:13)
- (7) He that liveth and was dead (Rev 1:18)
- (8) He that holdeth the seven stars (Rev 2:1)
- (9) He who walketh midst the golden candlesticks (Rev 2:1)
- (10) He who hath the sharp sword with two edges (Rev 2:12)
- (11) Son of God (Rev 2:18)
- (12) He which searches the reins and hearts (Rev 2:23)
- (13) He that hath the seven Spirits of God (Rev 3:1)
- (14) He that hath the seven stars (Rev 3:1)
- (15) He that is holy and true (Rev 3:7)
- (16) He that hath the key of David (Rev 3:7)
- (17) He that openeth and no man shutteth (Rev 3:7)
- (18) The Amen (Rev 3:14)
- (19) The faithful and true witness (Rev 3:14)
- (20) The beginning of the creation of God (Rev 3:14)
- (21) Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5,9)

- (22) The root of David (Rev 5:5,9)
- (23) The Lamb (Rev 5: 8,9)
- (24) Lord of Lords and King of Kings (Rev 17:14)
- (25) The Word of God (Rev 19:13)
- (26) The bright and morning star (Rev 22: 16)

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

To understand this wonderful book, the reader must see the “big picture” first. There is a key verse in Revelation that gives a helpful outline to the division of the timing of the fulfillment of the prophecies of this book. John was told, “*Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.*” (Rev. 1:19) Most commentators divide the Book into three main sections based on this divinely inspired outline:

- (1) **The Things Which Thou Hast Seen (Rev 1)**
- (2) **The Things Which Are (Rev 2-3)**
- (3) **The Things Which Shall Be Hereafter (Rev 4-22)**

REVELATION

	“The things which you have seen . . .” Personal and biographical CHAPTER 1	“The things which are . . .” Christ’s letters to the seven churches CHAPTERS 2–3	“The things which will take place.” (Revelation 1:19) Christ as Judge (chapters 4–5) The tribulation (chapters 6–18) The coming of Christ (chapter 19) The millennium (chapter 20) The eternal state (chapters 21–22) CHAPTERS 4–22	
“I am the Alpha . . .” (1:8)			“. . . and the Omega” (22:13)	
Scope	History: looking back		Prophecy: looking ahead	
Style	Dialogue		Observations and questions	
Scene	On earth		Shifts between earth and heaven	
Theme	Christ’s future triumph over the forces of evil and His re-creation of the world for the redeemed			
Key Verses	1:7, 19; 22:12–13			
Christ in Revelation	Jesus is the coming King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who will return as Judge and King to usher in the kingdom of God on earth (19:11–20:6).			

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All of these outlined sections are linked to the Person and Work of the Risen Christ. He is the key to unlock the mysteries of this book. Christ is the star of the inspired dramas that unfold. If you miss Christ you miss the true understanding of this final revelation. We should be looking for Him in all its pages. In this book we see 6 main sections that deal with that:

Ministry & Messages of Jesus Christ	Worship of Jesus Christ	Judgments of Jesus Christ	Rivals of Jesus Christ	Deliverance of Jesus Christ	Glorious Reign of Jesus Christ
Rev 1:1-3:22	Rev 4:1-7:17	Rev 8:1-10:11	Rev 11:1-13:18	Rev 14:1-19:10	Rev 19:11-22:21

SYMBOLISM OF BOOK

One of the reasons there is so much confusion in reading this book is the abundant use of symbols such as numbers, names, and images in many of the visions. We have multiple symbols used, for example, for Christ, the devil, and antichrist etc. Some of these symbols are easier to understand as they are explained in the text e.g. the seven stars and seven candlesticks of Rev. 1:20 we are told are seven churches. Others like the Tree of Life in Rev. 2:7 and 22:2 must be understood from the context of Genesis.

Other books like Romans or Ephesians follow a very logical format with much less symbolic language but Revelation utilizes many apocalyptic pictures, symbols, and dramas. We read right from the beginning of this, “*and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John*” (Rev. 1:1b) The verb “*signified*” is Greek word *semaino* meaning “to give a sign” or “to communicate.” What we need to take great care is not to ignore or even reject the symbols as redundant just because they are difficult to understand. These symbols are given to us by God, “*and He sent and signified it...*” so they must not be lightly dismissed by allegorizing or spiritualizing the text. We must not empty the book of any real meaning. These symbols or signs mean something! They point to a reality in the same way a road signpost to a town points to a real town. God wants us to discern the meaning and learn from it. Dr Adrian Rogers explains,

“Now, when we think about the Book of Revelation being highly symbolic, that always brings up the perennial question: Are we to interpret the Book of Revelation literally, or are we to interpret the Book of Revelation symbolically? Now, the answer to that is *yes*. We are to interpret the Book of Revelation both symbolically and literally. And, there’s no contradiction; you don’t have to make those things contradict themselves. You find out what the symbol stands for; and then, you literally believe it. You see, for example, in Revelation 12, Satan is spoken of as a great red dragon having a tail so long that he can knock a third of the stars from Heaven (Revelation 12:3–4). Well, obviously, that’s symbolism. Satan is not actually a red dragon; he doesn’t have seven heads and a tail so long that he could sweep a third of the stars from Heaven—not actually. But, as we study, we find out that the stars there represent the fallen angels that have become demon spirits. And, we see that Satan has been characterized as a dragon because of his ferocity, and his cruelty, and his power, and his might. So, this is a symbolic representation of the devil. But, dear friend, when we understand that it symbolizes the devil, we believe that there is literally a devil. Don’t do like some people would do, when they’d read that passage and say, “Oh, that’s symbolism. There is no devil, you see.” So, you interpret the Book of Revelation both symbolically and literally. You find what the symbol stands for; and then, you literally believe it.”

Of course there is another extreme to guard against. We must not allow our imaginations to run wild in interpreting these symbols and try to force esoteric meanings into every little detail. Much damage has been done to the credibility of preachers in doing just that. For instance in the 1980s some preachers were speculating that President Ronald Reagan was the Antichrist because his full name Ronald Wilson Reagan equated to 666! Others claimed that Mikhail Gorbachev could be the Antichrist as he had a prominent birthmark, which was argued to be the mark of the beast!

Rather we must follow conservative straightforward view of the symbols in light of what the text says. One writer wisely advised, “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common

sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

LINKS TO THE BOOK OF GENESIS

There is a close correlation between the other parts of the Bible and the Book of Revelation, especially the apocalyptic prophecies in books like Daniel and Zechariah, which have complementary visions and symbols. It is said that around two thirds of the Book of Revelation refers to verses or incidents recorded in just the Old Testament alone. So to understand properly this “Crown Jewel of Prophecy” we must know the other prophecies of the OT and the NT (like the Olivet Discourse, Paul’s statements about Israel in Romans 9-11 etc). This Book of Revelation draws all the threads of Scripture and history together in one grand consummation. It is no wonder that we are warned, *“For I testify unto every man that beareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”* (Rev. 22:18-19)

The Book of Revelation is especially linked to the first book of the Bible, Genesis. These two books are like divine bookends in that they tie the other 64 books of the Bible together by the golden thread of Jesus Christ. The devil particularly hates the first and the last book of the Bible. The first book predicted his destruction and the last book unveils the details of his final destruction. Satan has continually attacked the first book as a mythical account and the last one as an impenetrable mystery or an irrelevant symbolic story.

There are many links and contrasts between Genesis and Revelation. Many things that have their origins in Genesis have their conclusions in Revelation. In Genesis we see the first Adam reigning on earth and in Revelation we have the last Adam reigning in glory. In Genesis we see the origins of sin, suffering and death whereas in Revelation we see the destruction of sin, suffering and death. We also see in Genesis man driven from paradise and God’s presence whereas in Revelation we see man, through Christ, regaining paradise and ushered into the eternal presence of God. In Genesis the devil invaded paradise whereas in Revelation he is banished eternally from it. Man was removed in Genesis from eating from the Tree of Life whereas in Revelation man is fed from the same tree, *“In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”* (Rev. 22:2)

The key link to these two books is Jesus Christ. In Genesis He is the promised Seed of Genesis 3:15 but in Revelation He is the conquering Saviour who has triumphed over sin, death, and the devil. He is the One *“that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.”* (Rev. 1:5b) No book presents Him so clearly in His glory, power, majesty, and triumph. This book should stir the emotions of every believer’s heart to look forward with joyful expectation to the Blessed Hope. The revelations should also encourage us that God is in control despite the chaos and darkness around us. It is no wonder that John cried, *“Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”* (Rev. 22:20b)