

Revelation: Reading Guide

Outline

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A Book of Christian Prophecy

The Book of Revelation is not easy reading and has a long history of misinterpretation. Many people have made a fundamental mistake: taking it as a literal set of predictions delivered in the past concerning current events. Reading Revelation in that way has been popular for a long time. For many people today it has become an obsession. The “end time” has been awaited many times without occurring. Such readings have caused distortion of lives; many individuals and groups have left livelihood and loved ones to meet the New Jerusalem, only to have their dreams destroyed. Such readings have also missed the real religious message of Revelation. They reduce its value to that of an astrological chart.

The Book of Revelation requires an *openness of faith* and an *ability to hear*. Because it engages the hearing and the seeing, images must be elicited through the imagination. A contemplative attitude is essential, along with the need not to try to pin poetic language to specific events.

Although the text calls out for such an interpretation, with its promise to reveal “*what will happen soon*” (22:18-19), it is crucial to recognise that just such statements are standard features of a specific literary form of the ancient world, called *apocalyptic*. Two tenets should guide the faithful study of Revelation:

1. The Word of God was addressed to the people of the age when it was written.
2. A text’s “fuller” meaning for successive ages is secondary and never to be divorced from its first historical meaning.

Newspapers and poetry do not communicate their “truths” in exactly the same way. Knowing the usage of a literary form is necessary for intelligent reading.

What is Apocalyptic?

Beginning at least with the Book of Daniel in the OT, the apocalyptic style became prevalent in Judaism during the NT period (200 BC – 200 AD). Persecutions from without and the threat of unfaithfulness from within generated this “literature of the oppressed”, which quickly gained certain standard features:

1. Revelations about the future are experienced in dreams or visions.
2. The insights from these visions are communicated through a complex symbolism involving numbers, animals and cosmic phenomena.
3. The element of prediction is usually a fiction.
4. The seer interprets events of his own age, using a figure of the past (e.g. Enoch) or an angelic being as a spokesperson.

The literary features express an interpretation of history. Apocalyptic defends God’s justice. The “*present age*” appears to be under the control of evil people or even satanic powers, since those devoted to God are being persecuted. The apocalyptic transposes God’s blessing to a future time, “*the age to come.*” Just when things become humanly impossible, God will intervene (as through a messiah) to save God’s own, and he will inaugurate the “*Kingdom of God.*” Apocalyptic brings the conviction that God controls history even though experience seems to suggest that God does not.

The religious message of apocalyptic is simple. To the faithful, it says “hold on”; to the wavering, it declares “stand fast.” It offers hope of victory to those now oppressed but remaining loyal to the one God.

Revelation fits the apocalyptic genre well. It has visions, animals, numbers, cosmic catastrophes. It has a two-page interpretation of history and its basic religious message is a call for the “*endurance of the holy ones*” (13:10; 14:12).

Revelation as Prophecy

In other ways, Revelation transcends apocalyptic. The author is not a fictional sage from the past but a leader well known to his readers. He calls himself John (1:1,4,9; 22:8), who because of his Christian faith has been exiled to the rocky island of Patmos, a Roman penal colony.

The voice of prophecy is directed explicitly (not in coded form) to the seven churches of Asia Minor in ch.2-3. The turn of the ages had already begun. The victory of God over evil has been accomplished through the death and

resurrection of Jesus; even more, the faithful who have been killed already share that victory in heaven.

The self-understanding of the church in this writing is prophetic. Those who follow Jesus are “*servants and prophets and saints*” (11:18). Their witness is the “*spirit of prophecy*” (19:10). Jesus is the first and “*faithful witness*” (1:5) whose mission they continue. And what is their prophecy? To witness to the reality of God in the world in the face of corruption or apostasy (unfaithfulness). In the visions, it is expressed as loyalty to God in face of the idolatrous claims of the state (Rome) and even possible death.

Historical Dates to Assist our Understanding of the Book of Revelation

1. The death and resurrection of Jesus: the beginning of the 30s.
2. The martyrdom of Peter and Paul and Nero’s persecution of the Christians: the 60s.
3. The capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple: 70-73.
4. After the destruction of the Temple, conflicts between Jews and Christians increased, resulting in a complete break around the year 90.
5. The emperor Domitian (81-90) imposed the practice of emperor worship. Christians were often suspect and objects of persecution because of their refusal to participate in this ritual.

The Opening Vision (1:1-20)

The prologue (1:1-3) and the epilogue (22:6-21) provide an explicit prophetic framework for the whole work. The understanding of prophecy as *witness*, which becomes the major theme of the book, is sounded at once (1:2). This means that the prophet is seen primarily as one who tells the truth that people need to hear, rather than primarily as one who predicts the future.

The popularity of letter writing in early Christianity is shown by the fact that this apocalyptic writing contains letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (chs 2-3), and even has an epistolary greeting to introduce the work (1:4-8). The author identifies himself as one known to his readers, and he recounts the vision that provides the basis for the rest of the book. The phrasing of 1:9 suggests that John is on the Greek island of Patmos as a punishment for his witness to Jesus. The vision that now comforts him becomes an exhortation to all who are likewise oppressed.

The risen Jesus is encountered as the Son of Man (the central figure in much apocalyptic), described in the most transcendent terms available. The reader is

now in the realm of visions, which means the realm of symbols. These symbolic terms are not meant literally. The terms used here and elsewhere were not invented by the writer of Revelation but are part of biblical symbolism. Of all apocalyptic writings, Revelation most artfully weaves together the themes of classical prophecy, especially of the prophet Ezekiel. To help your understanding take notice of the footnotes and cross-references in your Bible. You will quickly realise that Revelation is a complex literary construction written by someone very much aware of the previous scriptural tradition.

The Son of Man appears with stars in his hands and standing amid the seven lampstands. Revelation makes two things clear from the start:

1. It is the risen and powerful Lord, in control of the whole universe, who is revealing all these matters.
2. This risen Lord is the one who is present to the churches (1:20), and their concerns are treated in the letters that follow.

Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1 – 3:22)

In what are literally “spirit letters” (cf. 2:7) from the risen Jesus, seven churches of well-known cities in Asia Minor are issued individualised prophecies. We see at once what Revelation understands “*prophecy*” to be: these letters are exhortations to remain faithful to the integrity of their calling. The trials and lapses of the Johannine Christians are here put on remarkable display. We also hear fragments of sayings (e.g. in 2:3) that occur elsewhere in the NT literature (cf. 1 Thess 5:2 and Mk 13:33).

The letters follow the same format. There is greeting, followed by an elaborate designation of Jesus. The risen Lord analyses each community’s spiritual condition and concludes with words of warning or promise. The description of the church’s struggles show how they faced opposition from without (as from the Jews), but even more, division within (as from the Nicolaitans – unauthorised and perverse missionaries. 2:2 refers to “*imposters*”). There is little evidence for connecting the group with Nicolaus, the proselyte from Antioch, mentioned in Acts 6:5). Corruption appears as a vivid possibility. Typical for Johannine literature, the opposition is pictured in terms of false prophecy (2:20). Endurance is the focus of the praise and persuasion in these letters.

The imagery of the letters is very rich. Who can resist the almost fairy-tale quality of the statement: “*To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*” (2:17)? But beneath the poetry lies grim reality. The difficulty in these letters of maintaining

loyalty in the face of social exclusion and human laxity is raised to the level of a cosmic conflict between the Lord and the forces of evil in the visions that follow.

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

Read the letters and fill in the spaces:

	Addressed to whom	Christ described as...	Judgement?	Conversion?	What is promised?
Ephesus 2:1-7					
Smyrna 2:8-11					
Pergamum 2:12-17					
Thyatira 2:18-29					
Sardis 3:1-6					
Philadelphia 3:7-13					
Laodicea 3:14-22					

God and the Lamb in Heaven (4:1 – 5:14)

John is “*caught up in spirit*” (4:2), and the rest of Revelation consists of the visions he experiences in his ecstatic state. The vision is an essential element of apocalyptic. It is found with equal frequency in early Jewish mysticism, called *Merkabah*, or “*throne-chariot*” mysticism. In prayer the mystic ascended through the heavens to the throne of God’s presence. Much of the celestial furniture in Revelation resembles that of the *Merkabah*: the jewel-encrusted throne room (4:3-4), the sea of glass (4:6), the angelic creatures (4:6-9) and the numerous hymns sung in praise of God (5:9-13).

A dramatic departure from standard symbolism is the appearance of “*a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered*” (5:6). Jesus is also called “*Lamb of God*” in Jn’s Gospel (1:29; see also Jn 19:36, a reference to the Passover lamb). What a bold stroke to picture Jesus in animal terms, especially one so

paradoxical. The obvious aspect of the lamb is its sacrificial function: Jesus was slain. But the lamb is also “*the lion of the tribe of Judah*” who has triumphed over death (Rev 5:5). In a powerful proclamation of Jesus’ status after his resurrection, the lamb sits at “*the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne*” (5:7; cf. Ps 110:1). Both figures receive the praise of the heavenly creatures (5:9-11) and indeed of all creation (5:13-14).

The special character of the visions of Revelation is shown by the problem of “*the scroll*” (5:1). It contains the secrets to be revealed, and because of its use in Ezekiel it is immediately recognisable as a symbol for prophecy (10:8-11; Ezek 2:9 – 3:4). Because of his resurrection, Jesus is empowered to open the scroll (Rev 5:5). What follows is both a revelation *of* and *from* Jesus Christ (cf 1:1). The visions will show “*what must take place after this*” (4:1), but the reader is not frightened, knowing from this first vision that the fundamental victory has already been accomplished.

Absorbing Understanding through Imagery

It is useless to try to tease such poetry into a train timetable. The vision here is not one of history unfolding like clockwork: it is a religious vision of God’s ultimate conquest despite current appearances. Once the reader lets go of the obsessive “need to know” that twists beauty into timetables, it is possible to wonder at the powerful and religious imagination at work in these glorious images.

Take time to read carefully and even pray the beautiful acclamations of Christ in 1:4-7; 5:1; 7:10; 19:6-7; 5:9-10; 5:13 and 11:15.

Visions of Cosmic Conflict (6:1 – 16:21)

The next section of Revelation is the most difficult to make sense of and the most worked over for signs of the end. Candidates to fit the beast with the number 666 (13:18) have ranged from Nero to Hitler.

The visions are so structured as to give the illusion of taking place in time, linked together by the phrase “*and then I saw.*” It is always tempting to translate a series of visions into a sequence of historical events. So readers have tried to figure out the overlapping series of sevens: seals (6:1-17; 8:1), trumpets (8:1 – 9:21; 11:15), plagues (15:1-8), bowls (16:1-20). But neither the events of the daily newspaper nor elaborate literary analysis have ever satisfactorily unlocked this dense poetry. It is in fact more likely that all the visions repeat the same basic message: the saints on earth are locked in conflict with hostile

forces. Their earthly combat finds a cosmic counterpart in the struggle between God and Satan.

This Christian community reflecting upon its experience shows two people who both “*witness and testify*” (the terms are inter-changeable). They are killed in imitation of Jesus (11:7). They are also called into heaven (11:12). This picture describes the conviction of Revelation that those who share Jesus’ death also share his triumph in heaven. Scenes of suffering on earth below are alternated with serene descriptions of the saints in heaven celebrating the anticipated and certain victory of the Lamb (5:9f; 6:9-11; 7:4-7; 14:1-5; 15:2-4). Apocalyptic demands that history move in a downward curve to ever more dismal circumstances, until God finally intervenes. In Revelation, however, the final outcome is not in doubt. Not just Jesus, but also those “*defeated*” with him by evil *already* share in the resurrection triumph.

The Cosmic Conflict

On one side we see all the “*beasts*” who oppose the faithful: the dragon (12:1-8), the first beast (13:1-10), and the second beast (13:11-17). These are not separate enemies, but masks worn by the one force of evil. As in modern horror films, the destruction of one evil force gives rise to another more horrifying still. Beneath the different masks, one visible enemy is most prevalent: the idolatrous state that persecutes the saints, enslaves them, and seeks to kill them (13:7-18).

On the other side are those loyal to God, the “*servants, prophets and saints*” (11:18; 19:9f). They continue Jesus’ own faithful witness to God by witnessing to Jesus. By so doing, they reject the idolatrous claims of the state for worship of the emperor. They suffer the consequences, some by shedding their blood. Revelation establishes the connection between “*witness*” and “*martyr*” by the disciples’ imitation of Jesus’ death.

Punishment of Babylon (17:1 – 20:15)

The masks fall away, revealing as the real enemy of God’s people the Roman Empire, “*the great whore who is seated on many waters*” (17:1). Rome is called Babylon (17:5) because in the biblical tradition it was Babylon above all that symbolised the desecration of the Temple and the exile of the people. In typical apocalyptic fashion, the sequence of events is laid out: God has given temporary rule to the evil empire, to accomplish God’s ends. It does battle against the Lamb and the people.

The persecution and suffering were undoubtedly real. These Christians were faced with the choices of all who suffer oppression. What were they to do? To resist violently and seek to overthrow Rome would be futile as well as contrary to their beliefs. But to co-operate would be to lose their identity. They chose the path of passive resistance. They did not fight the beast, but neither would they do its bidding. The path of martyrdom, however slow or fast, is not easy. For those who survive, the psychic toil is considerable. Anger at the enemy can easily turn inward; patient endurance is hard labour.

They were convinced that "*the Lamb will conquer*" (17:14), but in their earthly condition they had not seen it happen. The description of Rome's fall is deliciously detailed. The pent-up fury of the oppressed is released in glee over the disgrace of the oppressor. Much of this is obviously and literally wish fulfilment, the stuff of fantasy. The anger of a downtrodden people is deflected to a punishing God.

The stages of the end-time reveal how "*the words of God will be fulfilled*" (17:17). These final stages lack poetry, but this deficiency is overcome by the final vision.

The New Creation (21:1 – 22:21)

The conclusion to Revelation is a fitting conclusion to the Bible as a whole. The vision of a new creation (21:1) is central to the NT (cf 2 Cor 5:17). The Christian experience of Christ was one of an absolute new beginning, rooted in the ever-new life of God. God can say, "*See, I am making all things new*" (21:5), because God is "*the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end*" of all things (21:6; 22:13). As Genesis began with the creation by a word, so the vision of the end-time recaps that beginning: creation is renewed.

The hope expressed in Revelation is not simply that souls will be saved after death, or that evil will be conquered, or even that the saints will reign for a thousand years over a burnt-out terrain. The hope is that creation itself will be transformed. So the sight of a "*New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God*" is a vision of a civilised order, one that is intrinsically *holy* in the proper sense. Human society is based on the recognition of God's power and presence (21:3,7f.).

In this city there is not even need for "religion" as a separate compartment of life. The temple of the city is "*the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*" (21:22). and all the city's people will be priests of [the Lord] God (21:6). There is no division between peoples; nothing is accursed (22:3). The nations will

walk by the light of the Lamb (21:24), and the trees of the city “*are for the healing of the nations*” (22:2). and what medicine! “*Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away*” (21:4).

Great harm has come to those who have tried by force to make this vision a reality, to establish a thousand-year reign of the saints on earth. Great despair has come to those who have tried on the basis of good will to construct a society like the New Jerusalem. The vision has value precisely as challenge, as an ever-present call to all humanity for constant renewal. This does not come about by human effort but by God’s gift. The transformation is not technical but organic.

But so compelling is the vision that no one who hears it can help joining in the plaintive cry of the epilogue, “*Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!*” The epilogue also reminds us that we are still in the in-between time when the world is not yet recreated. There is still need for the witness of prophecy and for endurance of the saints, for “*Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy*” (22:11). Here is the call to the saints.

The above notes are an abridged version of the Introduction to the Book of Revelation in *The Catholic Bible (New American Bible)*, Personal Study Edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.