

REVELATION

Study 1: An Introduction

The Book of Revelation is a strange but exciting book located at the very end of our Bibles. It is a literary masterpiece that has sparked the imagination of its readers and stumped the minds of its many interpreters. It is a book that many of us might not fully understand, but one that God's people must not ignore.

Christians throughout history have been drawn to the Book of Revelation, but many pastors and teachers have often avoided the task of teaching such a controversial book. Throughout history, the Book of Revelation has stirred up a wide range of emotions, feelings, opinions and debates. Therefore, many people (and pastors) have unfortunately chosen to avoid the tension by avoiding the book altogether.¹ However, this has led many in the church to miss out on the inspiration and encouragement that the Book of Revelation has offered the church throughout history.

Consider how Richard Bauckham, one of the most renowned New Testament scholars of our time, describes the book:

"Revelation is a book of profound theology, intense prophetic insight and dazzling literary accomplishment... [It has] inspired the martyrs, nourished the imagination of visionary artists and hymn-writers, resourced prophetic critiques of oppression and corruption in state and church, and sustained hope and resistance in the most hopeless situations... Revelation can be seen to be not only one of the finest literary works in the New Testament, but also one of the greatest theological achievements of early Christianity."²

To sum up Bauckham's praise for the book: The Book of Revelation is an extremely important work of Scripture, and every Christian should read it, listen to it, study it and respond to its message.

¹ It's worth noting that the German monk and reformer, Martin Luther, wanted the Book of Revelation removed from the Bible, and his contemporary, John Calvin, wrote a commentary on every single book of the Bible except the Book of Revelation.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22

Therefore, this particular study of the Book of Revelation will be our own humble attempt to rediscover an appreciation for this particular portion of Scripture. It might be a difficult book to understand, but we are doing ourselves an incredible disservice when we fail to even give it a try.

Where to Begin?

Before we begin to deal directly with the main content of the book, it would help us to have a basic understanding of what we are actually reading when we read the Book of Revelation. This is an essential step to avoiding misinterpretation. Therefore, in this first study, we will simply try to get our feet underneath us so that we can steady ourselves for the wild ride that will follow.

One of the primary reasons why the Book of Revelation has caused so much confusion and controversy is because many people have failed to understand what kind of book they are reading when they read the Book of Revelation.

Basic observation teaches us that we cannot read every book of the Bible in the exact same way. All sorts of confusion and misinterpretation would result if we were to read the poetry of the Psalms in the same way that we read the discourses in Paul's letters. In the same way, we would never read *The New York Times* in the same way that we would read *The Lord of the Rings*. We all know that in order to properly understand any work of literature, we must first recognize and understand what kind of literature it is that we are actually reading.

So what are we reading when we read the Book of Revelation? The most obvious place to start in answering that question is to identify who wrote the book and why he wrote it.

Who Wrote the Revelation?

In the opening prologue and greeting, the author of the Book of Revelation identifies himself as the Lord's servant named John. This John could possibly be the same author who wrote the Gospel of John and the three letters of John (I, II, III John), or it could have been another leader in the early church named John. Scholars disagree and debate these things, but whichever John it was, he clearly held a prominent role among the first-century churches located in the Roman province of Asia. This John had recently received a revelation from God, and he was now writing an account of what he had seen and heard.

John is writing an account of a revelation that was given to him. The Greek word used here for the word *revelation* is the word *apokalypsis*. Often times, when we hear the word *apocalypse* we think about images of massive catastrophic events that involve the final destruction of the world as we know it. Many in the church immediately assume that this is what the Book of Revelation is all about – a book that describes the catastrophic events that will precede and lead up to to the end of the world. However, the word *apocalypse* (or *apokalypsis* in Greek) simply means an *uncovering*, or a *revealing*; or as John describes his own experience, a *revelation*.

This is what makes the Book of Revelation so difficult for many of us to understand and interpret properly. The Book of Revelation is the written disclosure of an apocalypse. John is writing down what God revealed to him in a unique spiritual experience that he was given while he was exiled on a remote island off the coast of Asia. And John writes what he saw and heard by using a particular writing style that was often used in describing these kinds of spiritual experiences – a writing style known as *apocalyptic literature*.

Apocalyptic literature was a particular kind of Jewish literature that was used by prophets and other writers to describe an apocalypse.³ They often recounted a prophet's symbolic dreams or visions that revealed what God was doing behind the scenes of human history so that present events could be viewed from the broader perspective of history's God-ordained finish line.

Richard Bauckham describes this apocalyptic aspect of the Book of Revelation in this way:

“John’s work is a prophetic apocalypse... because it offers prophetic insight into God’s purpose by disclosing the content of a vision in which John is taken out of the world, so to speak, in order to see it differently. Here John’s work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition, in which a seer is taken in a vision into God’s throne-room in heaven to learn the secrets of the divine purpose... and to see this world from a heavenly perspective. John is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history, to see what’s really going on in the events of his time and place. He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of its final outcome.”⁴

Apocalyptic literature seeks to proclaim a direct message from God, but it does so by using a wide range of symbolic imagery, language and numbers. So how should we interpret all the imagery?

³ Some other apocalyptic works that influenced the Revelation are the Book of Daniel, Zechariah, 1 Enoch, 2 Ezra and 4 Baruch.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 6-7

The real key to understanding all the symbolic imagery and numbers is understanding the Hebrew Scriptures (aka. the Old Testament). John was clearly immersed in the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, and it influenced every aspect of his letter. In fact, the Book of Revelation contains more allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures than all of the other New Testament books combined. And so, as we read about lions, lambs, beasts, and locusts, our key to interpretation will be the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (not 'end-times' charts and timelines). This is the best way to avoid popular misinterpretation, and it will put us on the right track to read, hear and keep what John has written.

John also refers to his apocalypse as a *prophesy*, but contrary to what many modern readers often assume, a *prophecy* is not primarily a message that is focused on predicting the future. A prophecy is more accurately defined as a direct message from God through a prophet of God to the people of God in order to help them discern and respond to their current situation and circumstances. The phenomenon of predicting the future can be an aspect of prophecy, but a prophecy is primarily the proclamation of God's plan and purposes for the people that are being addressed.

Therefore, the Book of Revelation is a prophetic apocalypse was intended to comfort and/or challenge the people being addressed by opening up their eyes and "enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their [own concrete historical] situation and to respond appropriately."⁵

So who was being addressed and what was their situation?

The book opens and closes in the form of an ancient letter, and it is addressed to seven specific churches located in the Roman province of Asia. And so, even though the Book of Revelation has continued to speak to Christians throughout history, the primary message and meaning of the book must be understood in light of the historical context of John's original audience.

Who Was the Original Audience of the Revelation?

Understanding that the Book of Revelation was written as a letter to specific first-century churches within the Roman province of Asia helps us to read and interpret the book in a more responsible manner. It is not a mysterious or magical book with a secret or coded message that provides a blueprint for how the world is going to end or when King Jesus is going to return. It is first and foremost a letter from a Jewish-Christian prophet named John to first-century Christians living in certain cities that belonged to the dominant world superpower of that time – the Roman Empire.

⁵ Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 7

This means that when we are reading the Book of Revelation (or any of the other New Testament letters for that matter) we must come to realize that we are essentially reading someone else's mail. We are reading a letter and a message that was originally written and addressed to someone else. And so, since we are reading a first-century letter written by a first-century author to specific first-century people, we must first take the time to try and discover how this message would have been relevant to the people back then in order to properly understand how it is still relevant for us today.

It is generally accepted that the Book of Revelation was written towards the end of the first-century during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Domitian (81-96 CE). History records Domitian as a cruel tyrant who was obsessed with his position of power and who demanded that he be worshipped as 'lord and god'.⁶ During this time, it had become common to attribute divine status to the Roman Emperor after his death, but Domitian was one of the only emperors to declare himself as being divine while he was still alive and reigning. His own declaration of deity and perspective on his own power led to a revival and a ramping-up of the Roman civil religion known as the *imperial cult*.⁷

The imperial cult was a form of national religion that worshipped the Roman Emperor as divine and that declared the Roman Empire to have divinely sanctioned authority and favor. Temples to the goddess *Roma* (a female personification of the Roman State) were located throughout the empire. And as the imperial cult took shape over the years, *Roma* began to be viewed as the enthroned deity over the Empire with the Roman Emperor being viewed as her partner and servant who shared in her reign. This national religion was promoted and propagated throughout the empire through public rituals, symbols (coins, statues, art, etc.) and ceremonies that were held on sacred days and at sacred places (*sacred* simply meaning special to Roman political/religious purposes).

This revival and ramping-up of Roman national religion created serious controversy and conflict for the Christians living in prominent cities within the Roman Empire. Cities that expressed the greatest public expressions of worship and that demonstrated their allegiance and loyalty to Rome and the Emperor were given special favor and benefits within the empire. By the end of the first century, the two cities of Pergamum and Ephesus found themselves trying to outdo one another in showing their national pride and allegiance to Rome. They were both awarded the title of "temple warden" which was an honorable title given by the Roman Emperor himself to Rome's most loyal cities.

⁶ N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament In It's World*, (London: SPCK, 2019), 814-815

⁷ The word *imperial* refers to the emperor and the state that supports his power, and the word *cult* refers to organized "worship". Therefore, the *imperial cult* can be understood as the national religion that worshipped the emperor and the empire.

David deSilva, a distinguished author and New Testament scholar, compares this kind of behavior among the Roman provinces to the way modern cities compete for special recognition and the economic benefits that come with that recognition. He mentions that, "The cities of Asia Minor were as enthusiastic and as invested in hosting the imperial cult as modern cities are about convincing a major football team to relocate or winning the bid to host the Olympics."⁸

Promoting and maintaining local loyalty to the Roman Emperor and the Empire helped to secure the overall stability and prosperity that the Empire provided, and it put your city in a good position to receive special benefits and Roman assistance when needed. And so, there was a good bit of pressure from local authorities and the social elites for all citizens and residents to participate in the public rituals and ceremonies that honored Rome and the Emperor. This created an atmosphere of serious controversy and conflict for Christians living among their Roman neighbors. A small group of people in your city who were choosing not to participate in the Roman national religion because they claimed that they belonged to another kingdom and worshipped another King would have been seen as a nuisance and a potential threat to the welfare of your city. Again, deSilva writes:

"The Christians' neighbors, who depended upon the stability now maintained by the empire, [viewed Christians in their community] as potential enemies of the Roman peace. Christians were, after all, followers of a man whom a Roman procurator had duly executed for sedition. A central focus in the proclamation of [the Christian leaders] was some future day when this executed leader would return to bring Roman power to an end in favor of some "kingdom of God," an upheaval that would not be welcomed by (or favorable to) the majority. In short, [the Christians' neighbors] would see formerly decent citizens or children of decent citizens who have gotten into some very bad company by being lured into this foreign superstition."⁹

It's difficult for us to imagine but important for us to remember that the large majority of the Roman world hardly even acknowledged the God of Israel. At this time in history, the God we know and worship as the Creator and King of the universe was likely viewed by the Roman population as a tribal deity of those peculiar people from a small province located in the far eastern part of the empire. The God of Israel, in most people's minds, was not a major player in the arena of the gods and was definitely not considered as being on the same level as the Greek and Roman gods (such as Zeus and Jupiter) that had long been respected and worshipped throughout the empire.

⁸ David A. deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances: Heeding Revelation's Warning*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing, 2013), 29

⁹ deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances*, 16-17

This aspect of the first-century Christian's experience is difficult for us to imagine and relate to because now the God of the Bible is the most popular god in the world. It's easy for us to overlook just how challenging it would have been for first-century Christians to remain faithful to what they believed when the vast majority of their neighbors had never even heard about their God and his crucified Messiah. Christians were viewed as strange people who had turned their backs on proper political and religious devotion, and ironically, they were even accused of being "atheists".¹⁰

All of these things help us better understand the situation and circumstances of the first-century Christians living in one of these seven cities to which John's letter is addressed. They were living during a time in which the Christian worldview would have been viewed as entirely foreign and strange. They were living during a time where there was strong pressure in your local society to participate in the Roman national religion. And they were living during a time where, if you did not participate, you could quickly become a potential target for accusations and persecution. If you wanted to be a follower of Jesus but also wanted to avoid being mocked by your peers, ostracized in your community, oppressed by the local government or even persecuted for what you believed, then there was a strong temptation to compromise and assimilate to 'the way of the empire' and at least go through the motions in participating in the public expressions of national pride and loyalty.

On top of all this, there was also another alluring temptation that confronted Christians living in the Roman Empire. For some Christians, the main problem wasn't persecution but rather that they had been lured by the wealth, power, peace and prosperity that the Roman economic system provided. They were "getting into bed" with an economic system entangled with injustice and exploitation, and they had found ways to justify this way of life. The Book of Revelation sounds an alarm warning these Christians of their participation in 'the way of the empire' and calls them to repent.

These were the realities and temptations that the original audience of the Book of Revelation was facing. Understanding these realities and temptations provides us with the context that helps us better understand the overall content of John's prophetic message. And so, we might define the book in this way: The Book of Revelation was written to comfort and challenge the Christians living under the power and influence of the Roman Empire to not give in to 'the way of the empire' but to be willing to patiently endure whatever may come out of an uncompromising loyalty to 'the way of the Lamb'.¹¹

¹⁰ Christians were viewed as "atheists" because they did not worship the gods that the rest of society acknowledged and worshipped and instead claimed to worship one supreme God that had no visible representation or temple like all the other gods.

¹¹ In Revelation 14:5, God's redeemed people are described as those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

Revelation's Relevance Today

The English philosopher, G.K. Chesterton, once said, "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."¹² The Book of Revelation is a difficult book to understand, but hopefully this introduction has helped us realize that it's not just some strange book with secret language about a future sequence of events.

The Book of Revelation was not written to predict the future or to describe the end of the world. The Book of Revelation was written to first-century Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. It was written to people who were fearing for their lives, resisting 'the way of the empire', watching the execution of their brothers and sisters, and wondering if it was all worth it.

It is to these people that the Book of Revelation first speaks. John wrote a prophetic apocalypse to communicate a clear message to the seven churches in Asia. And that message is this: It is worth it. You must overcome. You have to patiently endure this time of tribulation and conquer the forces of evil that conspire against you because we know how this story is going to end.

So how is this prophetic message still relevant for us today?

The Book of Revelation is a book that proclaims the good news of how the God of Israel has now become the King over all the nations on earth through his son, Jesus the Messiah, and it reveals the implications for how that good news is going to play out in the world. There will be temptations to compromise and tribulation, and so the Book of Revelation continues to call all Christians to avoid all forms of idolatry and unholy allegiances.¹³ Christians must not compromise with the dominate world-system operating behind their own society and culture. Instead, they must "come out" of and conquer that world-system through their unwavering loyalty and commitment to the way of the Lamb.

¹² G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 31

¹³ A phrase taken from David deSilva's great book by the same name, *Unholy Allegiances*.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. One of the primary reasons why the Book of Revelation has caused so much confusion and controversy is because many people have failed to understand what kind of book they are reading when they read the Book of Revelation.

What are some of the popular assumptions about this book, and how would you describe what the Book of Revelation is to others who may be interested in reading it?

2. The Book of Revelation is a prophetic apocalypse. One of the main keys to understanding all the symbolic imagery and numbers in the Book of Revelation is understanding the Hebrew Scriptures (aka. the Old Testament).

How does understanding the Book of Revelation as a prophetic apocalypse that is full of Old Testament allusions shape your approach to reading and interpreting all of the images, numbers and symbolic language that is used throughout the book?

3. The Book of Revelation was written to first-century Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. It was written to people who were fearing for their lives, resisting 'the way of the empire', watching the execution of their brothers and sisters, and wondering if it was all worth it.

How does understanding the Book of Revelation as a first-century letter written to specific first-century Christians living in prominent cities within the Roman Empire shape your approach to reading and responding to its message?

4. The overall message of the Book of Revelation is meant to comfort and challenge Christians living under the power and influence of the dominant Roman Empire, but in a way that was also intended to comfort and challenge all Christians throughout all of history who are tempted to compromise with the dominate world-system operating behind their own society and culture.

In what way can you see this message still being relevant for us today and how is this different than what many people assume the Book of Revelation is all about?