

REVELATION

Seeing, Knowing and Serving Jesus Christ
Today at the Edge of History

Volume 0, Number 2

Revelation: Introducing a Difficult Book

This issue of our "Revelation Newsletter" offers a basic introduction to the book of Revelation. You will find articles on Authorship, Literary Structure and other topics. To begin with, though it is important to say again that the overarching purpose of

the last book of the Bible is the same as the rest of God's Word. It is not about predicting the future or solving puzzles. It is about Christian Discipleship--seeing, knowing and serving Jesus Christ today at the edge of history where we live.

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Revelation: Who, Where & When?

St. John on the Island of Patmos, A Writer and An Example for the Ages

"St. John can refer to the Apostle, the Elder in Ephesus, or to an otherwise unknown leader in the first-century church. Scholars argue for the various identifications. It matters little, so far as I can tell, to an accurate interpretation of the book. I do take the position, though, that the St. John who wrote the Revelation also wrote the gospel and letters (Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, p.2 & footnote).

Having found no compelling reason to think otherwise, I tend to agree with Dr. Peterson, and I find much to compel me toward faithful Christian discipleship as I consider what may well have been John's circumstances on that Island of stunning revelation.

First, the very fact that John says so little about himself and his circumstances indicates that his concern is with the things of Christ. "The revelation of Jesus Christ" is how the letter begins. It will be about Jesus, not about John. And so we must speculate about its authorship. That is as it should be. Jesus is on the throne and John knows it. From Patmos John challenges me toward a similar focus in my life.

The year, most likely was somewhere around 96 AD. John the Apostle, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as he had referred to himself in his Gospel, is now in his 80's. He has been exiled to Patmos, an Island 10 miles off the coast of modern-day Turkey where Rome sent its criminals and enemies to spend what life they had left working its rock quarries. How did John end up here?

In 65 AD state persecution of Christians began under Nero. it was continued under Vespasian in 69 AD. Peter and Paul were crucified. Timothy was murdered. The Jewish Temple in

Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. Then, in AD 92 with Emperor Domitian, a man embodying the tragic combination of great power and great insecurity, on the throne things became worse. He changed the name of his empire to "The Eternal Empire," and he called himself "The Eternal King." He decreed that all people were to worship him as "Dominus et Deus" (Lord and God). All subjects were to go to temples built in his honor, throw some incense on the altar, bow and say "Caesar Kurios" (Caesar is Lord). This "little act of worship" was to be the glue holding his empire together. Believe what you will, but do this civil and religious ritual or pay a heavy price.

John, and followers of Jesus like him, could not do this. They would not affirm anyone but Jesus as "Lord." So they were called "atheists," seen as unity-destroying enemies of the state and killed or exiled. On Patmos John was paying the heavy price of faithful discipleship. From Patmos the Apostle challenges me toward similar dedication and courage.

Finally, John says "On the Lord's Day" he was "in the spirit" (Rev. 1:10). Whatever else this means, it tells us that John was still worshipping. Despite all he was suffering, John was giving his Sunday attention to

praising his Lord and Savior. He didn't give in to self pity. He wasn't swallowed up in fear and anger. he was putting effort into the most important of activities: worship. He had work to do. Oh did he ever! And so John, from Patmos, encourages me toward a similar freedom from circumstances and freedom for Christ.



Bosch: St. John on Patmos

Revelation: What Kind of Book Is It?

John wrote the Book of Revelation as an inspired theologian, but also as a prophetic poet and as a passionate pastor.



The Island of Patmos

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John wrote the Book of Revelation as an **inspired theologian**, but also as a **prophetic poet** and as a **passionate pastor**.

Richard Bauckham in his book The Theology of the Book of Revelation (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993) writes that “Misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is” and then goes on to say that Revelation “belongs not to just one but three kinds of literature.”

What kind of book is Revelation? It is **Apocalypse, Prophecy and Letter**.

1. Apocalypse: John writes what has been revealed to him by the Lord. The word “apocalypse” refers, literally, to the lifting of a curtain or a cover, and so means “disclosure” or “unveiling.” Many examples of this type of writing have come down to us from the centuries surrounding the time of Jesus including Daniel, and parts of Isaiah (24-27), Ezekiel (38-39) and Zechariah (9-14). A classic definition for this genre comes from John J. Collins (The Apocalyptic Imagination, p.5). It is “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” Darrell Johnson (Revelation: Discipleship on the Edge, p.4) helps us come to grips with what this means for us when he says that apocalyptic literature “seeks to set the present in light of the future” and “seeks to set the present in light of the invisible realities of the present.”

2. Prophecy: John writes what has been revealed to him by the Lords on behalf of the Lord. The tendency is to hear this word and think of telling the future, but in reality prediction is only a small part of what “prophecy” means. It is more “forth-telling” than “fore-telling.” It means to speak for God. John does this in a new way, appealing to our imaginations with dazzling images but his new way is entirely consistent with the rest of the Bible. Eugene Peterson conveys this idea so well in his book entitled Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1993): “I do not read the

Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything in the Revelation can be found in the previous sixty-five books of the bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination. St. John uses words the way poets do, recombining them in fresh ways so that old truth is freshly perceived. He takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us in an ‘animated and impassioned dance of ideas’” (Introduction, p.xi).

3. Letter: John writes what has been revealed to him by the Lord on behalf of the Lord and for the benefit of people he loves. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, John writes as a pastor. Revelation is a letter “To the seven churches in the province of Asia” (Rev.1:4). With great passion John wants his fellow believers to know the things that Jesus is telling. He wants their faith to remain strong and sure, their lives to remain abundant and obedient, their witness to remain bold and fruitful and their joy to remain full and infectious. So he writes as a pastor fully aware of the challenges his people face (the same ones he is facing and overcoming!).

Richard Bauckham again (p.17): *Revelation’s readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world. Civic and religious architecture, iconography, statues, rituals and festivals, even the visual wonder of cleverly engineered ‘miracles’ (cf. Rev. 13:13-14) in the temples--all powerful visual impressions of Roman imperial power and of the splendour of pagan religion. In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of the world: how it looks from the heaven to which John is caught up in chapter 4. The visual power of the book effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with an alternative vision of how the world is and will be.*

Revelation: The Literary Structure ("A Proposed Chiasm")

(from Darrell W. Johnson, Revelation: Discipleship on the Edge)

1. 1:1 -- Prologue

(1:1-8)

"Coming" ... "Near" ... "Must" ... "I Am" ...

2. 1:9

(1:9-3:22)

Jesus - in the middle

Seven messages

"Hear" ... "Overcomes"

3. 4:1 -- "Open" (a Door)

(4:1-11:18)

"Throne" ... "Scroll"

"Overcome" (5:5)

"Lamb"

"Seven seals" ... "Seven trumpets"
(seven peals of thunder)

4. 11:19 -- "Open" (The Temple)

(11:19-15:4)

"Sign" (12:1)

"Sign" (12:3)

"Overcome" (12:11)

"Beasts"

"Sign" (15:11)

"Overcome"

5. 15:5 -- "Open" (The Tabernacle)

(15:5-19:10)

"Seven Bowls"

17:1 -- "come up here and I will show you the judgment of the harlot"

17:3 -- "and he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness"

19:10 -- "and I fell at his feet to worship him"

19:10 -- "do not do that... worship God"

6. 19:11 -- "Open" (Heaven)

(19:11-22:5)

Jesus - on a horse

"Saw" ... "The one who overcomes shall inherit these things" (21:7)

21:9 -- "come up here and I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb"

21:10 -- "and he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain"

22:8 -- "I fell to worship at the feet of the angel"

22:9 -- "do not do that... worship God"

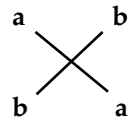
7. 22:6 -- Epilogue

(22:6-21)

"Coming" ... "Near" ... "Must" ... "I Am"

What is a "chiasm?"

The name "chiasm" comes from the Greek letter X ("Chi"). It refers to a way of presenting ideas that is also called "inverted parallelism." In this technique, found throughout the Bible, ideas are presented and then repeated, but they are repeated in reverse order. The structure is then something like: **a-b-b-a**, or **a-b-c-b-a**, etc. The visual representation is the letter "X":



The intent of this structure is to focus attention on what is found at the center of this "envelope." More particularly, it helps the listener/reader to understand "what is at the beginning and the end in light of what is in the middle." (Darrell Johnson, Revelation: Discipleship on the Edge, class notes).

*Note: The word "**open**" serves as a key to the structure for the whole book. This seems appropriate given that Revelation is an "**Apocalyptic**" letter and that this word means "to unveil, disclose, break through from hiddenness, to reveal" or "to open" (see p. 2)

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Revelation: 666 Ways to Miss the Point

1. Forget about Jesus: The Book of Revelation belongs to Jesus Christ. It is from Him. It is about Him. It is for Him. Forget this, at any point along the way, and you stand a good chance of doing a hatchet job on proper and healthy interpretation.

In the opening words of the Apocalypse, "the revelation of Jesus Christ," the preposition "of" carries a double meaning: the revelation is about Jesus Christ; the revelation comes by means of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both the content of the revelation and the agent of the revelation. Jesus Christ is the way in which God reveals himself to us; Jesus Christ is also God himself being revealed to us.

It follows then that the Revelation is, in the first place, not information about the bad world that we live in, or a report on the first century church under persecution. First of all, it is a proclamation by and about Jesus Christ. Items regarding future and past are introduced insofar as they are useful in providing material that is expositional of Jesus Christ. The Revelation is nothing if not focused on Jesus Christ.

It is difficult to sustain this focus. There are so many fascinating symbols to pursue and so many intriguing subjects to take up that only a highly disciplined imagination holds everything in subordination to Jesus Christ. But it is the only way the Revelation can be read sanely. It is the only way any scripture can be read rightly. (Eugene Peterson, Reversed Thunder, Ch. 3, pp. 26-27)

2. Don't Read the Book. Seems silly, but a lot of people do it. Don't read the whole book, just pull out certain ideas and intriguing facts like "The Millennium" or the "Number of the Beast" and make decisions about what they mean based on popular opinion, fictional accounts or personal feelings.

3. Don't Read the Bible. So much of the imagery of Revelation comes right out of the Old Testament -- Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah. John the Apostle was soaked in the Scriptures. His symbolic world was tied in with that of God's Word. Studying Revelation is a great way to learn more about the Old Testament. Studying the Old Testament is a great way to prepare to understand Revelation. Ignoring the rest of the Bible

makes Revelation unintelligible or, worse, severely misleading.

4. Don't Let History Get in Your Way. John also uses images from contemporary realities in the Roman Empire. "John intended his message for his own generation" (Bruce Metzger, Breaking the Code, p.21). He expected his readers to be able to understand what he was saying. Ignoring "what it meant then" makes understanding "what it means today" a vain pursuit.

5. Look for Hidden Meanings in Every Minute Detail of the Book, and then associate them with contemporary events. "It is important to recognize that the descriptions are descriptions of symbols, not of the reality conveyed by the symbols" (Metzger, Code, p.14).

6. Forget about Discipleship. The Book was written "in order to encourage the churches with the assurance that, despite all the forces marshaled against them, victory was theirs if they remained loyal to Christ" (Metzger, Code, p. 14). The Book of Revelation is for us who desire to see,

know and serve Jesus Christ. Approach it as a predictor-in-waiting rather than a disciple-in-training and you will miss its value. The Kingdom of God is breaking into the world in final opposition to its ways. This creates pressure, and we followers of Jesus live each day at the edge of this in-breaking.

Revelation is intended to help us persevere as faithful disciples *today* at the edge of this "kingdom in-breaking" Jesus inaugurated and Revelation affirms.

7. Forget about Witness. John's prophecy is initially a revelation to the churches of the role they are to play as prophetic witnesses to the nations. But also, indirectly, it is the content of the prophetic witness of the churches to the nations. (Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation, p.83)

8. Finally, Bring a Calculator for the Numbers. Assume they are actual figures you can count on rather than symbols you can believe in. All the numbers in Revelation are symbolic (like 7 which is the "number of completeness"--more on this in later issues). 666 ways? It's symbolic. It means infinitely short of completeness. Was I really going to come up with 658 more ways? No, but all of them are the "ways of imperfection," of incompleteness, of missing the fullness of God and the fullness of God's Revelation.

