

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION

AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Five times the author identifies himself as "John" (Rev 1:1; 1:4; 1:9; 21:2; 22:8)

From as early as Justin Martyr in the second century A.D., it has been held that this "John" was the Apostle, the son of Zebedee (Matthew 10:2) who also wrote the Gospel of John and the three Epistles of John.

The book itself reveals that the author was a Jew, well-versed in Scripture, a church leader who was well known to the seven churches of Asia Minor, a man deeply convinced that the Christian faith would soon triumph over the demonic forces at work throughout the world.

It wasn't until the third century that an African bishop named Dionysius compared the language, style and thought of the Apocalypse (Revelation) with that of the other writings of John and decided that the book could not have been written by the Apostle John.

He suggested that the author was a certain John the Presbyter, whose name appears elsewhere in ancient writings.

Although some today follow Dionysius in his view of authorship, the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view that the author was the Apostle John.

TITLE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Verse 1: **"The Revelation of Jesus Christ"**

Greek: apokalupsis = revelation, an unveiling or uncovering by God (presumably of things that God wants His people to know)

Conclusion: Revelation isn't an obscure, closed book - but an open one that is intended by God for His people to read and understand

"God didn't give the Book of Revelation to conceal truth, but to reveal it."

LITERARY STYLE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

An obvious reason (right on the surface) why Revelation tends to be difficult to interpret is its literary style or form (or its literary genre')

In crafting His Word for us, God has used various kinds of literary styles or forms - because He knows that some styles are better at conveying certain messages than others

So it's important for us to interpret each part of Scripture according to its literary style in order to properly interpret what's being said

God's Word comes to us "packaged" in many different styles - for instance:

1 - Epistles - like Romans or First and Second Corinthians which are personal letters written to a particular church concerning particular matters

2 - Genealogies - lists that document family histories and lineages - often proving who someone is (in terms of their genealogy or family tree)

3 - Historical Narratives - which are factual accounts, written in prose, concerning what happened at a certain time and place - and involve people, nations and events - books like Joshua, Ruth, Esther, or the Gospels and Acts in the NT

4 - Law Books (or Statutory books) - which is what much of the first five books of Scripture are - showing us what God required of His people in Old Testament times

5 - Poetic Verse - Some of the best poetry ever written is contained in the Bible. In fact, some books in the Old Testament are written entirely in poetic verse (such the Book of Psalms)

6 - Parables - which are a unique style of communicating truth via stories that are used to illustrate an important point such as in the Good Samaritan - and Jesus frequently used parables to powerfully make His points and convey His truths

7 - Proverbs (or Wisdom Literature) - which are short statements of truth for common and general rules of life - and contain many sayings that deal with a variety of aspects of daily living. The books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are examples of this literary style

8 - Prophecy - which are words that foretell or proclaim God's message (often a warning or call to repentance or righteous living) by a designated messenger of God like Jeremiah or Ezekiel

9 - Last, but not least, is Apocalyptic Literature - of which Revelation is the classic example. Note: The principle characteristic of apocalyptic literature is that it is highly symbolic. It is not to be understood in a literal sense, but primarily in a symbolic sense. At times, it provides a number of clues for its own interpretation (e.g., stars are angels, lampstands are churches (1:20); "the great harlot," (17:1) is "Babylon" (the Roman Empire and Emperors - 17:5,18); and the "New Jerusalem" is "the bride, the Lamb's wife" (21:9-10).

However in many other instances, the symbols are not self-interpretive and must be "mined" from other pages of Scripture.

Of the 404 verses in the book of Revelation, 278 of them make some allusion to the Old Testament - that's 68% of the verses!

So almost 7 out of 10 verses in Revelation are pointing back to the OT!

However John doesn't cite these OT references - so we're forced to trace them back, by careful study, to their sources - which is mostly from other prophetic and apocalyptic books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah

They are the fields from which the visual images and symbols in Revelation have been harvested - which requires parallel study in those books - in order to insure proper, biblical interpretation

SYMBOLIC USE OF NUMBERS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The use of numbers is significant in the book of Revelation - especially seven, ten and twelve (and also multiples of those numbers) - like 1,000 or 144,000 which are both multiples of 10 and 12

For instance, the number "seven" is used 54 times in the book:

There are seven churches (1:4,11), seven Spirits (1:4), seven golden lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1), seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), seven trumpets (8:2), seven thunders (10:3), seven signs (12:1,3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20), seven crowns (12:3), seven plagues (15:6), seven golden bowls (15:7), seven hills (17:9), and seven kings (17:10), as well as other sevens

The number seven indicates completeness. Throughout the book of Revelation, it's symbolically used to represent completion or completeness

So when John addresses himself to seven churches, he's actually addressing himself to the complete (or total) number of Christian churches in the entire world (until the end of time).

Likewise the Lamb's "seven horns" symbolize His complete power or His omnipotence - and the Lamb's "seven eyes" symbolize His complete knowledge or His omniscience

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The main purpose of the book of Revelation is to comfort Christ's persecuted and suffering church amidst her struggles against evil

This applies most immediately to the seven churches in Asia Minor to whom this book was written - which are listed in verse 11 of chapter 1

However we should look past the "first horizon" (of those seven churches) - and also apply this to all the other churches that existed in Asia Minor at that time - of whom there were many - as well as to all of the other NT churches that would come into being during the inter-Advental period

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The book of Revelation is addressed to seven different churches located in the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey) in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Revelation 1:11).

These churches were persecuted (2:10,13); threatened by false doctrine and teaching such as by the Nicolaitans (2:6,15); by compromise with cultural paganism through idolatry and immorality (2:14, 20-21); and by spiritual complacency and neutrality (3:1-3, 15-17).

The author of the book, John, identifies with, and speaks of, his experience of "tribulation" and persecution that he himself experienced - in chapter 1:9 where he wrote, "**I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ...**"

At this time, the known world was under the rule and reign of Rome - and Emperor Domitian was on the throne - and he was a cruel ruler who reigned from A.D. 81-96

About 25 years earlier, Nero carried out a local wave of severe persecution in Rome (blaming Christians for fires that had destroyed parts of the city) - and using Christians as human torches to light his gardens at night

But Domitian was much worse - because his persecution of Christians was more widespread and universal and, unlike Nero, Domitian demanded to be worshipped as God!

At the time of the writing the book of Revelation, Emperor worship as deity was the enforced requirement of every citizen

Government documents began with verbiage like, "Our Lord and God Emperor Domitian demands this (or that)..." - and everyone who addressed him in writing or speech had to refer to Domitian this way

And every year, everyone in any Roman province had to appear before the civil magistrates and burn a pinch of incense (as an act of worship) - and also make verbal confession that "Caesar is Lord"

Of course, Christians couldn't do this - surely some did to save their skin - but most refused to do so

Consequently they were labeled as "traitors to Rome" and were regarded as criminals - thousands were brutally martyred - and others, like John, were banished and exiled to places like the Isle of Patmos

At the end of v 9, John explained that this is what had happened to him - notice that He **"was on the island that is called Patmos for the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ."**

So apparently, John's faithfulness to Christ (by refusing to "call Caesar Lord" - and worship him as deity - eventually landed him in prison - exiled on the isle of Patmos

KEY THEMES IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

1 - Through His sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has conquered Satan, the accuser, and has ransomed people from every nation to become a kingdom of priests, gladly serving in God's presence (Revelation 1:5; 5:5-10; 12:1-11)

2 - Christ is present among His churches on earth through the Holy Spirit - and He knows their trials, triumphs and failures (Revelation 1:12-3:22)

3 - World history, including its woes and disasters, is firmly in the control of Jesus, the victorious Lamb (Revelation 5:1-8:1)

4 - God is presently restraining His own wrath and His enemies' efforts to destroy the church as He patiently gathers His redeemed people through the testimony that His suffering people proclaim about Jesus. (Revelation 6:5-11; 7:1-3; 8:6-12; 9:4-6,18; 11:3-7; 12:6; 13:17)

5 - Present disasters (war, drought, famine, epidemic disease), though limited in scope by God's restraint, are foreshadows and warnings of escalating judgments to come (Revelation 6:3-17; 8:6-13; 11:13; 16:1-21; 20:11-15)

6 - By maintaining their faithful testimony to the death, believers in Jesus will conquer both the dragon and the beast. The martyrs' victory, now hidden, will be manifest in their vindication at Christ's return. (Revelation 2:10-11, 26-29; 3:11-13; 6:9-11; 7:9-17; 11:7-12, 17-18; 12:10-11; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; 20:4-6)

7 - Satan attacks the church's perseverance and purity through violent persecution, through deceptive teaching, and through affluence and sensual pleasure (Revelation 2:1-3:22; 13:1-18; 17:1-18:24)

8 - At the end of the age, the church's opponents will intensify persecution, but Jesus, the triumphant Word of God, will defeat all His enemies; the old heaven and earth, stained by sin and suffering, will be replaced by the new heaven and earth; and the church will be presented as a bride in luminous purity to her husband, the Lamb (Revelation 16:12-16; 19:11-21; 20:7-22:5)

Source: Crossway ESV Study Bible, page 2455

RECOMMENDED READING FOR THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Recommended Reading List (listed alphabetically by author's name)

The Lamb is all the Glory, by Richard Brooks.
Evangelical Press.

More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation,
by William Hendriksen. Baker Book House

The Revelation of St. John: Expounded for those who search the Scriptures
by E. W. Hengstenberg. Wipf & Stock Publishers ***

Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation, by Dennis E. Johnson.
P & R Publishing

The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary,
by Leon Morris. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

The Book of Revelation (New International Commentary on the New
Testament), by Robert H. Mounce. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation,
by Vern S. Poythress. P & R Publishing

The Book of Revelation: An Exposition of the First Eleven Chapters,
by James B. Ramsey. The Banner of Truth Trust

What Christ Thinks of the Church, by John R. W. Stott
William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Worthy is the Lamb: An Interpretation of Revelation, by Ray Summers.
Broadman Press ***

Let's Study Revelation, by Derek Thomas
The Banner of Truth Trust

The Lamb Wins: A Guided Tour through the Book of Revelation,
by Richard Bewes. Christian Focus

Note: Most of these commentaries on Revelation are in-print and readily available. A few marked *** are out-of-print and are more difficult to find. Most of these commentaries can be purchased online at very affordable prices at: Bookfinder.com