

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Revelation

The book of Revelation is a carefully designed message about the salvation available through Jesus Christ. This book is also called John's Apocalypse (a type of writing that uses visions and symbols to show God's hidden plans). It promises blessing to all who listen and think about its words. It also gives strong warnings to those who oppose Christ, reject the good news, or live with shallow faith.

The book uses powerful visions and symbols that expand the audience's understanding and call for careful reflection. These visions show the struggles of Christians, God's judgments against their enemies, and the eternal hope that belongs to God's faithful people.

Above all, Revelation testifies to God's supreme power and to his promise that those who endure will share in victory with Christ.

Setting

John probably wrote the Revelation in AD 90s, though he might have written it in the AD 60s. During these times, Christians encountered increasing difficulty and persecution. By AD 90s, Jewish councils at Jamnia (AD 70–85) had condemned Christianity. They reported Christians to Roman authorities as part of corrupt religion, hoping Rome would deny them protection under laws that allowed Jews to practice their faith.

Meanwhile, Rome demanded complete loyalty to the emperor. There might not have been official persecution throughout the empire. The province of Asia (in western modern-day Turkey) supported Roman ideals. So, those who refused to worship the emperor often encountered severe persecution there.

Despite persecution, Revelation gives powerful reminders to Christians about God's future hope and his declaration of their innocence. It challenges them to remain loyal. Christians in Asia may have seemed weak and without power. But the book of Revelation reminds them, and Christians today, that the true God has all power. God controls history, has achieved the salvation of true Christians, and continues to fulfill his plans.

Summary

Revelation starts in an unusual way, with three separate introductions. John first explains the book's nature as a vision ([1:1-3](#)). Then, there is a letter greeting ([1:4-8](#)). A historical introduction follows ([1:9-11](#)).

The book describes a vision of Jesus ([1:12-20](#)). In letters to seven churches in Asia, Christ speaks directly to the Christians and discusses the lives of the churches ([chapters 2-3](#)). After these letters, [chapters 4-5](#) prepare for the future events by showing God's supreme power and portraying Jesus as both a lion and a lamb.

The main part of the book describes a drama with three acts of judgment ([chapters 6-16](#)):

The First Act

In the first act, Christ opens seven seals, leading to seven judgments ([6:1-8:1](#)). This act also includes the first interval ([chapter 7](#)). It shows God protecting his people from harm.

The Second Act

The second act shows seven angels blowing seven trumpets. This is another vision of God's judgment on the world ([8:2-11:19](#)). The sixth trumpet is followed by a second pause ([10:1-10](#)). In this pause an angel appears with a small scroll. Seven hidden thunders also sound, but their words remain secret. This scene opens the way for a vision of two witnesses. They proclaim God's message with both power and suffering ([11:1-14](#)). The final trumpet reveals heaven and the coming kingdom of Christ the Lord ([11:15-19](#)).

After the second act, the book of Revelation moves to three major signs and symbolic images.

[Chapter 12](#) shows the battle in the heavens between good and evil and the birth of the promised savior, Christ. God saves him from Satan's harmful plans ([12:1-10](#)). Although he defeats Satan, shown as a dragon, Satan continues to cause trouble for God's people ([12:11-17](#)).

The book then introduces two other beasts, who, along with the dragon, form a false version of the Trinity in the world ([Chapter 13](#)). These evil forces are in sharp contrast to the Lamb of God and his faithful servants standing on Mount Zion, the place of God's redemption and rule ([14:1-5](#)). Three

angels deliver God's message of future judgment and the destruction of the evil forces ([14:6-20](#)).

The Third Act

The third and final act of judgment includes seven plagues (serious disasters) ([chapter 16](#)). John introduces these plagues with a song by Moses and the Lamb ([chapter 15](#)).

After the plagues, John tells of the destruction of "the great prostitute," Babylon or Rome ([chapter 17](#)). The world shows grief for the loss of what they suppose is security ([18:1-19](#)). Meanwhile, heaven, the apostles, and the prophets celebrate the destruction of the evil city with songs of God's victory ([18:20-24; 19:1-10](#)). God's enemies cannot succeed against him, because he is "Lord of lords."

The beasts represent the world's power structures. They, along with those who follow them, meet their fate in the lake of fire. This happens when Jesus defeats his enemies at the battle of Armageddon ([19:11-21](#)). The devil remains imprisoned ([20:1-3](#)). God's holy people share in Christ's rule on earth ([20:4-6](#)). Despite Satan's full effort to defeat God in battle, God throws him into the lake of fire ([20:7-10](#)). In front of his throne, God judges all who follow the dragon and death itself. This greatest enemy of humanity ends ([20:11-15](#)).

Finally, John's words paint a marvelous picture of heaven, stretching the imagination with design, size, and symbolic images ([chapters 21-22](#)). These scenes, with their hopeful vision, make a fitting conclusion to Revelation and the entire Bible. The Spirit and the church invite all people to come and receive God's eternal promise ([22:17](#)). The book closes with the ongoing prayer of those who follow Christ: "Come, Lord Jesus!" ([22:20](#)).

Interpreting Revelation

The book of Revelation is an intriguing work that has confused many people. This is probably because it is both a prophecy and an apocalypse (symbolic text related to the end of history). John Calvin, the Swiss reformer, wrote commentaries on every Bible book except Revelation. This suggests he was not confident in his understanding of it. Martin Luther felt Revelation did not teach enough about justification by faith. As a result, he gave it a lower status, seeing it as important for Christian life but not for doctrine. Because of these challenges, many Christian teachers avoid the book of Revelation or only discuss the letters to the churches ([chapters 2-3](#)).

For centuries, those who try to interpret the Revelation have debated the meaning of the book. Some have used their interpretations to label other Christians as apostate (abandoning their faith) or heretical (holding beliefs against church teachings) if they disagree. Others spend a long time searching the book for clues about recent and future events.

The materials in these study notes interpret the visions as reflecting the world and experiences of the original churches in the Roman Empire, to whom John first wrote it. However, the entire drama and message of the book reveal great treasures to encourage Christians of all times in their faith.

The Nature of the Revelation

God has inspired the entire Bible (see [2 Timothy 3:15–17](#); [2 Peter 1:20–21](#)). Some books, like Romans, the historical books, and some prophets, mainly address the *mind*. Other books, such as the Psalms and other writings of poetry, often engage the *emotions*. The book of Revelation, however, greatly appeals to the *imagination*. Some Old Testament works, such as the book of Ezekiel and parts of the books Daniel and Zechariah are similar.

Revelation uses visions, images, and figures of speech as a mystery instead of appealing to logic. The book sometimes mixes literal and symbolic elements in interesting ways. It is difficult to treat it as a system of end-times teachings, as many have found when trying to organize it.

Hearing or reading Revelation requires imagination because it is like entering a dream about God, discovering an amazing message. Instead of fitting all of Revelation's scenes into a logical system, people will benefit from thinking in pictures. For example, John says all the green grass burned ([8:7](#)). Late, it says the locusts should not "harm the grass" ([9:4](#)). These statements seem to be a contradiction, but John describes two different visions.

These visions do not narrate a sequence of events. They portray God's message in pictures. Similarly, in the vision of heaven, "the temple of God in heaven was opened" ([11:19](#)). But later there is "no temple" ([21:22](#)).

Each vision has a different focus. People should not mix visions but concentrate on the main point of each one. Early audiences understood that Revelation used pictures and symbols. They knew how to follow the logic of a metaphor (a picture word). In the same way that they did not mix one of the parables of Jesus with another, they did not try to combine all of John's visions into one system.

Apocalyptic Writing

Through lively descriptions and visions, John takes us to a world of imagination. He was not the only one to write this way. He used a common type of literature to share his message. These creative works are called *apocalyptic* (from the Greek word meaning "uncover") because they claim to show a new view of reality.

People often wrote such works during times of distress and persecution to offer encouragement. Apocalyptic writings often used symbolic names, numbers, and descriptions as a sort of code. This way, outsiders to Christianity (especially enemies) without the "key" would not understand the message. To them, it would seem like nonsense. In Revelation, for example, "Babylon" is a code word for Rome ([17:5–9](#)).

The Old Testament includes apocalyptic literature, represented by the books of Daniel and Zechariah (see Daniel Book Introduction, "Daniel as Literature"; Zechariah Book Introduction, "Literary Genre"). Jewish apocalyptic writings picture God as above all and in full control of history. This is even true when things seem bad. God's messages often come through visions, dreams, or journeys to spiritual worlds. God gave these messages to prophets, dreamers, and those interpreting the texts to inspire hope and salvation in God's people and to warn God's enemies of judgment.

The prophets had to share their messages with others, especially with God's people who were suffering and facing persecution. People understood that the promises of hope would not happen right away. These promises were usually described as part of a great act of judgment, when God would defeat his enemies and bring lasting joy to his people. Meanwhile, God's people must remain loyal and strong, knowing God would soon save them. All these ideas appear in the book of Revelation.

John who sees visions, calls his work a "prophecy" ([1:3; 22:7](#)). He does not mean prophecy that only predicts the future. Instead, it is like the Old Testament, where it shares a message from God for his people. John's visions emphasize that God's solution to difficult times will fully happen at the end of history and in eternal life.

Author

Many Jewish apocalypses appeared after the completion of the Old Testament books. At that time, Jews believed prophecy had ended. They thought God's word was mainly in the law of Moses and in the writings of the prophets. These Jewish writers used the names of earlier respected figures like Ezra, Baruch, Enoch, Isaiah, and even the first man Adam to make their writings more credible and acceptable.

These works are called *pseudepigrapha* (meaning "false writings") because their authors attribute them to false authors. Similarly, in the period after the apostles, creative writers and false teachers used this method. They used the names of early followers of Jesus, such as Peter, James, John, and even Mary, to gain attention from Christians.

In contrast, the books in the New Testament had the authors' own names (see [Romans 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:17](#)). Or they were genuinely from apostles, even if they did not name an author (for example, Matthew's Gospel and the letter to the Hebrews). The author of Revelation simply calls himself John ([1:1, 4, 9](#)). In the early church, people generally identified this John as the apostle John. In the Gospel of John, he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" ([John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7](#)). In his letters, he calls himself, "The elder" ([3 John 1:1](#)).

Date

John had the visions in Revelation while he was a political and religious prisoner on Patmos. Patmos was an island full of rocks used as a Roman prison. It is off the western coast of Asia Minor near Ephesus ([Revelation 1:9](#)).

John probably wrote Revelation during the final years of Emperor Domitian's rule (AD 94–96) or shortly after (AD 96–99). The eight kings might refer to the eight Roman emperors from Augustus to Domitian ([17:7–11](#)). Another possibility is that he wrote Revelation during the AD 60s. This was when Nero persecuted the church and killed Christians.

During this period, Christians encountered great suffering and persecution ([2:9, 13; 3:9, 13:7](#)). John urged his audience to remain patient and loyal ([13:10](#)).

Recipients

The recipients of Revelation were the churches in the Roman province of Asia, which is now the western part of modern Turkey. The seven cities mentioned in [chapters 1–3](#) connected by a road system shaped like a triangle, similar to a mail route. Today, all these cities are ruins, except for Smyrna, which is now the busy modern seaport of Izmir, Turkey. The order of the cities in the seven letters has its basis in geography. It probably follows the route a messenger took to deliver the book to each church to be read aloud.

Meaning and Message

Revelation shows the plain nature of evil. At the same time, it emphasizes how God is always present and working to achieve his goals for his people. Evil can only happen with God's permission (for example, [6:3-4](#), [7:8](#); [13:5-7](#)).

Jesus is "the Alpha and the Omega" ([1:8](#)). He is the Lord over all history from beginning to end. Ultimately the powers of evil are useless. Satan has already lost the war ([12:12](#)). He can merely imitate and distort what God does.

Revelation clarifies that what is done on earth has eternal consequences. God's servants who suffer may sometimes wonder whether Jesus is powerful enough to accomplish God's purpose of salvation ([6:9-10](#)). Despite all the evil in the world, however, Revelation assures us that the "Lamb of God" crucified and resurrected is truly the powerful "Lion of the tribe of Judah" ([5:5-6](#)). He is fully worthy to receive our praise ([5:12](#)), as he is united with the eternal God ([5:13-14](#)).

The ways of the world result in war, violence, economic extremes, and death ([6:1-8](#)). Some people seem to profit from associations with evil ([13:15-17](#)). Yet, these things will ultimately produce distress and destruction ([18:9-24](#)).

God's people may suffer persecution and die for their faith ([13:7](#)). But they will ultimately triumph with Christ ([14:1-3](#)). This is because the seal of God marks them ([7:4](#)). God has granted them the white robe of victory ([6:11](#); [7:9](#)). They will have access to their home in heaven ([21:7](#)). They will continually praise God and Christ the Lamb, and will live forever ([7:10](#); [22:5](#)).

The book of Revelation reminds readers that the great victory over the powers of evil has already been won at the crucifixion of Christ ([5:5-6](#)). Armageddon is a desperate act of rebellion by an enemy who God has already defeated. God may allow Satan to kill the saints on earth ([13:7](#)). Yet, they have already conquered him through Christ and their own witness ([12:11](#)).

The message for Christians who suffer from Satan's servants is not to cry or be afraid ([1:17-18](#); [5:5](#)). But they must endure their suffering with loyalty to God ([13:10](#)). With God they will prevail ([1:6-7](#); [11:17-18](#)).

God will ultimately judge people by what they do and how they act ([20:12](#)). God will bless those who

pay attention to the words of this book ([1:3](#); [22:7](#)). God therefore calls his holy people to persist with loyalty in order to achieve spiritual victory ([2:7](#), [11:17](#), [26:12](#); [3:5](#), [12:21](#)).

The book of Revelation calls God's people:

- to obey God ([12:17](#)),
- maintain their witness ([22:7](#)),
- endure patiently ([13:10](#); [14:12](#)), and
- remain vigilant when persecution confronts them ([16:15](#); [17:14](#)).

God assures them that "the cowardly" will encounter eternal punishment along with those who do what is evil ([21:8](#)).