
The Book of Revelation

Lenten Study 2021



1 This is what God showed to Jesus Christ, so that he could tell his servants what must happen soon. Christ then sent his angel with the message to his servant John. 2 And John told everything that he had seen about God's message and about what Jesus Christ had said and done.

Introduction

Most mainline churches do not bother with the Book of Revelation. It is only sparingly used in the Revised Common Lectionary, and often only as an alternative suggestion. It might be read at funeral services, but again is only one of several suggested readings. It has so little regard as scripture that many throughout our 2000 year history have suggested removing it from the Christian Scriptures altogether. Martin Luther thought it would lead to misunderstandings about the afterlife. John Calvin wrote extensively about every other book in the Bible but wrote nothing about Revelation. Even prayer books in most traditions seem to forget it exists save for one or two references. Simply put, the Book of Revelation does not seem to fit in with the rest of the Christian Scriptures.

And yet it has captured the imaginations of artists, poets, novelists, television and movie producers. When wider non-Christian society thinks about our faith, they are often caught up in the images and symbols from Revelation. Fundamentalist traditions within Christianity spend an inordinate amount of time referencing this book, condemning others for not paying attention, and convincing their followers that the book was written especially for those with an inside understanding of the true faith.



WHAT IS REVELATION

Revelation means “revealing something hidden”; Apocalypse in Greek.

The Book of Revelation is a combination of three different writing styles: Letter, Prophecy and Apocryphal literature. Prior to the Gospels being composed and shared, letters were the only way teachers could ensure the churches they established continued with their teachings. It was also the only way to discipline congregations and members who were not living up to the expectations of the community. Most of the letters we have in the Christian Scriptures were sent as corrective measures with the initial problems being lost in time.

Prophecy was well used in the Hebrew Scriptures. God would tell the author / dictator of the prophecy who to address and what to say, while the prophet would acknowledge that they were doing so by the grace of God and not to highlight themselves.

The third style was that of Apocryphal literature, a popular form of writing from the 2nd century BCE until the 2-3 centuries CE. In a uniquely Hebraic way, it was a form of resistance to the oppression of first the Hellenist and then the Roman governments, but also a message of hope: We will get through this and the oppressors will be punished. The Book of Daniel is an example of Apocryphal literature, as are the non-canonical books of Enoch and The Shepherd of Hermas.

At the same time apocryphal literature was popular, a new concept for salvation arose amongst the Hebrew people: The Messiah. While there was no consistent idea of what the Messiah would be or do, they believed a saviour, a hero would come to rescue them and destroy the enemy. The notion of messiah became so extensive that many read the idea back into the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were the only scriptures the early church had available.

WHO WAS JOHN OF PATMOS

We have no real idea who John was or why he was on Patmos, just that he was there because of his teaching about Jesus. Many have assumed that he was a prisoner on the island during the time of Emperor Domitian whose reputation held that he was horrid to the early church. However more modern readings of history think his negative reputation was overblown by his political opponents. Historically the island of Patmos was a garrison as it's location was very close to the western shore of Asia (modern Turkey), and prior to that it was the location of a temple to Artemis. John does not say specifically he was there as a prisoner, so he might have been there as a missionary



Island of Patmos with monastery on the hill



Cave where John was assumed to have written his revelation

WHEN WAS REVELATION WRITTEN

There is no agreement on when this book was written, but it has been narrowed down to sometime between the beginning of the Jewish-Roman Wars that began in 66 CE and the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, up to the turn of the century. It was written during the same era as the four Gospels, so aside from possibly the Gospel of Mark, John would not have the benefit of any of that literature when he was writing.

John's use of Emperor Nero to depict evil, as seen by the use of the number 666, could mean an earlier dating for this book. Or it could mean that he was using Nero as a general representative of all Roman Emperors.

WHO WAS THE AUDIENCE

Not us. That can't be stressed enough. Much of the misuse of Revelation comes from the assumption that all of the signs are warnings written for modern audiences, whenever 'modern' was throughout history. Anything cataclysmic was seen as a sign that the happenings in Revelation were about to begin, whether it was the Black Plague, the Crusades, the World Wars, or the current climate change.

John's audience were those early Jesus followers who were still within the Hebraic tradition of the day, wanting desperately to be rid of the Roman government. All the negative references were to the Romans or other nations the Hebrews had fought with and been conquered by over the generations.



WHY WAS IT WRITTEN

This is where bible scholars and historians get to theorize based on the primary and secondary messages of the text. While none of the theories can be confirmed, there is wide scholarly agreement.

The primary message of Revelation is hope, not destruction of their world. Hope that a new world will come. Hope that the destroyed temple will be rebuilt in a new Heaven here on earth. Hope that the Hebrew people and Jesus followers would never again be conquered and ruled by anyone from the outside.

There was also hope that the Jesus followers would be in agreement of how to follow their tradition. This brings one theory to light. John was very focused on correcting what the seven churches were doing incorrectly and the false teachings they had shared. There is speculation that John was in disagreement with Paul and how Paul was encouraging the churches to grow. Paul was not the least bit concerned with the way the Gentiles influenced the early church, welcoming them to participate and allowing them to disregard things like circumcision and food restrictions. In 50 CE there had been a council in Jerusalem discussing this issue that agreed those joining the faith community of Jesus followers did not have to go through the rituals that those born into the Hebraic culture experienced (Acts 15). John's writing show someone desperate to reestablish the Hebraic traditions of food restrictions and circumcision. He was fully grounded within the religious Temple tradition.

A second theory, and one conventionally held, is that John was writing to encourage and support those enduring persecution. Work by historians like Candida Moss (*The Myth of Persecution*, 2014) has proven that the martyrdoms of early Christians were greatly exaggerated, as was the belief that the Romans were continually at odds with the early church. While there were pockets of uprisings and some in the Roman government who wanted to quash the early church in their jurisdiction, there was not an overarching directive to do so, nor was the Emperor Domitian as destructive as historically assumed.

A third theory holds that these letters and revelations were intended only for a small audience in Asia and they would have been lost to time if it weren't for the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE trying to argue about the nature of Jesus being equal or subordinate to God. The elder and respected Arius argued that Jesus was inferior, but a younger bishop, Athanasius, argued that Jesus was co-equal to God, being of one substance. Athanasius won the argument, and Arius and Arianism were condemned as heretical. Biblical scholar Elaine Pagels suggests the Book of Revelation was included in scripture to support Athanasius.