

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Authorship of Revelation

Internal claim

- Written by “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8)
- Written to churches in province of Asia (1:4, 11)
- Author in exile on island of Patmos (1:9)

This data fits best with the Apostle John, whose name was John, who lived and ministered in the province of Asia, and who was exiled on the island of Patmos:

“It is said that in this persecution [Domitian’s] the apostle and evangelist John, who was still alive, was condemned to dwell on the island of Patmos in consequence of his testimony to the divine word.” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:18 [NPF 2nd Series, 1:148])

Problem of literary style

The grammatical and literary style of Revelation is quite different from that of John’s Gospel and epistles. This fact has been noticed for centuries. The first extant writer to discuss it is Dionysius of Alexandria (died ca. A.D. 264). His writings are not extant, but he is quoted extensively by Eusebius. Note his remarks:

“Therefore, that he was called John, and that this book is the work of one John, I do not deny. And I agree also that it is the work of a holy and inspired man. But I cannot readily admit that he was the apostle, the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, by whom the Gospel of John and the Catholic Epistle were written. For I judge from the character of both, and the forms of expression, and the entire execution of the book, that it is not

his. . . . But I think that he was some other one of those [someone named John] in Asia; as they say that there are two monuments in Ephesus, each bearing the name of John.

“And from the ideas, and from the words and their arrangement, it may be reasonably conjectured that this one is different from that one. . . . Anyone who examines carefully will find the phrases, ‘the life,’ ‘the light,’ ‘turning from darkness,’ frequently occurring in both; also continually, ‘truth,’ ‘grace,’ ‘joy,’ ‘the flesh and blood of the Lord,’ ‘the judgment,’ ‘the forgiveness of sins,’ ‘the love of God toward us,’ the ‘commandment that we love one another,’ that we should ‘keep all the commandments’; the ‘conviction of the world, of the Devil, of Anti-Christ,’ the ‘promise of the Holy Spirit,’ the ‘adoption of God,’ the ‘faith continually required of us,’ ‘the Father and the Son,’ occur everywhere. In fact, it is plainly to be seen that one and the same character marks the Gospel and the Epistle throughout. But the Apocalypse is different from these writings and foreign to them; not touching, nor in the least bordering upon them; almost, so to speak, without even a syllable in common with them. . . .

“Moreover, it can also be shown that the diction of the Gospel and Epistle differs from that of the Apocalypse. For they were written not only without error as regards the Greek language, but also with elegance in their expression, in their reasonings, and in their entire structure. They are far indeed from betraying any barbarism or solecism, or any vulgarism whatever. For the writer had, as it seems, both the requisites of discourse—that is, the gift of knowledge and the gift of expression—as the Lord had bestowed them both upon him. I do not deny that the other writer saw a revelation and received knowledge and prophecy. I perceive, however, that his dialect and language are not accurate Greek, but that he uses barbarous idioms, and, in some places, solecisms. It is unnecessary to point these out here, for I would not have any one think that I have said these things in a spirit of ridicule, for I have said what I have only with the purpose of showing clearly the difference between the writings.” (quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7:25 [NPF 2nd Series, 1:309-11])

A thorough listing and discussion of these differences can be seen in R. H. Charles’s commentary (*ICC*, vol. 1). Charles lists three and a half pages of differences, along with two pages of “close connections” (pp. xxix-xxxiv). His section on the “A Short Grammar of the Apocalypse” is massive and detailed, and further compares the two works (pp. cxvii-clix). He recognizes the large Hebrew influence in the Greek style.

The literary differences can be explained best perhaps by three factors:

(1) Different types or genres of literature, calling for a different use of terms (more literal than figurative use of verbs, etc.; see John Battle, *An Exegetical-Statistical Study of the Most Common Words in John and Revelation*, esp. pp. 95-103)

(2) No amanuensis, or different amanuensis, on Patmos

(3) Deliberate changing of style in Revelation to recall style of Hebrew prophetic writings (note excellent discussion by William Milligan, *Discussions on the Apocalypse*, ch. 5: “The Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel,” pp. 180-266)

Milligan notes that the author of Revelation is capable of excellent and eloquent Greek in several sustained passages in the book. His variations from standard usage were deliberate, not the result of ignorance.

Problem of two Johns

In the statement quoted above, Dionysius suggested that there were two men named John who lived in Ephesus—one wrote the Gospel, and the other wrote Revelation. Eusebius himself preferred this approach, since he was not a chiliast and did not want Revelation to be written by John the Apostle. To bolster this theory, Eusebius quoted from Papias, who was a disciple of John:

“But I shall not hesitate also to put down for you along with my interpretations whatsoever things I have at any time learned carefully from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those that speak much, but in those that teach the truth; not in those that relate strange commandments, but in those that deliver the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and springing from the truth itself. If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elder, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders—what Andrew or what Peter said [εἶπεν *eipen*, aorist tense], or what was said [this verb not in Greek] by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say [λέγουσιν *legousin*, present tense].” (Papias, quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3:39:3-4 [NPF 2nd Series, 1:170-71]; Greek can be seen in Theron, *Evidence of Tradition*, p. 28)

Immediately following his quotation of Papias, Eusebius continues by giving his evaluation of the evidence from Papias:

“It is worth while observing here that the name John is twice enumerated by him. The first one he mentions in connection with Peter and James and Matthew and the rest of the apostles, clearly meaning the evangelist; but the other John he mentions after an interval, and places him among others outside of the number of the apostles, putting Aristion before him, and he distinctly calls him a presbyter. This shows that the statement of those is true, who say that there were two persons in Asia that bore the same name, and that there were two tombs in Ephesus, each of which, even to the present day, is called John’s. It is important to notice this. For it is probable that it was the second, if one is not willing to admit that it was the first that saw the Revelation, which is ascribed by name to John.” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3:39:5-6)

While Eusebius' understanding of Papias's statement certainly is possible, it seems just as probable that Papias was talking of only one person named John. He uses the title "presbyter" ("elder") for the apostles at the beginning of the quotation, and then repeats the title in front of John's name. Also, the apostles are referred to with the aorist tense, but when John is mentioned again, the present tense is used. This change of tenses would agree with the circumstances if John the apostle was still living after the others had died. Papias was concerned with what all the apostles, including John, said, and also with what John the apostle was still saying. For a good discussion, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 266-68, 887-89.

External evidence for Johannine authorship

External evidence strongly favors John the apostle as the author of Revelation. No other author was suggested, except in retrospect. The two strongest witnesses are Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.

Justin Martyr

—ca. A.D. 150

“And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 81 [ANF 1:240])

This quotation from Justin Martyr is certainly genuine, since it is noted by Eusebius, who himself did not believe that John wrote Revelation:

“And he [Justin] mentions the Apocalypse of John, saying distinctly that it was the apostle's.” (*Hist. eccl.* 4:18:8 [NPF 2nd Series, 1:197])

Irenaeus

—ca. A.D. 180

Irenaeus is especially important, since he is in the direct line from the apostle John:

John → Polycarp → Irenaeus

Irenaeus mentions this relationship in his lost letter to Florinus, a section of which is quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5:20 (NPF 2nd Series, 1:238-39; the extract is also in ANF 1:568).

In his massive work *Against Heresies* Irenaeus in various sections quotes from nearly every chapter of Revelation, attributing it to John the apostle:

called "John" page in ANF, Vol. 1

1:26:3	352
4:14:2	479
4:17:6	484
4:18:6	486
4:21:3	493
5:26:1	554
5:28:2	557
5:34:2	564

called "John, the Lord's disciple"

4:20:11	491
4:30:4	504
5:35:2	566

Date of Revelation

To the references listed above must be added this reference, in which Irenaeus, while discussing the identity of the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666, links John's writing of the Revelation (cf. 5:28:2, p. 557) to a date:

"For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign." (*Haer.* 5:30:3, *ANF* 1:559-560)

Roman emperors:	Julians:	Augustus	30 B.C. - A.D. 14
		Tiberius	A.D. 14-37
		Gaius (Caligula)	37-41
		Claudius	41-54
		Nero	54-68
	generals:	Galba	68
		Otho	69
		Vitellius	69
	Flavians:	Vespasian	69-79
		Titus	79-81
Domitian		81-96	

Antonines:	Nerva	96-98
	Trajan	98-117

It seems most natural that Revelation was written during a time of persecution. There were two emperors during the first century who persecuted the church: Nero and Domitian. The number 666 can be made to fit the name of either emperor (Nero's name can come out also to 616, which is found in some manuscripts).

Some have placed the writing of Revelation earlier than the traditional date, sometime before A.D. 70. J. B. Lightfoot has suggested this earlier date, in order to account for what he felt was the more "Hebrew" literary style of Revelation, compared to the Gospel and epistles ("St. Paul and the Three," in *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, pp. 360-64; same conclusion in B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to John*, pp. lxxxvi-lxxxvii).

F. J. A. Hort suggests an earlier date (time of Vespasian) because of internal evidence as it relates to the historical background of the first century (*The Apocalypse of St. John I-III*, pp. xiv-xxxvi). In addition, he recognizes and advances the literary style arguments advanced by Lightfoot and Westcott (pp. xxxvii-xl):

"It is however true that without the long lapse of time and the change made by the Fall of Jerusalem the transition cannot be accounted for. Thus date and authorship do hang together. It would be easier to believe that the Apocalypse was written by an unknown John than that both books belong alike to St John's extreme old age. The supposition of an early date relieves us however from any such necessity, and the early date is, we have seen, much the most probable on independent grounds." (p. xl)

Hort's arguments are well answered in the introduction to H. B. Swete's commentary (esp. pp. xcix-cvi).

Others have placed it earlier than A.D. 70 for theological reasons (as J. Stewart Russell, *The Parousia, A Study of the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*, pp. 370-73; David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, pp. 3-6; these arguments are expanded by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-A.D. 70 Composition* [1998; Gentry's Th.D. dissertation at Whitefield Theological Seminary]), or to fit an over-all theory regarding the composition of the entire NT (as John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 221-53).

In spite of these who have argued for a date before A.D. 70, the testimony of Irenaeus (see above) and other fathers, which places the writing toward the end of the reign of Domitian, and the bulk of internal evidence (such as the martyrdom of Antipas in Rev. 2:13 in the reign of Domitian; cf. *NIV Study Bible*) have convinced most scholars to hold to a date in the 90s. See arguments and data in Charles, 1/xci-xcvi; and in Guthrie, pp. 949-61. The cosmic nature of the prophecies in Revelation argues against finding their fulfillment in A.D. 70; hence, there is no need to posit the writing of the book before that date. The differences in language and approach

between Revelation and the Gospel and epistles can be accounted for by the different circumstances of writing and by the Semitic cast of the Revelation's literary genre.

Audience

Revelation was addressed to the seven churches of the province of Asia (1:4, 11; ch. 2-3):

Ephesus
Smyrna
Pergamum
Thyatira
Sardis
Philadelphia
Laodicea

The apostle John labored there before and after his banishment to Patmos, and died there during the reign of Trajan (A.D. 98-117; Irenaeus *Haer.* 2:22:5, *ANF* 1:392).

Articles on these cities have been written by William M. Ramsay in Hastings *Dictionary of the Bible*. As the epistle to the Ephesians, Revelation appears to be a circular letter to the churches in the main cities of Asia, following the Roman mail route.

Purpose and theme

Revelation was written to reveal the future to John's readers (1:1), especially the events surrounding the second coming of Christ (1:7; cf. Zech 12:10).

It focuses on the times of past, present, and future (1:19). The bulk of the outline deals with future events, in agreement with 1:1 (see below).

Written in a time of persecution, the book emphasizes two main truths:

1) Christ will overcome evil powers.

Rev 4:11; 5:5, 9-10, 12-13
Rev 6-16 (the seals, trumpets, bowls)
Rev 11:15; 12:5-12; 15:3-4; 17:14; 19:1-2, 6, 12-16; 20:4, 6; 22:5

2) Therefore we should endure and overcome.

Rev 1:3, 9; 2:7, 11, 26-27; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:9-10; 7:15-17; 11:18; 12:10-11; 13:10;
14:13; 16:15; 18:20; 20:4-6; 21:3-4; 22:3-5

Methods of interpretation

Revelation is clearly in the genre of apocalyptic literature. Yet parts of the book represent other types of literature. In addition, there is a great variety of figurative language and description. All these factors make interpreting the book very uncertain and difficult. Certainly one should exercise reserve in advancing his own method. And there should be toleration for other methods, as long as they recognize the inspiration and inerrancy of the book and seek to use sound hermeneutical principles. For an interesting comparison of some of the major methods, see David C. George, ed., *Revelation: Three Viewpoints* (1977). Some of these positions are analyzed thoroughly from a futurist perspective by Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation* (1968).

Normally the types of interpretation are based on the way that ch. 6-19 are handled. Do they primarily refer to John's own times (preterit), to the entire dispensation (historical), or to the immediate times of Jesus' second coming (futuristic)? Each of these positions uses a particular mix of literal-symbolic hermeneutics, with wide varieties of usage within each position.

Preterit interpretation

E.g., Luis de Alcazar, F. W. Farrar, Moses Stuart, R. H. Charles, H. B. Swete, David Chilton

E.g.: ch. 13 (beast dies & rises again) refers to Nero, perhaps Domitian

ch. 19 (Christ coming on white horse) refers to Jerusalem destroyed in A.D. 70

Some problems:

13:5, Hard to fit 3-1/2 years with Nero or Domitian

1:1; 4:1, Indicate future to John (especially difficult for traditional date for Revelation)

19:19ff, Hard to fit with destruction of Jerusalem

[For a debate between the preterite and futurist views of the tribulation, see Thomas Ice and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Great Tribulation, Past or Future?* (1999)]

Historical interpretation

E.g., Joachim of Floris, E. B. Elliott, Albert Barnes, A. J. Gordon, William Hendriksen

Often combined with “day-year” interpretation—1 day = 1 year

Thus, 3-1/2 years = 1300 years

Note on Joachim of Floris (1130-1201): “He drew a parallel between the seven seals and seven divisions of the Christian era, ending with a consummation that should follow immediately his own times” (Tenney, *ZPEB* 5:97a)

Some problems:

Excessive allegorization required

Need to readjust as history moves on

Futuristic interpretation

E.g., W. Scott, J. A. Seiss, J. B. Smith, J. Walvoord, G. E. Ladd, R. Mounce (Ladd and Mounce, “preterite-futurists”)

Reasons for this view (cf. Gary Cohen, *Understanding Revelation*, pp. 29-43):

1) Beast of Rev 11-19 = beast of Dan 7, which follows the fragmenting of the Roman empire (cf. Dan 2)

2) Time specifications in Rev. = those of Dan.

Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7
Rev 11:3; 12:6, 14; 13:5

These follow the 4th empire and immediately precede the kingdom

3) Futuristic scheme best fits prophetic Scriptures into one program:

Scriptures used: Jer 30:4-10; Dan 7:19-27; (8:23-25); 9:24-27; Mt. 24:15-23, 29-31; John 5:23; Rom 11:25-26; 2 Thess 2:1-12

- Revived Roman empire (10 kings)
- Temple rebuilt
- Personal Antichrist, a Roman; replaces 3 kings

- Antichrist's breaking of covenant with Israel in middle of seven-year period (depends on interpretation of Dan.)
- Abomination of desolation
- Persecution of Israel, saints (3½ years)
- Spirit poured out, Israel converted
- Christ returns
- Antichrist destroyed
- Christ's kingdom on earth established

[Many items in this order of events coincide closely with what we know of the Jewish messianic expectation during the time of Jesus; see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black, 1979, 2:514-47).]

4) Agrees with Rev 1:1, 19; 4:1—future things

5) Can use literal hermeneutics more than other views do

Some problems:

Bulk of book might be considered irrelevant to most of church

John's readers were expected to understand symbols (e.g., 666 in Rev 13:18)

Literal and symbolic interpretation

Representatives of all schools use a greater or lesser degree of non-literal interpretation in Revelation. In general, it seems best to assume a literal meaning is intended, unless the context or uniform biblical usage indicates that a figurative interpretation is intended.

There have been commentators who have employed excessive allegorization in Revelation: e.g., Augustine, sometimes Alford, Lenski, Hendriksen. Of course, some make the book completely mysterious, denying any historical correlation (as Swedenborg).

Allegorism sees in Revelation “not simply a map of history in advance; it is rather a philosophy of history written from the standpoint of heaven” (Tenney, *ZPEB* 5:96b). Often the book is taken in cyclical or topical form: evil is embodied in Antichrist, but Christ overcomes

him in the church (ch. 2-3), in heaven (ch. 4-5), and in the world (ch. 6-18). Ch. 19-22 would repeat the theme in more dramatic language. Various details are allegorized; e.g., the two witnesses (ch. 11) are symbolic of Christian martyrs.

Allegorical interpretation in general is inferior to a more literal-grammatical interpretation, especially if the “Revelation” is to “reveal” anything specific. Allegorical interpreters generally do not agree as to the proper meaning. E.g.:

Ch. 8, 4 Trumpets; 1/3 earth, sea, rivers, sun, moon

Lenski—religious delusions (p. 277)

Hendriksen—natural disasters (p. 143)

Ch. 11-13, 3½ years

Lenski—follows year-day theory

Hendriksen—parallels Elijah; whole inter-advent age, time of judgment

Outline of Revelation

(Futuristic scheme)

Introduction, 1:1-8

I. Things that are past: vision of Christ, 1:9-20

II. Things that are present: letters to the seven churches, ch. 2-3

ch. 2—Ephesus

Smyrna

Pergamum

Thyatira

ch. 3—Sardis

Philadelphia

Laodicea

III. Things that are to come, ch. 4 - 22:5

A. Heavenly preparation for the tribulation, ch. 4-5

1. God the Father, ch. 4

2. God the Son, ch. 5

B. The tribulation period, ch. 6-18

1. The seven seals, ch. 6 - 8:1

(ch. 7, interlude: 144,000 sealed; tribulation martyrs)

2. The seven trumpets, 8:2 - ch. 11

3. Interlude before the bowls: personalities of the Revelation, ch. 12-14

ch. 12: The woman, the dragon

ch. 13: The antichrist, the false prophet

ch. 14: Many of those in heaven, including the 144,000

4. The seven bowls, ch. 15-16

5. Destruction of Babylon, ch. 17-18

C. The return of Christ, ch. 19

1. Preparation in heaven, 19:1-10

2. Battle of Armageddon, 19:11-21

D. Millennium and judgment, ch. 20

1. Satan bound, 20:1-3

2. Millennial kingdom, 20:4-6

3. Battle of Gog and Magog, 20:7-10

4. Great white throne judgment, 20:11-15

E. The new order, ch. 21 - 22:5

1. New heavens and new earth, 21:1-8

2. New Jerusalem, 21:9-27

3. Life in the new order, 22:1-5

Conclusion, 22:6-21

Commentaries on Revelation

Henry Alford (1860)

John Peter Lange (Amer. ed., 1874)

William Milligan (intro., various passages, 3rd ed., 1893)

Richard Chenevix Trench (ch. 2-3, 1897)

J. A. Seiss (1900)

William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (1904; updated ed. by Mark W. Wilson, 1994)

F. J. A. Hort (ch. 1-3, 1908)

Henry Barclay Swete (3rd ed., 1911)

Isbon T. Beckwith (1919)

Walter Scott (4th ed., 1920)

R. H. Charles (ICC, 2 vols., 1920)

William R. Newell (1935)

R. C. H. Lenski (1943, 1963)

Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (1957)

W. Hendriksen (1960)

J. B. Smith (1961)

John F. Walvoord (1966)

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Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1968)

Herman Hoeksema (1969)

Leon Morris (TNTC, 1969; rev. ed. 1987)

George Eldon Ladd (1972)

Robert H. Mounce (NIC, 1977)

G. R. Beasley-Murray (NCBC, rev. ed. 1978)

David Chilton (1987)

Donald Guthrie (studies, 1987)

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (1990)

Robert W. Wall (NIBC, 1991)

Robert Thomas (at Masters Seminary, 2 volumes, 1992)

Bruce J. Malina (a little weird, 1995)

David E. Aune (WBC, 2 volumes so far [Rev 1-16], 1998)

G. K. Beale (NIGTC, 1999)