

Revelation Introduction: 10 Things About Revelation

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1. Title, comes from the first word(s) (1:1)

Revelation, fr. Gk. ἀποκάλυψις, from which we get English *apocalypse* (which is the title in several languages); the basic meaning is to uncover and in the biblical text describes making something fully known and can be translated as revelation or disclosure (BDAG); but not in just a simple revealing, but more of a pulling-back the curtain kind of revealing.

Revelation of Jesus Christ, meaning 1) from Jesus, or 2) about Jesus, or 3) both; probably both, the message originated with him, but he is also the protagonist or primary character in the book.

2. Author, John (1:1 cf. 1:4, 9; 22:8)

But which John? Three prominent possibilities (Beale): 1) John, the son of Zebedee and apostle of Jesus, 2) John the Elder/Presbyter, or 3) someone using John as a pseudonym.

Overwhelming evidence that it is John, the son of Zebedee and apostle of Jesus; evidence includes 1) internal, for example, the use of Word to refer to Jesus (John 1:1; 1Jn 1:1; Rev 19:13), and 2) external evidence, for example, the early church assigning authoritative (canonical) status to works connected to apostles (or apostolic authority) and the earliest attestations are to this John (see, for example, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho* 81 [ca. 135]).

The most significant argument against the apostle John being the author is the difference in writing style (vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc.). The difference is very real and very large, and it should not be minimized. However, it can easily be explained by the difference in the kind of writing (genre: apocalyptic vs biography-ish/ gospel, including stock phrases and syntax), the purpose in writing, and the time of writing (as many as 35 or years have passed!).

3. Audience (1:4, 11; cf. chs 2–3)

Seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.

This is the area where John was known to have worked.

Initially and specifically for them, but also meant for Christians in other places and times.

4. Situation of audience

1:9, persecution, note John is a co-sufferer, meaning they are suffering and he is suffering; he is suffering in exile on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus.”

cf. chs 2–3 and the description of God’s people throughout the main part of the book, for example, 6:9–10.

It was a time of great crisis and confusion (why was God allowing the persecution to continue?).

5. Date

Date of writing, two prominent options

1. Pre-AD 70, usually held in connection with either the persecutor(s) being 1) Nero and what he did to Christians in Rome, or 2) Jews who persecuted Christians before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
2. AD 95–100, usually in connection with Domitian being the persecutor.

While knowing the exact date and the exact persecutor(s) can aid in identifying specific details of the visions John saw, such understanding does not prevent a person from understanding the message of John's visions.

Date of fulfillment

1:1, what must happen very soon (cf. 4:1; 22:6), and 1:3, the time is near.

ANY interpretation of the prophetic aspects of the book MUST use this as a filter; that is, it is not possible to interpret the events of the book as pertaining to something 2,000 years in the future.

In addition to the specific language used that indicates this, the very idea that something would be written to Christians 2,000 years ago but that had nothing to do with them is pointless to the extent of being absurd.

6. Kind of writing (genre)

Letters, 1:4, 11; chs 2–3.

Prophecy, 1:1 future events, 1:2 “prophecy” (cf. 22:7, 10, 18, 19).

Apocalyptic, 1:1 “showed” and “signified.”

- *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*: “Apocalypse was a literary genre that flourished in the period between the OT and NT (though apocalyptic visions of the future can be found in the OT as well as the NT). When read aloud an apocalypse held ancient listeners spellbound with special effects and promise of better days ahead [JRG: ONLY written in times of great crisis or conflict that left God's people confused]. Visions of heaven [JRG: the heavenly realm, pulling back the curtain] and the future, featuring extraordinary [JRG: or otherworldly] creatures and events, focused attention on a whole new world [JRG: in which God and his people were victorious, no more crisis]. Natural catastrophes ravaging the earth portrayed God's ... judgment on the evil in the world. Cosmic fireworks ushering in the new age suggested how revolutionary God's decisive triumph would be. These previews of God's will being “done on earth as it is in heaven” drew the attention of hearers away from the crises of everyday life. They caught glimpses of another time and another world where, devoid of the vice of the present global order, the virtue of God's universal order prevailed.

“But today's readers are often puzzled and frustrated by this genre. The unexpected imagery and out-of-this-world experiences seem bizarre and out of sync with most of Scripture. Taking this literature at face value leaves many readers scrambling to determine “what will happen when,” thus missing the intent of the apocalyptic message. Yet apocalypticism, the perspective that informs apocalyptic literature, is in some ways very modern: current science fiction and space fantasy in both literature and movies use graphic and disturbing images similar to those in the genre of apocalypse.”

- Seen in Daniel, Ezekiel, Matthew 24 and parallels (Mark 13; Luke 21).
- Highly symbolic (not literal) language, 1:1, “shown” and “signified.”
 - “Show” as used in 4:1; 17:1; 21:9–10; 22:1, 6, 8.

- “Signified,” some translations “communicate” or “made known” (very good translations [BDAG], but not contextualized); when 1:1 is compared to Daniel 2:28–30, 45 (Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about the statue made of four materials representing the four kingdoms of Babylon, Medes & Persians, Greece, and Rome) the following parallels are found (only places where these parallels are found; h/t Beale):
 - a revelation / God reveals mysteries
 - God showed / which he (God) has shown
 - concerning what will come to pass / what will take place
 - and he (God) signified it / and these he (God) has signified
 - This is the verb form of the noun used in John’s Gospel to describe the signs of Jesus that pointed to or showed who he was.
- These symbols were often pulled from stock imagery used throughout apocalyptic literature.
 - Side note: the use of symbolic imagery was not for the purpose of keeping the message of Revelation a secret. Stock imagery was used (meaning it was understandable, cf. *Gulliver’s Travels*). And there are several occasions in the book where the symbolism is explained, which would defeat the purpose it it were meant to be kept secret.

7. Use of the OT

As seen in 1:1 connecting to Daniel 2; cf. 1:7 w/ Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10; 1:13 w/ Daniel 7:13.

No direct quotation (w/ an introductory formula such as “it is written”), but more than 300 indirect quotes and allusions, especially to Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. This means in order to understand Revelation, one must understand these OT passages and their contexts, including stock images of apocalyptic literature.

Pay attention to cross-references (will try to get a good list by section). Ferrell Jenkins’s *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* and G.K. Beale’s *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*.

8. Purpose and themes

Primary purpose: to encourage the Christians to whom John wrote who were suffering great persecution giving them hope that God was doing something and was going to do something about it to bring about ultimate victory in Jesus for all who would remain faithful to him, even to the point of death (because the Christian who dies continues to have life in Jesus)

Themes (Schreiner):

- The reality of evil
- The suffering of the saints
- Call to perseverance
- The sovereignty of God [God is ALWAYS in control]
- God protects his people
- God’s justice in judgment
- The deity of Christ
- The cross of Christ

- The centrality of worship [continue worshiping in the face of crisis!]
- The wonder of the New Creation

9. Interpretive approaches (Jenkins)

Millennialism (1,000 years of Revelation 20):

- Pre-millennial, the return of Jesus will take place before a literal 1,000 years of reigning on the earth (most conservative Protestants)
- Post-millennial, the return of Jesus will take place after a figurative 1,000 years / long time that was concluded by a great period of success for the gospel (several connected with the early years of the Restoration / Stone-Campbell Movement)
- Amillennial, not a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ, but symbolic of a long period of victory for the saints (most churches of Christ today, several biblical scholars)

Theories of interpretation

- Futurist, the prophecies of Revelation have not yet been fulfilled, but will be soon (extreme: dispensationalists; moderate: pre-millennial).
- Continuous historical, a forecast of the church, usually with an emphasis on the pope and the Roman Catholic Church.
- Philosophy of history (idealist, spiritual, symbolical), Revelation is symbolic of forces at work behind actual events.
- Preterist, events have already taken place and are a part of history, fulfilled by third-century AD, some agreement with the philosophy of history view.
- Historical background (eclectic), combination of the philosophy of history and preterist views; yes, the specific events that were near and were to happen soon (1:1) have indeed happened, but there are principles that apply to all times of suffering or crisis for God's people (Kyle Dowling: the use of stock imagery that is equally applicable in the OT apocalyptic literature and Revelation supports this idea)

10. Application for today

Christians will suffer, even to the point of death, but if we will remain faithful to God, trusting and hoping in the work of Jesus, one day God will make everything right and we will be victorious in Jesus.