



INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of the world.

—Richard Bauckham

Author, Date, and Audience

- **Author:** The Apostle John
 - John received his Revelation on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea roughly 40 miles off the coast of Asia Minor (i.e., modern Turkey). John was likely exiled to Patmos for preaching Christ.
- **Date:** AD 85–95
 - We are not *exactly* sure when Revelation was written. While most scholars date Revelation between AD 60 and 95, we should not accept—and will not offer—any interpretation that demands a specific date.¹
- **Audience:** Seven local churches in Asia Minor (i.e., Modern Turkey).
 - *Externally*, these churches suffered persecution from Rome and intense pressure to worship the emperor and to live for the glory of the empire and its benefits. *Internally*, they were plagued with complacency and compromise.
 - In writing to seven churches, John writes to *the* church as well. Each letter ends with, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”²



¹ The Apostle John personally disciplined Polycarp who personally disciplined Irenaeus. Irenaeus argued for a date around the time of Domitian's reign (81–96 AD). It's hard to imagine that Irenaeus's date wasn't informed by Polycarp (who knew John).

² Sam Storms, *Our God Reigns: An Amillennial Commentary of Revelation* (Scotland, UK: Mentor, 2024), 35. For the phrase, “He who has an ear, him hear...” see 2:7, 11, 17; 3:29, 6, 13, 22.

Genre

Revelation is a prophetic-apocalyptic circular letter.

- **Prophetic:** “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this *prophecy*.” (Rev. 1:3)
 - Prophecy exhorts: “...blessed are those who hear, and who *keep* what is written in it, for the time is near.” (Rev. 1:3; cf. 22:7)
 - Prophecy foretells: “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:2)
- **Apocalyptic:** “The revelation (Gk. ἀποκάλυψις, *apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ...” (1:1)
 - *Apokalypsis* means “uncovering” or “unveiling”. In apocalyptic literature, an otherworldly being discloses (to a human) a divine, transcendent perspective on reality for the purpose of affecting the way they live and think in the world.³
 - Chain of revelation: God → Christ → Angel → John → The servants of God



The Last Judgment, Michelangelo

“John (and thereby his readers with him) is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is 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 what its final outcome must be, in God's ultimate purpose for human history.... It is not that the here and now are left behind in an escape into heaven ... but that the here and now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.”⁴

—Richard Bauckham

Key Concept: The goal of Revelation is to fuel these churches, and broadly, *the church*, to overcome by allowing them to see reality in Divine perspective. By giving them a picture of the cosmic battle between good and evil from God's point of view, John seeks to motivate believers to gain the victory in this life—to conquer.

³ For a discussion on the nature of apocalyptic literature, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 35–43.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7–8.

The Chronology of Revelation: Three Primary Views⁵

- (1) **Preterist:** Nearly all of Revelation describes events that have already taken place culminating in the judgment on Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. Thus, John is concerned with these churches' immediate historical circumstances.
 - Proper emphasis on the relevance of John's word to the churches. Relies too heavily on dating and can over-realize future events (e.g., Christ's return).
 - (2) **Futurist:** Nearly all of Revelation—from chapter 4 to the end—describes events that have yet to take place. Thus, John is informing these churches about events and circumstances in the distant future.
 - Properly recognizes that Revelation does speak of *some* future events. Difficult to see how Revelation would have been relevant or intelligible to its original hearers.
 - (3) **Idealist:** Revelation symbolically depicts the battle between good and evil throughout the church age (i.e., the resurrection and second coming of Christ) through a series of parallel descriptions. Thus, John's words to these specific churches—his exhortations, warnings, and promises—are also his timeless words to *the* church in every age.
 - Properly recognizes that Revelation meaningfully addresses all Christians. Runs the risk of de-historicizing certain parts in order to simply draw out principles.
- (4) **An Eclectic Approach:** Each view has its own strengths and weaknesses. We will incorporate the strengths of each approach *while giving priority to the Idealist view and its chronology*.

 - Some of the events John describes have already occurred.
 - Sometimes John describes events that are both future *and* literal.
 - Revelation describes common struggles, threats, circumstances experienced by believers in the interadvent age.

“[I]t seems best to view Revelation as oriented not primarily to the past (the preterist approach) or to the future (the futurist approach), though it is linked vitally to both, but to the present life of the church—to the entire span of the time between the first and second comings of Jesus. The initial statement of the book, that it is to show “his servants the things that must soon take place” (1:1), is looking not to the imminent arrival of the end of the world, but to events and forces that will immediately affect the first readers and will continue to be relevant to God's people until the end.”⁶

—Charles Hill

⁵ For a brief overview of different approaches to interpreting Revelation, see G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 7–9. Each approach understands 1:19 differently.

⁶ Charles Hill, “Revelation” in Ligon Duncan et al., *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 518.

The Structure of Revelation: Four Main Visions⁷

Prologue	1:1-8
Vision 1	The Glorified Christ Who Investigates His Churches (1:9–3:22)
Vision 2	Divine Court Proceedings and Trial of the Nations (4:1–16:21)
Vision 3	Babylon's Destruction and Christ's Return (17:1–21:8)
Vision 4	Believers' Reward and New Creation (21:9–22:5)
Epilogue	22:6–21

***Important Note:** While other scenes in Revelation could also be labeled visions, these four visions are set apart from the others by four elements that they alone share in common. Each is introduced by the phrase “[I was] in the Spirit,” and locates John in a different place: Patmos (Vision One), Heaven (Vision Two), A Desert (Vision Three) A Mountain (Vision Four)

Five Principles for Interpreting Revelation⁸

(1) Focus on the original purpose of the visions.

- John's primary goal in writing Revelation is to motivate his hearers to overcome. Each of the proclamations to the seven churches ends with a promise to the one who overcomes/conquers (cf. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).
- We “conquer” through genuine repentance, perseverance, obedience, witness, and worship.

(2) Let the original historical context guide your interpretation.

- Revelation was written *for* you, but it was not written directly *to* you. Recall that its original hearers were to “keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3).
- Interpretations that would have been unintelligible to the original hearers (e.g., the Pope, microchips, Hitler) should largely be rejected.

⁷ See Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 789–90.

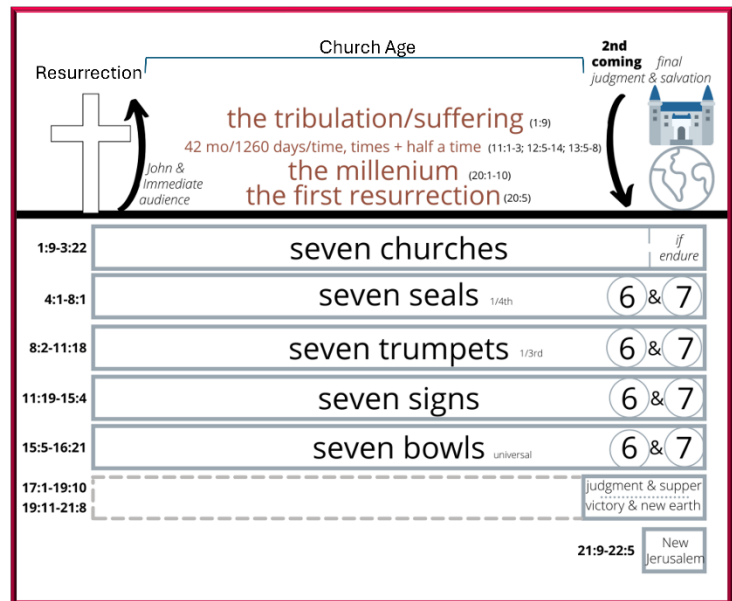
⁸ Here I'm following Alexander Stewart, *Reading the Book of Revelation: Five Principles for Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 9–66.

(3) Recognize repetition.⁹

- Revelation isn't giving a linear account of history! The series of sevens are *not* chronologically consecutive. Similar to how football replays examine a touchdown, they describe, from different angles and points of emphasis, the various realities of the interadvent period. The seals, trumpets, signs, and bowls all end in final judgment and salvation.

(4) Recognize symbolism.

- Interpreting literally what communicated symbolically (and vice versa) will leave us with a dramatically distorted understanding of the text.
- The seven stars are angels and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (1:20). The bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints (5:8). The fine linen of the Lamb's bride represents the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8). The dragon and the serpent are Satan (12). The two witnesses are churches (11:4; 1:20).
- In Revelation, numbers are often symbolic, especially seven, four, ten, twelve, and their multiples.



(5) Read Revelation in connection with the entire Bible.

- Revelation contains more OT allusions than all the other NT books combined!
- Genesis in particular is featured: the seed of the woman who crushes the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12); God's promise make Abraham the father of many nations (Gen. 12:3; 17:5; Rev. 7); the Garden of Eden, Tree of Life and humanity's dwelling in God's presence (Gen. 1-2; Rev. 21-22).

⁹ "Thou shalt not study Revelation without at least one chart" (Guesstimations 1:5). Credit to Logos editor Kirk Miller for this helpful visual of Revelation's chronology. Here, Miller depicts a very popular, legitimate approach to Revelation's literary structure, viz., through its series of sevens.

*Accessible to laymen

Resources for Revelation

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