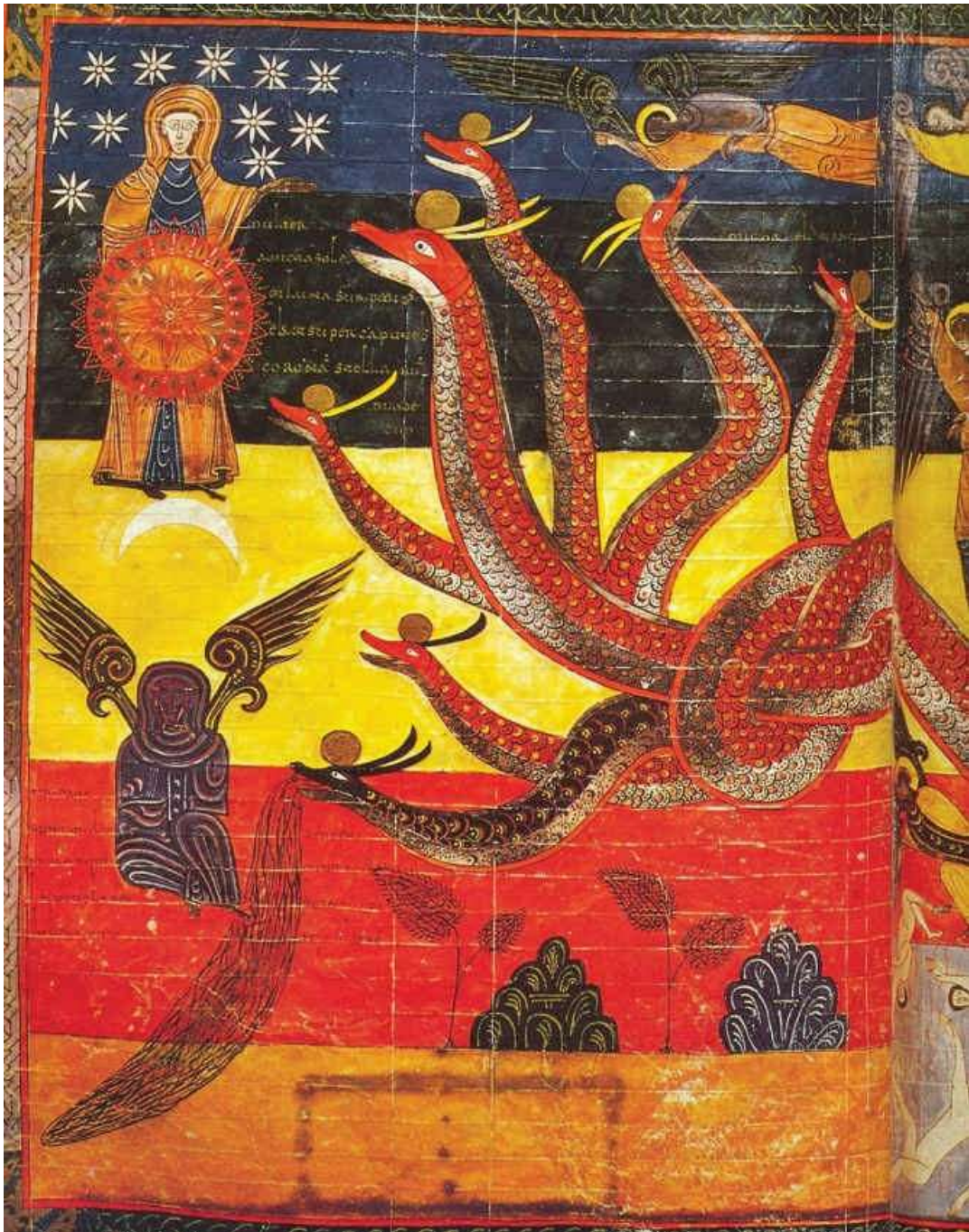


Revelation



Angels blowing trumpets! Monsters rising from the deep! Lakes of fire and rivers of blood! Ah, yes—the book of Revelation. There is nothing like it anywhere else in the New Testament. It certainly is the only book to feature dragons (12:3–13:10), giant bugs (9:3–11), and airborne horses (6:2–8; 19:11–12).

Revelation is a book to excite the senses. The Bible does not often tell us what color things are, but here everything is red, purple, yellow, blue, green, gold. It is also a noisy book, rumbling with the din of battle and the crash of thunder. Earth echoes with the wailing of the damned; heaven rings with songs and shouts of the saved. And those trumpets! There is hardly a moment's peace. No, wait—there are a thousand years of peace, but that's just three verses (20:4–6), and then all hell breaks loose (literally). The imagery is fantastic: buildings and furniture made of gems, and a menagerie of creatures like something Dr. Seuss might have thought up after a sleepless night reading Stephen King: the locusts wear armor like horses (9:7–9), and the horses have serpents for tails (9:19). And what's this thing that's part leopard, part bear, and part lion but lives in the sea (13:1–2)?

In a sense, to “interpret” this book is to misinterpret it, for often the appeal is to the imagination; it's a book to be experienced, not explained. Could the impact of its visual imagery ever be captured in literal illustrations? Imagine the questions that would arise at some film studio determined to bring Revelation to the big screen: Why do the beasts have ten horns but only seven heads (13:1; 17:3)? How, exactly, does a lion look like a lamb (5:5–6)?

Just as jokes are seldom funny when they have to be explained, so Revelation may lose some of its power when it has to be interpreted. Of course, modern scholarship enables us to understand some things about this book that are missed by readers at large. But it is worth noting that, throughout history, Revelation has proved to be one of the most popular books in the Bible among people who lack formal (much less, theological) education, especially those who belong to lower economic classes and/or marginalized social groups. Why? What do they (these uninstructed readers) get out of this book? Or, to put the question more broadly: Why does Revelation work so well for some people and not at all for others?

Overview

This book opens with an expanded title and a beatitude for its reader (1:1–3). After a salutation similar to those with which many New Testament letters begin (1:4–8), John, on the island of Patmos, reports that he received a revelation while “in the spirit on the Lord's day” and that he was directed to write this in a book and send it to seven churches (1:9–11).

The first thing that he sees is a spectacular image of the Son of Man (1:12–20), who dictates seven letters to him, specific messages for each of the churches (chaps. 2–3).

After recording these letters, John sees a door open in heaven, and he is taken up into the heavenly realm itself. There he beholds the throne of God, angels, and other wondrous creatures (chap. 4). The one seated on the divine throne holds a scroll bound with seven seals, and there is a search to find someone who is worthy to open this scroll. The only one worthy is the Lion of Judah, who, as it turns out, looks not like a lion but rather like a lamb that has been slaughtered (chap. 5).

One by one, this Lamb opens the seals of the scroll, and as he does this, catastrophes strike the earth until, with the sixth seal, stars fall from the sky and the sky itself rolls up like a scroll and disappears (chap. 6). Then angels intervene to ensure the safety of God's faithful ones: 144,000 people of Israel are marked for protection, and John sees an innumerable multitude of people, robed in white, from all nations being brought before the Lamb (chap. 7). The Lamb opens the seventh seal, initiating a half hour of silence in heaven (8:1).

Seven angels appear, each with a trumpet, and as these trumpets are blown, more disasters strike the earth (chaps. 8–9). But following the sixth trumpet, there is a brief interlude: an angel appears with a small scroll, shouting with a sound of seven thunders. John is told to seal up what the seven thunders said and not write it down, and he is given the scroll to eat; it tastes sweet but makes his stomach bitter (chap. 10). He then takes some measurements in heaven and is told about two witnesses who will come to the earth, be martyred, raised from death, and taken up into heaven. Finally, the seventh angel blows the seventh trumpet, and God’s temple in heaven is opened amid loud shouts of praise (chap. 11).



Fig. 30.1. The heavenly militia. Revelation tells of angels in combat in heaven and on the earth (e.g., 12:7–9; 14:15–20), here depicted in a painting by the fourteenth-century Italian artist Guarniento. (The Bridgeman Art Library International)

Great portents appear in heaven: a cosmic, pregnant woman and a red dragon, which turns out to be Satan. War breaks out as Michael the archangel leads the heavenly forces to defeat Satan (chap. 12). On earth, a series of beasts blaspheme God, oppress the saints, and insist on conformity to idolatrous ways (chap. 13). Angels call for saints to endure this tribulation, and John beholds a vision of the Son of Man reaping the earth with a massive sickle; the wrath of God comes mightily upon the earth, as evidenced by an awful river of blood (chap. 14). Seven angels with seven bowls appear, and each bowl brings a terrible plague upon the earth (chaps. 15–16).

John is invited to witness the judgment of a “great whore,” who is identified as the city of Babylon. Her downfall is lamented on earth but celebrated in heaven (chaps. 17–18). Amid great canticles of praise, John then sees heaven opened, and a rider who is called “Faithful and True” comes on a white horse to wage a final victorious war against all the kings of earth. The flesh of those kings is consumed in a grotesque but spectacular banquet, and the beasts responsible for the tribulation mentioned earlier are thrown into a lake of fire (chap. 19). Satan is imprisoned, and those who proved faithful in the previous trials are allowed to reign with Christ on earth for one thousand years. After that time, Satan is released for a final battle and then is thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented forever (chap. 20).

Then John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. He concludes his book with a thrilling vision of paradise: gates of pearl and streets of gold, and a city in which there is no fear or pain or trouble of any kind (chaps. 21–22).

What Sort of Book Is This?

What are we to make of such a book? Scholars sometimes say that Revelation shares the features of three different types of literature.

First, the book is something like a *letter*. It begins (1:4–8) and ends (22:21) like a letter, and it is supposed to be sent to seven churches (1:11). Perhaps this book was composed as a “circular letter” to be distributed and read in particular congregations, as were some of the letters of Paul (Col. 4:16). If so, then some of the content might apply to specific situations in those churches or be intended to address questions that members of those churches were asking.

Second, the book is presented as a *prophecy* (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). The reader is expected to “keep” the words of this book, implying that the message is something that can be obeyed—a call to repentance, perhaps, or an exhortation to perseverance. In some sense, the book may be compared to writings of certain Old Testament prophets who also claimed to be passing on direct communications from God and who sometimes did so through symbolic language or by recounting visionary experiences (see Ezekiel, Zechariah, and especially Daniel). Prophets often announced what God was about to do and detailed blessings and woes that were to come upon people when God acted (assuming that everything continued on its present course; for one instance in which a change in course allowed the predicted judgment to be averted, see Jonah). To the extent that Revelation is read as a prophecy, its content may be regarded as a series of colorful exhortations or warnings about what will happen when God’s purposes are fulfilled.

apocalyptic literature: a genre of heavily symbolic literature that displays distinctive literary characteristics and claims to unveil the truth about the world as viewed from a dualistic and deterministic perspective.

Third, the book has much in common with a genre of literature known as *apocalypse*. This type of writing is not well known today, but it was popular at the time when Revelation was produced. As a result of archaeological discoveries in the last century, we now have copies of numerous apocalypses that were read by Jews and Christians in the centuries just before and after the time of Jesus. These books are different from Revelation in certain ways, but they do display some marked similarities (see box 30.1). They typically report divine or transcendent visions that are granted to a seer and then interpreted by angels or other spiritual beings. As in Revelation, the seer sometimes is transported to a heavenly or spiritual realm to describe what is seen there. Symbolism is prominent, and the content of the visions often involves bizarre creatures, fantastic spectacles, and mysterious events similar to those found in Revelation. Such books tend to be dualistic in their outlook, which means that they describe a universe where there are clear distinctions between good and evil; the story pits angels against demons or saints against sinners with little allowance for ambiguity. And the themes of such works typically are matters of cosmic significance: the end of the world, the defeat of evil, the vindication of the righteous.

dualistic: exhibiting the tendency to separate phenomena into sharply opposed categories.

Box 30.1

Some Common Features of Apocalypses

- pseudonymous
- addressed to persons experiencing suffering and persecution
- seek to motivate faithfulness in a time of crisis
- heavy use of symbolism, including numbers and colors
- engagement with otherworldly beings, such as angels and demons
- bizarre menagerie of fantastic creatures
- spiritual or supernatural visions, often interpreted by otherworldly beings
- portentous dreams that must also be interpreted
- mystical journeys from the earthly plane to a heavenly or spiritual realm
- review of history with ultimate culmination linked to the present era
- secrets revealed about imminent cosmic transformations
- forecast of cosmic catastrophes
- liturgical settings and elements, such as altars, temples, hymns
- unveiling of the true-but-hidden character of present circumstances
- radically dualistic outlook: clear distinction between good and evil with no ambiguity
- deterministic view of history: all proceeds according to a preordained divine plan
- pessimistic forecast for the world as is: things will go from bad to worse
- hope for a favored remnant lies in radical divine intervention



Fig. 30.2. Impressions. The book of Revelation is often compared to abstract or nonrepresentational art, in which colors and shapes create impressions to fire the imagination. The Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky said this painting, *Study for Improvisation V*, was inspired by Revelation. Audiences and critics have often seen specific images in it: on the left side is a cross with a multitude of people gathered beneath it; just behind the cross stands a figure of Christ, viewed from the back (his head, at the top, is blue, he is dressed in red, and he has a white hand); kneeling before Christ is a woman with an orange body and blue hair—she probably represents the church; in the top right, two of the four horsemen of the apocalypse are fleeing the advent of Christ. Whether you see these images or not, the book of Revelation functions in a similar inviting-but-confusing manner: at first a collage of absurd imagery, it may, on further reflection, offer impressions that begin to make sense. (Bridgeman Images)

Many scholars think that some confusing aspects of Revelation can be best understood in light of what the book's original readers would have known about "how to read an apocalypse." For example, some scholars maintain that apocalypses often employed visions in a concurrent rather than consecutive manner, and that readers knew the visions were more kaleidoscopic than chronological. If this is true of Revelation, then it might be a mistake to regard the different visions in the book as laying out scenarios that will occur one after another at the end of time. Rather, different visions might offer repeated depictions of the same events. This

would explain how the world could appear to come to an end in chapter 6 and yet be described as still experiencing various cataclysms in chapter 8, or why God's righteous ones appear to be gathered into heaven in chapter 9 only to be described as suffering persecution on earth in chapter 13. The one basic story of judgment and salvation is being told over and over again through visions that use different symbols or images to describe the same occurrences.

How Is This Book to Be Read?

There is probably no other book in the Bible for which the divide between scholarly interpretation and popular reception is as wide as it is with the book of Revelation. Scholars usually focus on determining what the book of Revelation meant to its first-century readers, while at a popular level Revelation is taken as a blueprint for understanding or predicting events taking place in the world today. These tendencies do have their exceptions, but they raise the fundamental question of what the book of Revelation intends to communicate and of what a basic approach to understanding this book should entail.

Over the years, Christians intent on understanding Revelation have taken three approaches.

- *Historical.* The book is understood with reference to the time and place in which it was written. Its main purpose was to disclose the truth about what was happening in the world at that time.
- *Idealist.* The book is understood with reference to universal themes and symbols. Its main purpose was to provide spiritual insight that is meaningful for every time and place.
- *Futurist.* The book is understood with reference to times and places after its composition. Its main purpose was to predict what would come to pass in generations yet to come.

To illustrate how these approaches lead to divergent or competing interpretations, let's apply them to a couple of examples.



Fig. 30.3. A letter for an angel. This tenth-century illustration from Spain depicts John handing a letter to “the angel of the church in Ephesus” (2:1), a letter that had been dictated to him by “one like the Son of Man” (1:12–20). At some point in art history, an inattentive reader gave the illustration an official name that gets this backward: “The Angel Gives John the Letter for the Church of Ephesus.” (Bridgeman Images)

Example One: The Seven Letters

Revelation 2–3 presents seven letters dictated by Jesus to the angels or messengers of seven churches. How are these letters to be understood?

A *historical* approach views the letters as actual correspondence addressed to churches that existed in Asia Minor at this time. Archaeologists have excavated some of the cities where these churches were located, and scholars have sought to document and clarify specific problems or incidents mentioned in the letters, such as the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13) and the heresy of the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15).

An *idealist* approach treats the letters as generic advice to seven types of churches that might be found in any age: a “Thyatiran church” is one given to gross corruption (2:18–29), and a “Laodicean church” is one in which people are lacking in zeal (3:14–22).

Box 30.2

Gematria

The practice of “gematria” consists of assigning a numerical value to a word or phrase by adding together the values of the individual letters. This works in Hebrew and in Greek, where the letters of the alphabet can also serve as numerals. In Greek, the marks signifying 6 and 90 were not used as letters in New Testament times.

Hebrew Letters

1 = א	5 = ה	9 = ט	40 = מ	80 = פ	300 = ש
2 = ב	6 = ו	10 = י	50 = נ	90 = צ	400 = ת
3 = ג	7 = ז	20 = כ	60 = ד	100 = ק	
4 = ד	8 = ח	30 = ל	70 = ע	200 = ר	

Greek Letters

Α α = 1	Ϝ ϝ = 6	Κ κ = 20	Ο ο = 70	Τ τ = 300	Ω ω = 800
Β β = 2	Ζ ζ = 7	Λ λ = 30	Π π = 80	Υ υ = 400	
Γ γ = 3	Η η = 8	Μ μ = 40	Ϙ ϙ = 90	Φ φ = 500	
Δ δ = 4	Θ θ = 9	Ν ν = 50	Ρ ρ = 100	Χ χ = 600	
Ε ε = 5	Ι ι = 10	Ξ ξ = 60	Σ σ = 200	Ψ ψ = 700	

In the Roman world, gematria became a basis for riddles, jokes, and games.

- Graffiti on a wall in Pompeii reads, “I love her whose number is 545.”
- As a political joke, Suetonius (*Nero* 39) indicates that the name “Nero” (Νέρων) and the phrase “killed his own mother” (ἰδίαν μητέρα ἀπέκτεινε) have the same numerical value (1,005) when written in Greek. This was pertinent because the emperor was rumored to have murdered his mother.

In Christianity and Judaism, gematria could provide a basis for religious symbolism.

- Rabbis noted that “Eliezer” (אליעזר), the name of Abraham’s favored servant (Gen. 15:2), has a numerical value of 318, which is the total number of servants mentioned in Genesis 14:14. Thus Eliezer was the equal of all the rest of the servants combined.
- The Hebrew letters in the name “David” (דוד) add up to 14, so that number could be accorded messianic significance: the Messiah was to be the Son of David. This is probably why Matthew’s Gospel emphasizes that the genealogy of Jesus can be divided into three sets of fourteen generations (Matt. 1:17).
- The Greek letters in the name “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦς) add up to 888, which some early Christians found significant: eight surpasses seven (the number for perfection) and heralds a “new creation” beyond what God did in the first seven days (Gen. 1:1–2:3).

Many scholars think that gematria holds the clue to resolving the puzzle of 666, the number attributed to the beast in Revelation 13:18. (See box 30.3.)

A *futurist* approach may take these letters as representing Christ's description of what at the time were still future eras of church history. A scenario popularized by *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) identified those eras as: (1) faithful apostolic church (Ephesus); (2) persecuted postapostolic church (Smyrna); (3) worldly Constantinian church (Pergamum); (4) corrupt medieval church (Thyatira); (5) orthodox Reformation church (Sardis); (6) missionary early American church (Philadelphia); and (7) lukewarm modern church (Laodicea).



Fig. 30.4 The four horsemen. One of the more memorable images from the book of Revelation is that of the four horsemen unleashed upon the earth: Pestilence (or Conquest), War, Famine, and Death.

Example Two: The Number of the Beast

Revelation 13:18 tells us that the beast who oppresses God's faithful ones has "the number of a person," and this number is 666 or, in some Greek manuscripts, 616. What does this mean?

Historical readings usually take the number as a reference to Nero, the Roman emperor famous for persecuting Christians. His name was spelled "Neron Caesar" or, sometimes, "Nero Caesar." In Hebrew, letters of the alphabet also serve as numerals (a system called "gematria"), and when "Neron Caesar" is written in Hebrew, the letters have a numerical value equal to 666, while the Hebrew letters for "Nero Caesar" have a value of 616. Other scholars have noted an alternative connection to a different emperor, Domitian: the numerical value of the Greek letters that appeared on certain coins bearing his inscription also totaled 666. (See box 30.2.)

Idealist readings usually take the number as a symbol for anyone supremely evil. Just as the number "seven" represents what is pure or perfect, the number "six" symbolizes impurity or imperfection. A threefold six is "triple bad" (constantly falling short), and anyone who repeatedly fails or opposes God may be said to have earned this number.

Futurist readings usually assume the number to be a code for some evil person who is to come into the world at the end of time. Such readers sometimes scrutinize the names, addresses, phone numbers, and other data pertaining to potential candidates to determine if anyone in the modern world can be associated with the number of the beast (see box 30.3).

Box 30.3

Who Might Bear the Number 666?

Most Bible scholars think that the number of the beast, given as 666 in Revelation 13:18 (or 616 in some manuscripts), employed the system of gematria (see box 30.2) to designate a hostile Roman emperor:

- A popular spelling for the name of the emperor Nero adds up to 666 when written in Hebrew (קסר נרון = Caesar Neron). An alternative spelling (קסר נרו = Caesar Nero) adds up to 616, a variant reading for the number of the beast found in some manuscripts of Revelation.
- A designation for the emperor Domitian that sometimes appeared on Greek coins also adds up to 666: A. Kai. Domet. Seb. Ge. (an abbreviation for *Autokratōr Kaisar Dometianos Sebastos Germanikos* = Emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus Germanicus).

But Bible readers throughout history have sought to determine if there might be anyone in their contemporary world who bears the number of the beast. In the second century, Bishop Irenaeus warned the church to be wary of anyone named "Evanthas," "Lateinos," or "Teitan," because the letters of those names in Greek equaled the fateful sum. Later, in the thirteenth century, some Franciscans noted that the Greek name of Pope Benedict XI (*benediktos*) made him suspect for the same reason. Some Protestant Christians in the twenty-first century would likewise cast aspersions on Pope Benedict XVI.

But why would the name have to be in Hebrew or Greek? English systems of gematria also exist: it was noted in the 1960s that "Kissinger" (President Richard Nixon's secretary of state) is a name that equals 666 in English gematria.

In recent years, beast hunters have set computers to work on this problem, and the pool of potential beasts now includes phenomena in addition to proper names. Words or phrases whose letters produce the ominous number (in accord with English gematria) include "computer," "New York," "US of America," and "SS Number."

Guesses can also be made without any appeal to gematria. Former US president Ronald Wilson Reagan was once identified as a candidate for the beast simply because he had six letters in each of his three names—and then after he left the presidency he moved to a house located at 666 St. Cloud Road (his wife later had the address changed to 668).

Finally, since an English "w" is equivalent to the Hebrew letter *vav*, which has a numerical value of six, some pundits have wondered whether "www" is not just another way of writing 666, in which case the beast could be the internet.

With regard to these three basic approaches to Revelation (historical, idealist, futurist), we should note that the use of one approach some of the time does not rule out preference for a different approach at another time. Many popular readings of Revelation see a shift at 4:1, from “messages for the early church” to “visions for the church at the end of time.” Accordingly, such readings might take a historical approach to interpreting the seven letters (which come before 4:1) but adopt a futurist or idealist approach when it comes to figuring out the number of the beast (which comes after 4:1).

In the academic world, biblical scholars have tried to base their conclusions regarding the best approach to Revelation on what they have learned about the book’s genre (discussed above). They frequently conclude three things: (1) to the extent that the book of Revelation is like a letter, it should be read as a communication intended primarily for people at the time when it was written (not primarily for people born long after it was written); (2) to the extent that Revelation is prophecy, it also should be understood as addressing the current circumstances of its original readers, since that is what prophecy typically does: like most prophets, the author of Revelation discloses things about the future, not so that people at a later time will have a guide to those events when they happen but rather that the disclosures might affect the attitudes and behavior of people in his own day; and (3) to the extent that Revelation is an apocalypse, it should be read as a book that employs imaginative symbolic language to convey general truth about God and the world, rather than as one that tries to provide detailed predictions regarding specific future events.

Accordingly, there is a clear preference in academic scholarship for historical readings of this book, with some allowance for idealist application. Futurist readings generally are disparaged in academic circles, though they remain very popular in church and society as a whole. To avoid overstatement, however, we should note that most scholars do grant that the book of Revelation intends to portray what will happen at the end of time in a broad and general sense. What they object to is the detailed futurist interpretations that try to line up references in Revelation with specific people or occurrences in the modern world. Most scholars hold that such interpretations are incompatible with the book’s intent, based on a premise that we should not understand the book in ways that its original readers would not (and could not) have understood it.

The author of Revelation says that he is going to reveal “what must soon take place” (1:1). Accordingly, most scholars think the author believed the eschaton would arrive during his own lifetime or at least during the lifetime of his readers. This perspective accords with the scholarly preference for situating the book within its original context but raises theological questions concerning the book’s continued significance for people who know that its most significant portents did not in fact occur. Simply stated, first-century Christians were assured that many things would take place “soon” that, two thousand years later, have still not happened. For one suggestion as to how Christians might resolve this dilemma, see 2 Peter 3:8.



Fig. 30.5. St. John on Patmos. John pens the book of Revelation, as depicted in a late medieval painting by Spanish artist Mates. (Bridgeman Images)

By any reckoning, Revelation can be one of the more confusing or disorienting books of the Bible. Those who try to take it as a fairly literal projection of “things to come” still end up disagreeing over how to construe the eschatological timetable (see box 30.4). And those who understand Revelation as a proclamation to readers of its own day still end up struggling to discover what messages were being conveyed and why the author chose this medium as the means for conveying them. Furthermore, although everyone agrees that the book of Revelation is heavily symbolic, readers do not always agree on *which* elements of the book are symbolic. Did John want his readers to believe that heaven literally has pearly gates and streets of gold (21:21)? And what about that millennial reign with Christ (20:6)? Is this something that John wants his readers to believe will literally happen on earth, or is it instead a figurative way to describe an ultimate triumph of peace and justice?

Box 30.4

Millennium, Tribulation, Rapture

In Revelation 20:1–10 John sees a vision in which Satan is bound and some Christian martyrs are raised from the dead. Faithful saints reign with Christ for one thousand years, and then Satan is released, but only to be cast in the lake of fire following a final battle.

Throughout the centuries Christians have adopted various positions with regard to what this vision of the “millennium” means:

- *Premillennialism*. Christ returns before the millennium: his faithful saints rule with him on earth for one thousand years after the second coming but prior to the final judgment and establishment of the new kingdom.
- *Postmillennialism*. Christ returns after the millennium: his faithful saints will successfully evangelize the world and rule it in peace for one thousand years before Christ's second coming.
- *Amillennialism*. Christ returns without any literal millennium: his faithful saints experience spiritual victory symbolized in Revelation as a triumph equivalent to a thousand-year reign.

Premillennialists take a futurist approach to interpreting Revelation and sometimes try to relate their understanding of the book to two other eschatological events: the "tribulation" (a seven-year period of woes thought to be described in Rev. 6–9 and specifically mentioned in Dan. 9:27; Rev. 11:2–3) and the "rapture" (a miraculous removal of God's faithful from the earth thought to be referenced in Matt. 24:40–41; 1 Thess. 4:15–17; Rev. 4:1). Thus premillennialism yields subcategories:

- *Pretribulationism*. The rapture will come prior to the onset of the tribulation (so the unfaithful who are left behind will receive a wake-up call regarding what is now to come).
- *Midtribulationism*. The rapture will come at some midpoint during the tribulation (so the faithful may regard any onset of terrible woes as a possible sign that the rapture is near).
- *Posttribulationism*. The rapture will come after the tribulation, at the time of Jesus's second coming (so even the faithful should expect to endure suffering prior to Christ's return).

Historical Background

Unlike most apocalypses, Revelation does not pretend to be written by some famous religious figure out of the distant past. The person responsible for this book identifies himself as a Christian named "John" who was on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). The latter reference probably indicates that he has been banished from the mainland for witnessing to his faith and sent into exile on this island. But who is this person? In a popular vein, he often has been identified with the apostle John, who was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. This view, however, was sharply challenged by authorities in the early church, and most modern scholars do not think that it can be maintained. Most interpreters today simply view the author of Revelation as a Christian prophet named "John" who is otherwise unknown to us.

word of God: proclamation that expresses what God wants to say; in John 1 Jesus Christ is identified as the Word of God made flesh.

Nevertheless, scholars do seek to surmise certain facts about the author from the book itself. He is steeped in the Old Testament and familiar with the imagery and style of Jewish apocalypses. Indeed, this John (whoever he was) appears to write Greek as one whose native language was Hebrew or Aramaic. So it is often suggested that (like the apostle) he was a Jewish Christian from Palestine who immigrated to Asia Minor at some point during or after the Jewish war with Rome. Since he seems to assume that the churches in that part of the world will regard him as a prophet (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19), he may have served those churches in a capacity similar to that of the itinerant prophet Agabus mentioned in Acts 21:10–11. Eventually, he ended up on the island of Patmos, probably banished from the mainland by political authorities.



Map 30.1. Asia Minor: Churches addressed in Revelation.

When was Revelation written? The dominant theory places it during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81–96), most likely toward the end of that period. This was the view of the early church, as reflected in testimony from Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. The time period also fits concerns addressed in the book: Domitian referred to himself as a god and demanded emperor worship in a manner similar to what is attributed to “the beast” in Revelation (13:4). Domitian, however, is not known to have inflicted the sort of violent persecution on Christians that is prominent in this book (2:10, 13; 6:9; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4). The emperor Nero (54–68) was more famous in that regard, and some scholars think that connections to him can be found as well (such as the interpretation of 666 as a cipher for “Caesar Neron” mentioned above). Do those connections mean that the book might have been written earlier, during Nero’s reign? Possibly. Or, perhaps, the book simply means to present Domitian as a “second Nero.” Some scholars take a reference to the beast having recovered from a mortal wound (13:3) as a hint that Domitian is “Nero redivivus”: everyone thought the beast was gone when Nero died, but now it is back. Discussion continues, but the most common approach today is to date Revelation around 95, during the reign of Domitian. One popular suggestion accepts this date but holds that our version of the book could be a “second edition,” an expansion of an earlier work that hailed from the time of Nero.

The visions of Revelation were received by John on the island of Patmos and sent to seven churches in Asia Minor (now western Turkey; see map 30.1): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Our New Testament also contains a “letter of Paul” to Ephesus and mentions a letter from Paul to Laodicea (see Col. 4:13–16). In the early second century (probably just fifteen years after Revelation),

Ignatius of Antioch wrote letters to churches in Philadelphia, Smyrna, and Laodicea. The book of Acts makes mention of Thyatira (16:14) and contains colorful stories about early missionary work in Ephesus (18:18–20:1).

All of these cities were located in the Roman province of Asia, which is to say that all were part of the Roman Empire. They were somewhat distant from the capital city itself, but they remained dependent on that city for stability and prosperity. Loyalty to Rome was intense, as the general populations of these cities competed for Roman attention and favor. For example, Ephesus and Pergamum were rivals for the honor of being named *neōkoros* (“temple warden”), the city responsible for overseeing emperor worship for the entire province. On more than one occasion this official designation was withdrawn from one of these two cities and granted to the other, with attendant changes in fortune and prestige. And, of course, the main claim to fame of Ephesus was its magnificent temple to the Roman goddess Artemis (see Acts 19:23–41).



Fig. 30.6. The divine Caesar. This Roman coin shows the emperor Domitian enthroned upon the earth with seven stars encircling his open hands. The inscription reads, “To the Divine Caesar.” The book of Revelation presents Jesus Christ as the divine ruler of earth and describes him as holding seven stars in his hand (1:16).

What was life like for the small (but growing) groups of Christians in these cities? Many Christians no doubt were viewed as disloyal and unpatriotic for despising the very things that most people considered to be emblems of local pride and national honor. They also were considered to be antisocial for shunning the banquets, festivals, and public amusements that were the stuff of ordinary people’s lives. And they were thought to be irreligious for refusing even to acknowledge (much less propitiate) the gods whose favor was deemed essential for continued protection and prosperity. In short, there was tension between Christians and the general population, and many believers appear to have suffered as a result. Some were victims of violence, even to the point of death. Others had to deal with the reality of being publicly shamed in a culture in which social disgrace was often regarded as a fate worse than death. And many had to endure penalties and discrimination that led to economic hardship. For example, Christians may have been excluded from joining various trade guilds in which membership was all but essential for success in business or advancement in one’s chosen profession.

The book of Revelation reflects that, in addition to having problems with Roman society in general, the Christians in these churches appear to have been on poor terms with the Jews in the local synagogues (2:9;

3:9). And even within the Christian fold all was not well: some people who called themselves Christians were advocating ideas and practices that the book of Revelation regards as abhorrent. Though we do not know for certain who the so-called followers of Balaam (2:14) or Jezebel (2:20) were, it seems likely that they were Christians who had adopted an accommodating stance toward the Roman environment. Thus some teachers or prophets in these churches apparently were telling the people to just “lighten up” and “go with the flow”: cooperate with the powers that be and learn to adapt; figure out how the world works and try to fit in; let the emerging religion of Christianity develop a compatibility with culture that will make it more appealing to society as a whole.

The stated purpose of the book of Revelation is to reveal “what must soon take place” (1:1). It attempts to do this in ways that will (1) inspire confidence in those whose obedience to God may prove costly; (2) stir up indignation toward those who defy God and promote injustice; (3) provoke repentance on the part of those who have been overly accommodating; and (4) inspire praise for God from those who realize that the Lord of history is worthy of their trust.



Fig. 30.7. The beast, a saint, and a hypocrite. The one whom Revelation calls "the beast" tramples a devoted believer of Christ while a hypocritical believer pays homage to the beast. (The Bridgeman Art Library International)

Major Themes in Revelation

Unveiling

The word *apokalypsis* (translated “revelation” in 1:1) literally means “unveiling.” The book of Revelation seeks to pull back a veil and show Christians the truth about God and the truth about the world in which they live. Accordingly, the message of the book is both negative and positive, an oracle of doom infused with a promise of hope.

The Corruption of Human Society

Revelation shows believers what their world is really like, and it is not a pretty picture. In chapter 17 John beholds a vision of a woman who is “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). Scholars identify this city as Rome: the woman sits on seven mountains (17:9), just as Rome was built on seven hills, and she is also seated on many waters (17:1), just as Rome was famed for its control of the seas. She is adorned with jewels and clothed in fine linens (17:4) in a manner emblematic of Rome’s great prosperity. But although this woman seems rich and powerful, she is not a figure to be envied; she is, in fact, a drunken whore, supported by a monster, covered with blasphemies, sated with the blood of martyrs and saints (17:1–6). A horrible fate awaits her, and when it comes, she will be getting her just deserts (17:15–16). Thus one prominent message of Revelation is that the powerful and prosperous empire is not what it appears to be: when the empire is unveiled, it is exposed as a corrupt and horrible reality that believers should renounce and abhor.

Box 30.5

The Grapes of Wrath

Did you ever wonder about the title of John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*? The book focuses on the hardships of tenant farmers during the Great Depression, but what exactly are “grapes of wrath”?

The book’s title was inspired by a line from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” composed by abolitionist Julia Ward Howe in 1861:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord: He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

But that line in itself makes little sense unless one realizes that it is an allusion to Revelation 14:19:

The angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God.

The biblical verse describes divine judgment meted out on those who have oppressed and exploited others: they will themselves be oppressed by God’s avenging angel. The vision of judgment day as an awful, final harvest also recalls the words of Jesus in Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43.

Some theologians complain that Revelation’s perspective on human society is too pessimistic, and they suggest that this extreme perception be balanced by more positive or neutral takes on the political world elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17). But by the same token, Revelation is highly regarded as a work that takes seriously the power and nature of sin, portraying unrighteousness not just as personal immorality but rather as systemic evil and social injustice (see especially chap. 18). In this regard, Revelation usually is recognized as offering the most sustained political critique of an “anti-God society” anywhere in the New Testament: a society is “anti-God” when it uses its power to enslave others, when it becomes prosperous by making others poor, when it

systemic evil: evil that arises from or manifests itself in structures within human society, assuming a corporate dimension that transcends individual wickedness.

revels in self-adulation, or when it becomes cavalier about justice, ignoring the suffering of the innocent and allowing or perpetrating violence against the righteous. And, in a basic sense, an anti-God society is one that claims for itself the prerogatives of authority and power that belong to God alone.



Fig. 30.8. *To God Be the Glory*. This work illustrates the scene described in Revelation 5:1–14. The artist, Peter Attie “Charlie” Besharo, was a Syrian immigrant to the United States whose activity as an artist remained undiscovered until after his death in 1960, when numerous acclaimed works were found in a garage that he had rented in Pennsylvania. (Ricco/Maresca Gallery / Art Resource, NY)

The Judgment of God

Revelation depicts human society as standing under God’s judgment, which is imminent, final, and absolute. The readers are assured that whatever trouble comes on those who spurn the corruption of this world will be of minimal consequence compared to this divine judgment; their current experience of temporal tribulation will prove to be nothing compared to what God’s angels dole out. This, then, is the real crisis, what requires their full attention. The visions of Revelation alert believers to this true crisis, so that they will not compromise their faithfulness in ways that might spare them minor troubles today, only to guarantee them harsher judgment from God in the near future.

God Controls the Future

Revelation not only exposes the corruption of the world and its power systems but also pulls back the veil of heaven to reveal who truly is in control of history. In so doing, it provides an ultimate proclamation of confidence and hope. God alone is Lord of history, and so the forces of evil will not prevail. Suffering is only temporary, for God is preparing a new world in which all sorrow and injustice will be banished: God will dwell with God's people and "wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more" (21:4). Indeed, Revelation does not just predict that this will happen; it also claims that this victory over evil has already been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (5:9–10). The truth that this book unveils is that what is currently happening on earth and what will soon take place are but a playing out of events for which the ultimate outcome has already been determined. Those who have been loved by Jesus and freed from their sins by his blood (1:5) are able to witness troubling times unfold without giving in to despair, for they know how the story ends. The church, accordingly, becomes a community of prophets (19:10; 22:9), empowered to speak and live for the one who, they know, is already ruling in heaven.

Worship

Finally, Revelation answers the question, "Who is worthy of adulation?" No earthly power, however grand, but only God and the Lamb are worthy of receiving "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12; cf. 4:11). For this reason, the entire book of Revelation is threaded with songs of worship and hymns of praise (1:5–6; 4:8, 11; 5:9–14; 7:10–12; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8). Despite its bleak portrait of injustice in a corrupt world, Revelation remains an optimistic book. It is, in the final analysis, an ironic invitation to joy.

Conclusion

The book of Revelation often has created problems for theological leaders in the church, who have not always known what to make of it. It was the only book of the New Testament on which John Calvin did not write a commentary. And Martin Luther admitted freely, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book." Still, it has been a boon to artists and poets. Pieter Brueghel, William Blake, Salvador Dali, and countless others have been inspired by its fantastic imagery, and no other book in the New Testament has contributed so generously to the church's hymnody and liturgy. At a crassly popular level, it continues to fuel everything from pulp fiction to Christian rock operas to Hollywood horror movies. Revelation has proved to be a book to fire the imagination, to take readers beyond themselves. It expands our horizons, spatially and temporally: we travel from earth to heaven and from the present to the future, without always knowing exactly what the experience means—except that God, here in the final book of the Bible, as in all things, has the last word.

FOR FURTHER READING: Revelation

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