

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is very unique to our canon of sacred scripture. John's Revelation always brings to mind other-worldly images of dragons and plagues and angelic beings in a heavenly battle over good and evil. In fact, this unique book draws on literary genres not uncommon to the era it was written, and has parallels to other books in the Bible. In this introduction we will examine the timing of the writing of John's Revelation and its literary styles, as well, as briefly discussing the historical context of the Roman world in which John lived. I hope that this introduction will help you to better understand this long misunderstood and awe-inspiring book.

Date

Two possibilities are firmly debated among scholars for the writing of John's Revelation. One group holds that this book was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem and is John's vision of Rome destroying Jerusalem and taking Israel captive. A second possibility, and the more likely, is that John wrote this book sometime around 95-96 AD after the fall of Jerusalem. The churches he addresses are not in Israel proper, they are in Asia Minor. They are places where many Christians fled during the persecutions of Christians by the Jews prior to the fall of Jerusalem and after.

Author

The author identifies himself four times as "John". Similarities in vocabulary and theme exist between John's Gospel, his letters, and this work to identify John the Apostle as the author of this book as well. The tradition attached to the writing of this book (and as mentioned by John himself in Revelation 1:9 is that he received this vision from Jesus while on the island of Patmos. Why was he on Patmos? It is believed he was sentenced to hard labor for continuing to spread the Gospel, establishing churches in Asia Minor, and continuing to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. John had established a thriving ministry in Ephesus and its surrounding region. Tradition holds that he was initially sentenced to die in a vat of boiling oil. He survived this trial utterly unscathed and since the Emperor Domitian failed to kill him, he sentenced John into exile on Patmos. This story is a

wonderful tradition of God's preservation of his servant revealing his mighty power to save despite Domitian's evil scheme. Domitian is rendered almost powerless in the face of God's desire to preserve John for future great work. It bears strong similarity to the story of Daniel in the lion's den and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace! Early church fathers, including Justin Martyr (d. 165), Irenaeus (c.180), Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), Tertullian (d. 220), and Eusebius (d. 339) do affirm that John, the son of Zebedee and apostle of Jesus Christ was exiled to Patmos at this time and wrote the book of Revelation. From Patmos it was delivered to Ephesus and circulated among the seven churches, and beyond.

If we take the later date of the writing of this book (95-96 AD), it puts our timing during the reign of Domitian who succeeded Nero as Emperor of Rome. We all have heard of Nero's persecutions of Christians – putting them in the ring with lions for entertainment, lining the streets with Christians dipped in oil to provide light for the city, to name a few of the atrocities he employed in the persecution of Christians. The fire that devastated Rome during Nero's reign was blamed on Christians. Actually it is now fairly firmly believed that it was a fire started by his own people to clear an area of the city to build his *Domus Aurea*, or Golden Palace. The fire got out of hand and destroyed nearly half of the city. The Christians received the blame making way for Nero to rebuild the city and his palace. The persecution of Christians (and as well as Jews by this time) while well known, was really only focused in Rome under Emperor Nero. It wasn't until Domitian took over that the persecutions became widespread throughout the Roman Empire. One of John's recurring themes in the letters to the churches is to encourage them during their persecutions. Domitian died in 96 AD which allowed John to return to Ephesus where it is believed he wrote the Book of Revelation.

An earlier date for this book cannot reconcile this need for encouragement during heavy persecution encountered by Christians in Asia Minor. In the 60's there may have been some comparatively minor persecution of Christians by Jews, but that persecution pales in comparison with the terrors of Roman Imperial persecution at the end of the century.

Genre

For the purpose of our study, we actually have two literary genres combined in John's Revelation. The letters to the seven churches are a traditional epistolary formula. These seven **epistles** are embedded into the larger **apocalyptic** work. In 1:11 Jesus commands John to record what he sees and to send it to the seven churches. What is revealed to John is a heavily *symbolic* apocalypse – a revealing of what God will bring about for his creation. John must do two things: first, he must write the apocalypse as a record of his vision; and second, he must enclose it in the letter to the seven churches. While John's

Revelation includes the epistles, the overarching genre is apocalyptic and some of the symbolic characteristics of apocalyptic literature are evident in the epistles.

Apocalyptic comes from the Greek word “apokalypsis” which means “an uncovering” or figuratively, “a disclosure, revealing, or revelation”.¹ When scholars speak of the apocalyptic genre, they are comparing a writing style that is similar to what John wrote in his Revelation. It was also a genre known in John’s time, and similar writings already existed in the Jewish prophets. This writing style was prevalent from 200 BC up through 100AD. We see similar style, language and imagery in the books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and especially Enoch, part of the Apocrypha – books not esteemed of the same value as our canon, but highly significant in early Jewish culture. A key feature of apocalyptic writing is that the information imparted in the vision originates with God, and is a message to his people of divine warning of impending judgment if God’s people don’t mend their ways. The message imparted is expressed with much symbolism. The things seen by the visionary, in our case John, are things of the heavenly realm, things unfamiliar to John. The only way he can express the things he sees is symbolically, and they are expressed to him symbolically. Signs and symbols are used to illustrate spiritual truths in a way understandable to earthly minds. In apocalyptic literature symbolism is the rule while literal interpretation is the exception.

While the seven specific and historic churches are identified, the message of the epistles is for all Christians of all times. The letters to the seven churches are the only letters in the Bible dictated by Jesus. These seven churches were actual, existing churches in Asia Minor at the time of John’s revelation and writing these epistles. The primary message of these letters is one of encouragement to those afflicted by persecution, many of whom would be called upon to suffer, and even die, for their faith. Jesus both commends the churches for their strengths but also admonishes them for their weaknesses or failures. Jesus’ message to each of the seven churches is still relevant today for the entire Church as it encourages those who suffer, reminds us that good will triumph over evil, provides hope in difficult times, and gives counsel when our faith wavers. Each letter is both an encouragement and a stern warning to those Christians who have grown cold and apathetic in their faith. Each letter ends with a call to return to faith with a promise to those who heed Jesus’ message that they will find acceptance and blessing. In fact the book of Revelation begins with a promised blessing to those who heed the words of this prophecy. The message to be heeded is not just the contents of the epistles to the seven churches, but the whole of the Revelation itself:

*“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy,
and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it,
because the time is near.” (Rev. 1:3)*

¹ Holman Bible Dictionary