



## The Book of Revelation

### Aim

To introduce the book of Revelation: its interpretation and application for today.

### Objectives

For students to:

- Gain an understanding of the content, flow and integrity of the book of Revelation.
- Wrestle with key issues of how Revelation should be read.
- Gain insight into particular important passages and theological themes.

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1. Introduction to Revelation
  2. Apocalyptic
  3. Quick Overview
  4. Building Blocks for Interpreting Revelation
  5. Setting the Scene
  6. Is there any hope? The witness of the Church
  7. Deception is the Enemy
  8. Visions of the End
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### 1. Introduction to Revelation

#### a) Where?



## **b) Who?**

- By 'John' (1.1, 1.4, 1.9, 22.8)
- 1.9 normally read as meaning he was on Patmos in exile, but not necessarily.
- There are linguistic and other connections with the Gospel of John and the Letters of John, but also differences. It's a complicated story to put together. Possible e.g. that Revelation was written significantly earlier than John's Gospel.
- Revelation certainly seems to be from a Jewish thinking church leader of high respect, so the apostle John would make sense.
- Some elements of the church in the period of the Christian Roman Empire were hesitant about its author being the apostle John, because they didn't like its anti-Roman message. (E.g. it is still not read in church in the Greek Orthodox Church) but that isn't a good reason.

## **c) When**

- We don't really know.
- Tradition connects it with the persecution under Domitian (early 90's AD). However, a number of the features of the text (e.g. the 'Nero' material) could work well in the late 60's AD.
- Gets into the difficult question of relationship with John's Gospel and Johannine letters.
- Authorship by the apostle John doesn't determine the date, though he would be very old, but not impossibly so, by the early 90's.

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## **2. Apocalyptic**

Revelation can be helpfully seen as being a letter, and prophecy and apocalyptic. Letters and prophecy you are more familiar with, but what is apocalyptic?

### **a) What is apocalyptic?**

- a genre (way of writing) not a topic
- is not the same as eschatology (stuff about the end)
- it really means 'revealing' or 'unveiling' – lots of different things can be revealed
  - Some Jewish apocalypses reveal the way God has ordered the stars
  - Some reveal what was really going on in Jewish history
  - Some reveal what is God's plan for the future
  - Some deal with God's plan to bring judgment on wickedness
- Fundamental to it is that a seer gains 'the heavenly perspective' – generally he sees things and an angel explains to him what he sees.
- Daniel 7-12 is apocalyptic, also Isaiah 24-27, and elements in others such as Joel and Zechariah. Much Jewish apocalyptic in the couple of centuries around Jesus.
- Lots of details which connect Revelation with Jewish Apocalypses, though Revelation is unique in some ways e.g. not attributed to a past hero, and told not to seal up the visions (22.10) when normally the opposite is said (e.g. Daniel 12.4)

- It's a genre full of images which are hard to pin down. E.g. Revelation 1.16 "out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword" – are we meant to visualize that, or is it a different way of expressing Heb 4.12, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."
- Often helpfully compared to cartoons.



- You depict a British prime minister as a bulldog, to communicate a huge set of ideas, but not because he actually eats pedigree chum and pees on lamp posts.

## b) A Real Vision?

- Definitely claims to be a record of a vision (e.g. 1.1, 1.10, 22.10)
- But it is also highly literary. Fascinating detail in the numbers of times different phrases are used, the order they are used etc.
- The text draws massively on the Old Testament – self consciously 'The Climax of Prophecy?' – the only text in the NT written to be scripture?
- A vision but then carefully worked over and written up?

### Question

Is comparing this part of the bible to a cartoon helpful or not?  
 What challenges does it bring?

### 3. Quick Overview

| Main Unit |                         | Sections   |                                            | Particular Features                                                                   |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1         | Introduction            | 1.1-1.3    | General Introduction                       | Revelation                                                                            |
|           |                         | 1.4 – 1.20 | Letter introduction from John              | 1.4-8 key summary<br>1.12-16 vision of Son of Man                                     |
| 2-3       | Letters to the Churches |            |                                            | Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea                   |
| 4-5       | Vision of Heaven        | 4          | God as Creator                             |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 5          | God as Saviour                             | Lamb Scroll                                                                           |
| 6-11      | The Scroll              | 6          | Opening of the Scroll - Judgements (seals) |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 7          | God's People                               | 144k / multitude<br>Washing their robes<br>Prayers of the Saints                      |
|           |                         | 8-9        | Judgements (trumpets)                      |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 10         | The Scroll proclaimed                      |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 11         | Witness of the Church                      | 2 Witnesses                                                                           |
| 12-18     | War against Evil        | 12         | Woman and the Dragon                       | War in Heaven<br>War on Earth                                                         |
|           |                         | 13         | The Beasts                                 | First Beast (Empire)<br>Second Beast (Deception)<br>Nero                              |
|           |                         | 14         | The Harvest                                |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 15-16      | Judgement (bowls)                          |                                                                                       |
|           |                         | 17-18      | Babylon                                    | Whore and the kings of the earth<br>Seduction<br>Fall of Babylon<br>Economic Critique |
| 19-22     | Vision of the End       | 19         | Victory of the Rider                       | Bride<br>Rider – true and faithful                                                    |
|           |                         | 20         | Judgement                                  | Millennium<br>Final Judgement                                                         |
|           |                         | 21 – 22.6  | New Heaven and New Earth                   | No more tears...<br>New Jerusalem                                                     |
| 22        | Epilogue                | 22.7-21    | Closing Summary                            |                                                                                       |

#### 4. Building Blocks for Interpreting Revelation

##### (a) A revelation for now, not 'the end times'

**Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ...<sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

- Don't seal up (22.10 compare Daniel 12.4, 9).
- Jesus is already king (1.5) already among the churches (1.13).
- Pointers to events in his day (e.g. 13.18, 17.9).
- Soon (4.1, 22.7, 12, 20).
- 1.19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.
- Point is that now, post Jesus, we are in the 'end times' (Acts 2.17, Mark 1.15 etc.)
- Bible is scripture *for us*, not just for some people in distant future.

##### (b) Sequence of Visions, not a vision of the sequence of history.

- If you read the text carefully, you see all the sequencing links between sections are about John's experience in his world, not sequences in the visions.  
Rev 4.1: " After this I looked, and there before me ..." also 7.1, 7.9, 15.5, 18.1, 19.1; 20.1, 21.1, also 12.1 "A great and wondrous sign appeared", 14.1 "then I looked", 15.1 "I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign", 16.1 "then I heard", 17.1 ""Come, I will show you..." , 20.1 "And I saw ..."
- Again, if you read the text carefully with an open mind, you are faced with 'the end' coming multiple times  
e.g. Revelation 6.12-17 "I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig-tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?".  
How can we continue after this, and how are the mountains and islands back in their place for Rev 16.20<sup>20</sup> "Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. (Rev 16:20 NIB)"?
- Another example: 14.8 "fallen is Babylon", 16.19 "God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath." Then 17.1-5 ""Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, ... BABYLON", 18.2 "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!"

### **(c) Repetition of visions**

- E.g. verses above and Babylon. Each of the seven seals (ch 6), seven trumpets (ch 8-9) and seven bowls (ch 14-15) end in the end. Ch 12 starts off the whole thing afresh. Repeated moves from heaven to earth (ch 4-5, ch 7, ch 14).
- Repeated period of time – 3 ½ years, 42 months, 1260 days. All the same period – the period of ‘now’, the period of God’s people being oppressed but not abandoned.
- Same thing from different perspectives.

### **(d) Ambiguity**

- Crucially ambiguity in the future. Same thing from different perspectives = alternative futures held out to us.
- E.g. 1.7 “<sup>7</sup> Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.” – mourning of repentance (Zechariah 12.10-13.1) or despair (Matthew 24.30)? 11.13 giving very different ending to 9.20 and 14-17.
- Fundamental ambiguity in churches in ch 2 and 3.
- Kings of the earth in ‘new earth’ in 21.24.
- Ambiguity = call to respond! See Jesus’ parables.

### **(e) Intertextuality**

- E.g. Beast in Daniel 13.1 as ‘uber-beast’ combining beasts of Daniel 7 – not a particular beast but ‘beastliness’/ ‘empire’.
- The depictions of Jesus in the letters to the churches (Ch 2-3) pick out details from the vision in Ch. 12-18, and what those who ‘conquer’ will receive picks out details from rest of book. E.g. 2.1 “...in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (1.12-13, 16), 7: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (22.2).
- But surprise – God does not conform to expected/OT plan – see/hear in 5.5-6 (lion/lamb) and 7.4/9 (select few saved or a multitude).

### **(f) Fulfilled in every age**

- Bible for us, not for a select few who happen to be at a particular moment in history.
- ‘The beast’ (13.1) is linked to the Roman Emperor Nero (13.20: This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.) and Babylon is Rome (17.9: “This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.”) but they are not only that.
- The beast is also ‘all empire’ (13.1 uber-beast from Dan 7), all that sets itself up opposing God (‘satanic trinity in ch 13). We find Babylon and Rome in every age.
- Need to open our eyes and see Babylon and Rome today in our neighbourhoods, not think they are about distant events.

## Question

Which of these 'building blocks' has struck you as helpful?

A sequence of visions about now, not a vision of the sequence of events surrounding the end/Jesus return. Is that right?

## 5. Setting the Scene

- Revelation 1-5 really sets the scene for the rest of the book.
- Pass over briefly because better known and easier to understand.
- Chapter 1 establishes that Jesus is Lord and among the churches, and has sent this revelation to them.
- Chapters 2 to 3 the famous letters to the churches. Seven churches deliberately to represent the whole church. Range of issues and difficulties, though false teaching and deception must more dangerous than persecution. All churches given a challenge for moving forward. Details link these letters to the rest of the book.
- Chapter 4-5 – heaven's throne room. 'Meanwhile in heaven'. Ch. 4 God in creation. Ch. 5 God in salvation. Sense of incompleteness. God must have a plan! 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'
- Notice Jesus as the slain lamb, not a conquering hero, contrary to expectations.

## 6. Is there any hope? The witness of the Church

- heaven is incomplete - scroll opened only by Jesus.

**Revelation 5:1-9** Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. <sup>2</sup> And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" <sup>3</sup> But no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. <sup>4</sup> I wept and wept because no-one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." <sup>6</sup> Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, ... <sup>7</sup> He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. <sup>8</sup> And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. ... And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

- Opening the scroll leads to the seven seals (ch 6) and seven trumpets (8-9) – displays of power from on high but these do not lead to repentance (6.15-17, 9.20).
- Mourning in 1.7 as despair. Few are saved.
- Then scroll again this time ingested by man (10.2, 8-11 see Ezek 2.9 but now to all people) – incarnation.

- This is the mystery of God 10.7.
- Two witnesses – the church (or part of it) copying the example of Jesus 10.4-12 (sharing his suffering to share his glory Romans 8.17).

The result is 11.13: "At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."

- Repentance after only 700 dying (compare I Kings 19.18) and only 1/10<sup>th</sup> dying (compare idea of remnant e.g. Amos 5.3).
- Mourning in 1.7 as repentance. Beyond expectations of salvation (though not universal).

#### **Which view of the future will happen?**

- Power from on high ('if God sent a lightning bolt I'd believe) achieves nothing.
- What makes the difference is if the church fulfils its calling to witness copying the example of Jesus, for that is the mystery of God.

#### **Questions**

- In your experience, is this right that no amount of 'power from on high' and judgements turn people to repentance, but that the church living out the life of Jesus does?
- What do you make of the idea of the majority turning to God? Or do we rather like being a special minority?
- Do you think this reading of Revelation 5-11 is right?

### **7. Danger is Deception not Persecution**

In general:

- Seven churches. Lots of mention of deceit (e.g. 2.2, 9,14, 20, 24, 3.9, 17-18) but only in one place any physical persecution (2.10, 13) and that is limited (10 days prison, one martyr in the past).
- The antidote to deception is revelation!
- Jesus described as 'faithful' and 'true' 1.5, 19.11 and wrongful worship of angel (19.1, 22.8)

Comes to the fore in the 'war on the earth' in Chapters 12-19:

- War on earth (12.17)
- What does this war really consist of? Definitely a war but the Devil has better weapons than force.
- 13.12, 14 – second beast like a lamb makes the world worship the beast and deceives the world.
- 13.16-17 marking the forehead parody of sealing of the saints. Dragon, beast who rules and 2<sup>nd</sup> beast who points to him – parody/deception of Trinity.

Key deception is focused on Babylon:



Babylon: Rev 17.1-5 "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters.

<sup>2</sup> With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." <sup>3</sup> Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. <sup>4</sup> The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. <sup>5</sup> This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

(Note pictures of women in revelation both good – 12.1 and 19.7 and bad, here.)

- Adultery – drunk – golden cup full of shit.
- Riding the beast (using its power, directing it, but dependent on it) – the acceptable face of the beast.

But there is more focus:

18.3 "All the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries."

18.9-20 Picture of an economic system.

18.11-13: "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no-one buys their cargoes any more-- <sup>12</sup> cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; <sup>13</sup> cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

- Call to 'come out from her' (18.4) and to rejoice not mourn at her destruction (18.20).

### Questions

Are we deceived?

Do we 'buy into' a economic system which is rooted in exploitation of others and is aligned to the beast (power/might) rather than to God?

What does it mean to 'come out from her'?

What would this mean in your church context?

## 8. Visions of the End

- The end finally does come in Chapter 19!
- Jesus as the victorious rider but wearing Robe dipped in his own blood.
- Rider is 'true and faithful' key words, not power.
- Judgment including the 'millennium' of the oppressed raised up and the oppressors put down (compare Mary's song in Luke 1)
- Judgement – books of what we have done (as might expect) plus the wonderful – book of life.
- New earth, new creation (21.1-5)
- God will be close (21.3, 7, 22, 22.1, 4)
- Evil is gone, reversal of fall (22.1-5)
- The nations will be there (21.24)
- But not universalism (21.8, 22.15 both talk about those who are 'outside' and interestingly – both emphasising falsehood, returning to the deception theme).
- I am coming soon (22.7, 12, 20)

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### **Reflecting Back on Revelation**

What have you learnt?

What is of relevance in your ministry?

What do you want to learn more about

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### *Going Further:*

- *Best book on revelation: Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation, 1993, Cambridge University Press, or if you are keen the very large and magisterial Richard Bauckham, The Climax of Prophecy, 1993, T & T Clark.*
- *A great quick way in is the Grove Booklet by Ian Paul (B28: How to Read the Book of Revelation). If you don't know Grove Booklets they are an excellent way of getting an introduction to subjects right across theology and practical ministry (grovebooks.co.uk).*
- *There are also some helpful video resources in the Common Awards hub accessible through Padarn's Moodle.*