

# The Book of the Revelation

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## Introduction to Revelation

Few books of the Bible have generated as much fascination, speculation, confusion and fear as Revelation. Its pages have supplied images and language not only to the church but to the wider culture: Armageddon, apocalypse, beasts, Babylon and the end of the world.

Hollywood has borrowed them. Preachers have charted them. Every generation seems to find someone willing to match the latest war, ruler, technology or crisis with a verse from Revelation. Yet that fascination can cause us to miss why John wrote the book in the first place.

Revelation was written to bring comfort to the people of God and to call them to worship. Those two purposes belong together. John writes to communities facing pressure, uncertainty, compromise and suffering. The Roman world could look permanent and overwhelmingly powerful. Evil could appear to be winning. Faithfulness to Yeshua could be costly. Revelation pulls back the curtain and shows those believers—and us—that what appears to dominate the world is not what ultimately rules it. God is on His throne. Yeshua is the Lamb who was slain and yet lives. The kingdoms and powers that swagger across the stage of history are temporary. The King is not.

That is why comfort in Revelation is not sentimental reassurance that nothing bad will happen. Some very bad things happen in this book. John does not deny suffering, persecution, injustice, judgment or death. Instead, he shows us those frightening realities from heaven's perspective. Again and again the message is, “Do not be afraid.” Not because there is nothing frightening, but because the frightening thing is never ultimate. Yeshua is. He is the First and the Last. He was dead and is alive forevermore. He holds the keys. Revelation is given to people who need courage to remain faithful when what they see around them seems to contradict what God has promised.

And when the curtain is pulled back and we see who really rules, the response is worship. Revelation is filled with worship. Elders fall down. Living creatures cry out. Multitudes praise. Heaven rejoices. The Lamb is declared worthy. Worship is not decorative material inserted between the more interesting prophecies. It is one of the main points of the book. Revelation asks us to see God and His Messiah so clearly that worship becomes the (super)natural response. Comfort leads to worship because we discover that the world is not in the hands of Babylon, the beast or any earthly empire. It is in the hands of God.

## What Kind of Book Are We Reading?

The opening word gives the book its name: apokalypsis, an unveiling or revelation. Something that was hidden is being disclosed. Revelation pulls back the curtain so that we can see history, suffering, judgment, the community of faith and the purposes of God from

another perspective. It is therefore not merely a puzzle about the future. It is an unveiling of reality, and above all it is “the revelation of Yeshua the Messiah” (1:1). If we finish Revelation knowing more about beasts, numbers and timelines but not knowing Yeshua better, we have missed its centre.

Revelation is also prophecy. John calls it “the words of the prophecy” (1:3), and biblical prophecy does more than predict. The prophets call God's people to hear Him, trust Him, repent where necessary and live faithfully. Revelation certainly looks toward what God will do, but its message about tomorrow is intended to change the way God's people live today. The blessing at the beginning of the book is not given to those who successfully decode it. It belongs to those who read, hear and heed.

And Revelation is a letter. John writes to actual congregations in Asia Minor, modern-day Türkiye, and greets them with “Grace to you and peace” (1:4). These communities lived in the first-century Roman world. They knew the pressures of pagan religion, commerce, imperial power and social conformity. Some were suffering; others were compromising; others had grown comfortable. Before we ask what Revelation says to Nashville, Sydney, Singapore or anywhere else today, we should hear what it said to the people who first received it.

## How Should We Interpret It?

Christians have approached Revelation in several major ways. The futurist approach sees much of the book as describing events still to come. The preterist approach emphasizes its relationship to events and circumstances in the first century. The historical approach has understood the visions as portraying the unfolding course of history between Yeshua's first and second comings. The idealist approach emphasizes the book's symbolic portrayal of the continuing struggle between God's kingdom and evil. Each approach asks legitimate questions, but none should be allowed to silence the text itself.

My own reading is basically preterist. I want to begin by asking what John was saying to the people who actually received this book. The congregations were real congregations. Their cities were real cities. Rome was real. Their pressures, temptations, compromises and suffering were real. John did not send them a book whose meaning would remain largely inaccessible for nearly two thousand years until the correct generation finally appeared. Revelation had to mean something to them, and I believe that first-century setting should control our starting point.

But beginning there does not leave Revelation trapped in the first century. The same pressures appear in different clothing in every age. Empires still boast. Political and economic powers still demand loyalties that belong to God. Communities of faith still grow comfortable, compromise, suffer, persevere and sometimes lose their first love. Evil can still look more powerful than righteousness. So throughout this commentary I will regularly ask two questions: What did this mean to the people who first heard it? And having heard that, what does it say to us? The application can be contemporary without pretending that today's newspaper supplied John's original meaning.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum warned about “newspaper exegesis”—reading today's headlines and then searching Revelation for something that seems to match. The temptation is understandable. Revelation contains extraordinary images, and world events can be frightening. But every generation has had its candidates for the beast, its supposedly final war and its confident predictions that the end must occur within its lifetime. We should be much more interested in what John actually wrote than in making John say what appeared in this morning's news.

I learned a similar caution very early in my life as a believer from my old friend Brother Ernie Gruen, now long gone into eternity. He said to me, “Jesus in the Bible didn't say, ‘occupy about when I'm coming’; but rather, ‘occupy until I return.’” I have carried that caution with me as a life principle. Predictive prophecy can easily draw our attention toward dates, calculations and speculation, when our calling is much more immediate. My job is to get right with God, stay right with Him, and help others to know Him. Whatever we believe Revelation tells us about the future, it should make us more faithful in the present.

## Read Revelation with the Tanakh Open

One of the most important things to know before entering Revelation is that John speaks the language of the Hebrew Scriptures. The book is saturated with Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and other books continually supply John's vocabulary and imagery. He often does not stop to announce a quotation. He assumes that the biblical language is already familiar to his hearers. The more we recognize the older Scriptures behind his visions, the less strange many of those visions become.

In that sense Genesis and Revelation function almost like bookends to the biblical story. Genesis introduces creation, human rebellion, judgment, death, exile and God's promise of restoration. Revelation brings those themes toward their conclusion. The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a garden-city. Death enters near the beginning and is finally defeated near the end. Humanity is driven from God's presence, and the story concludes with God dwelling with His people. Revelation is not an isolated appendix attached to the Bible. It gathers up a story that has been developing from the beginning.

That means we should resist reading Revelation as though John suddenly invented a collection of bizarre symbols on Patmos. Much of what he sees has been seen before. The imagery is new in its arrangement and application, but its roots are ancient. Reading Revelation well will repeatedly require us to turn backward in our Bibles before trying to look forward into history.

## The Drama Has an Ending

Revelation presents a 22-chapter drama in which things that look immensely powerful are finally shown to be temporary. Kings rule. Empires boast. Babylon dazzles. Evil persecutes. Death threatens. Yet none of them gets the last word. John eventually hears the announcement, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His

Messiah” (Revelation 11:15). The outcome does not depend upon the strength of God's people. It depends upon the faithfulness and sovereignty of God.

That is the comfort Revelation offers. God has not lost control of His world. Yeshua will return. Evil will not reign forever. Death will not win. God's promises will not quietly expire because history became difficult. What He began, He will bring to completion. The people of God can therefore persevere—not because we know every detail of what happens next, but because we know who stands at the end of the story.

And that is why we worship. Revelation does not invite us merely to stand outside the drama with a chart and a calculator. It invites us before the throne. It asks us to hear the songs, see the Lamb, join the praise and live now in light of the King who is coming. Comfort and worship are not side benefits of understanding Revelation. They are among the main reasons John wrote it.