

Lesson 2 of Introductory Material

The Author, Historical, and Geographic Background

Introduction: In understanding what God is saying to us in a particular book or passage of the Bible it is helpful to know something about the author, the cultural aspects of the time, and the historical background and context of when God revealed the context of the book. This is not only true with the Book of Revelation, but likely more important that with any other Bible book. It is often said that for someone who has never read the Bible or is a new convert you would not want to recommend that the first Bible book they read is Revelation! We need to know what was going on in the world and what the early Christians were facing to understand more of why God would reveal a book that speaks of the things it does and how it speaks to them. This is why we are spending a good bit of time in the background information before we begin working through the chapters. We will then have a foundation and the proper “lens” through which to view Revelation.

Author:

See pages 9-10 in Lesson 1 from the *God's Word for Today* study as we answer who the human author of Revelation was.

We will expand with the historical background, but for now know that Revelation was written in the range of 90-96 AD, most likely in 95 or 96.

Historical Background:

View Video *Explaining All the Scary Stuff in Revelation: Locked on a Collision Course* (26 minutes)

The video provides historical background and some information/discussion items are provided below. Lesson 1 from *God's Word for Today* also provides a historical summary on pages 10-11.

Alexander the Great 356-332 BC

It may seem strange to begin with a ruler so long before the time Revelation was written and one that was Greek rather than Roman. Why? What three things did Alexander the Great do that would influence the Romans and the world?

- 1.
2. (Why in particular is this later important for Christianity)
- 3.

Rome would become a major city of the world. Its practical people began expanding not only their city, but eventually its empire which would stretch across an impressive swath of the world. The video begins with Julius Cesar and continues to outline the Roman rulers through the time of Revelation.

Julius Caesar 100-44 BC

His rule would see the beginning of the end for the Roman Republic form of government, as he desired to become an emperor. He would be killed, but the days of emperors would begin.

Octavian (Caesar Augustus) 27 BC-14 AD

Here we see Biblical history intersect with Western History. Octavian, or Augustus, was the first Roman Emperor and ruled when Jesus was born in Bethlehem (as we are familiar with from Luke 2). Time would later be divided by the birth of Jesus, rather than measured from the founding of Rome. Octavian did many things including: expanding the empire, establishing a police and fire departments, built roads (which would be an aid for the later spread of the Gospel), established a courier system. He restored temples and elevated religion. It is very important to note that, after his death, he was the first Roman Emperor to be declared a _____.

Tiberius 14-37 AD

Tiberius was the emperor when Jesus was crucified (under the Roman governor Pilate) and rose from the dead. He was a good emperor at first, but later went crazy.

Caligula (nickname meaning "little boot") 37-41 AD

He was even more eccentric than Tiberius. He actually named himself a "god",

Claudius 41-54 AD

He has some type of disability, including stuttering. He conquered Britain and exiled the Jews from Rome (why Aquilla and Pricilla are in Corinth in Acts). He is also responsible for "The Nazareth Inscription". What was this and why is it important?

Nero 54-68 AD

Nero was a successful military and political leader (at first). But it is under him that the Jewish revolt began and also a major fire hit Rome. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and a vigorous persecution of Christians in the City of Rome took place. Peter and most likely Paul were martyred under Nero. Some early Christian writings even viewed him as the Anti-Christ. He ended up committing suicide saying, "What an artist the world is losing."

Following Nero, there were three emperors with very short reigns:

Galba June 68-January 69 (killed)

Otho January 69-April 69 (suicide)

Vitellius April 69-December 69 (murdered)

Vespasian December 69-79

Notable things that happened under Vespasian were the building of the Colosseum, the end of the Jewish revolt including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (70 AD), and that he commissioned the historian Josephus (from which we have much information relating to and confirming events outlined in the Bible).

Titus 79-81

Titus had been the general that oversaw the taking and destruction of Jerusalem. Fortunately, the Christians took seriously the prophetic words of Jesus spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem and fled the city before it was destroyed. This caused the Gospel to be spread to many other areas. Unfortunately for Titus, his ambitious brother wanted the throne...

Domitian 81-96

Domitian was a strong leader who was a “micromanager” and “law and order” type of ruler. He balanced budgets, rebuilt Rome after a fire, and sought to strengthen the empire. He was also very religious (in the Roman sense). Nero saw himself as a “divine monarch” and declared himself a god and led a “revival” of Roman religion. Other religions were tolerated, so long as they went along with Roman order and assimilated Roman religious practices to include offering incense to the god-emperor once a year. For many of the religions with multiple gods, this was not too much of a problem.

But who would this be a problem for? Christians, of course. Christians had only one God and were to worship only Him. There were also many common misconceptions about Christians, causing many people to not like them. A bloody persecution of Christians began throughout the Empire. It was most felt in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) as this region had the largest number of Christians.

What can we learn from the early Christians in responding to the demands to worship the Emperor and how they reacted to it?

Some of the following information is covered in the video and some is from the study and other sources. See the map in the appendix for the locations of the places mentioned below.

We have fairly reliable information about the Apostle John’s later life from an early Church Father named Irenaeus (130-200 AD). St. John was the pastor of the church at Ephesus. After surviving being boiled alive in oil (according to church tradition), John was exiled to the island of Patmos. Patmos is a small 10 by 6 mile island (in modern day Greece) off the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). It was here that in a cave (according to tradition) that the Lord visited John in 95/96 AD to deliver the vision that would be recorded as the Book of Revelation.

After Domitian was assassinated, Nerva become emperor from 96-98. He allowed John to return to Ephesus, where he resumed pasturing the congregation there. John would die during the reign of Trajan (98-117). He lived to be about 100 years old, the only one of the 12 Apostles to not die a martyr’s death. According to Irenaeus, John in his old age he would be carried into the congregation to preach, always beginning his sermons with words reflecting the “new commandment” that

Jesus had given the Disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, "Little children, love one another."

Now that we have the author, geographic, and historical background of Revelation we can begin to understand what this book meant to the early Christians. In our next lesson we will see specifically how they would have received and understood many of the things in Revelation that seem "scary", "strange", or "mysterious" to modern readers.

In closing we read the words of St. Paul from Romans 8:31, 35; 37-39.

³¹ What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁷ Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.

³⁸ For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

³⁹ Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

While these were written to the church at Rome, how do they also reflect what the Christians in Asia Minor were experiencing? How can they help and encourage us today?