

INTRODUCTION

"You Can Understand the Book of Revelation!"

Have you ever puzzled over the 66th book of the Bible, shuttling between clarity and confusion, vertigo and terror? Do you have a boatload of questions about the meaning of this important book of God's Word? Does Revelation really prophesy the end of the world? Who is "the Beast"? (Saddam Hussein? Slobadan Milosevic? The person sitting next to you?) How much of Revelation has been fulfilled? Were current political and economic events clearly foretold 2000 years ago?

This study has been designed to direct our thoughts upward as we sink our roots downward, down into the Word, and specifically what is acknowledged to be one of the most difficult books in the sacred canon. But is Revelation that difficult to understand? We will see that most of this exciting book is actually rather straightforward. There's no need to be mystified – especially as we see how *The Apocalypse* relates to our daily lives.

Let's be inspired by the example of our first century brothers and sisters, in the face of overwhelming odds.

SEVEN EMPERORS Revelation 17:9-11

<i>King (Emperor)</i>	<i>Reign</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Biblical connection</i>
1. AUGUSTUS	27 BC—14 AD	Fallen	Caesar when Jesus born
2. TIBERIUS	14—37 AD	Fallen	Pontius Pilate reported to him
3. CALIGULA	37—41 AD	Fallen	Like Nebuchadnezzar, went insane
4. CLAUDIUS	41—54 AD	Fallen	Mentioned in Acts 18
5. NERO	54—68 AD	Fallen	Burned Rome, blamed X'ns
6. VESPASIAN	69—79 AD	On throne	Began assault on Jerusalem
7. TITUS	79—81 AD	Short reign	Ended Destruction of Jerusalem
8. DOMITIAN	81—96 AD	Belongs to 7	Significant persecutor

REVELATION: FACTS

1. Title

Revelation, or the Apocalypse, literally means *unveiling*. The reader, informed by the prophetic message which pierces through mere appearances, sees behind the veil, thus affording a spiritual view of the cosmic battle which is raging all around us. (By the way, the common name "Revelations" is wrong; the word is singular.) Interestingly, this book took several centuries before it was universally accepted in the Christian church.

2. Author

Traditionally the apostle John is credited with authorship. In his old age – probably at least 80 years old – he wrote the only book of prophecy in the N.T. This is the same John who penned four other books in the N.T., making him, along with Paul and Luke, the most prolific N.T. writers.

3. Location

John wrote Revelation while in exile on the Aegean island of Patmos. Through John's assistance, Jesus Christ delivered personal messages to a cluster of 7 churches in the province of Asia – in the western end of what is Turkey today. If you have maps of the book of your Bible, take a look at them now and locate the province of Asia, which is in Asia Minor.

4. Date

The book of Revelation was penned in the time of the “6th King” of Revelation 17:10, towards the close of the 1st century AD. Although scholars are divided among Neronian, Vespasianic, and Domitianic dates for the Apocalypse, I believe evidence for the Vespasianic date is strongest, based on a careful study of Revelation 17. The lack of mention of the Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) is truly remarkable, if in fact Revelation dates to the 70s, 80s, or 90s.

5. Situation

The limited persecution under Nero had turned into a time of relative peace under Vespasian. Yet under Domitian persecution would soon really heat up. Emperor worship was on the increase, Domitian insisting on being addressed “Supreme Lord and God.” Images were erected and local committees enforced their worship. (See Daniel 3 for a parallel.) At the time of Revelation’s writing some saints were already suffering martyrdom, a foretaste of what would happen under Domitian.

6. Language

Koine Greek – the language of virtually the entire N.T. – is the language of Revelation. It has a Hebraic feel because the author thought in Hebrew/Aramaic, but wrote in Greek. Isolated on the Isle of Patmos, John had no one to help him correct his grammatical errors. The sheer excitement of the visions may also have contributed to the sometimes disjointed syntax. Nevertheless, the book in the original is easy to read.

7. Apocalyptic

This is a genre of literature, popular especially from 200 BC to AD 200, describing historical and spiritual realities in cosmic, often cataclysmic terms. (Examples include 1 Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, 2 Enoch, 2 Baruch, and 4 Ezra.) God’s eternal truths and specific encouragements were made more vivid through the use of colorful symbols. “In prophecy, the symbols used are always natural; in apocalyptic, they are largely arbitrary” (Summers). Characteristics include historical relevance, visions, predictions, symbolic numbers, and drama. As with O.T. apocalyptic, N.T. apocalyptic isn’t meant to be taken literally, though the message conveyed is to be taken very seriously! As McGuigan puts it,

“Apocalyptic speech is lurid in its colours and very often violent in its tone. It strikes the imagination and grabs hold of the mind. Who, having read it, can forget the 7-headed sea beast or the scarlet prostitute on its back? Whose mind does not boggle over the falling of the stars and the rolling up of the heavens? Apocalyptic speech is vivid and easily remembered. It appeals to our imagination. It is the language of conflict and victory. It is the language used when God smites the oppressor and vindicates his people. It is the language of crisis if not of persecution.”

8. Old Testament allusions!

Its 22 chapters (404 verses) have some 500 allusions and references to the O.T.! The metaphors and idioms are scarcely intelligible to the modern reader making a cursory reading of the book. Background is essential! Key to understanding Revelation is the O.T., especially such prophetic books as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. These books, along with some Psalms and a few other isolated passages, include apocalyptic. One more note: the triple seven-fold judgment on the enemies of God mirrors the judgments of Leviticus 26 – check it out!

9. Symbolic Numbers

Since the numbers are usually symbolic, we must be careful not to interpret them literally unless compelled by context. For example, 1 = unity or independent existence; 2 = strengthening, emphasis, redoubled courage and energy; 3 = divinity; 3_ = incompleteness, longing (equivalent: 1260 days, time, times and half a time); 4 = earth; 5 (doubled to ten) = human completeness; 6 = (sinister) imperfection, like the number 13 today in Western culture (Jesus was killed on the 6th day, e.g.); 7 = perfection, completion (the perfect world number plus the perfect divine number, or 4 + 3); completion, 10 = human completion; 12 = (organized) religion. Consider the composite number 144,000: 12 x 12 (religion perfected) x (10 x 10 x 10 = man’s number raised to God’s power) = 144,000. Revelation is full of symbolic numbers! Consider the number “7.” We read of the 7 churches, 7 spirits, 7 golden lampstands, 7 stars, 7 seals, 7 horns, 7 eyes, 7 angels, 7 trumpets, 7 thunders, 7 heads, 7 crowns, 7 plagues, 7 golden bowls, 7 hills, and 7 kings – not to mention multiples of 7, like 14 and 7000! Yet not all “7”s are purely symbolic – for instance, the 7 churches of chapters 2-3, 7 kings of chapter 17.

10. Major Interpretations

There are at least five categories of interpretation of Revelation. There is the *Futurist*, which is the most common method of interpretation, and is almost totally eschatological. There is a heavy emphasis on the 2nd Coming of Jesus, literal torments that will befall the impenitent, signs of the nearness of the end, and so forth. Chapters 4-19 are considered to take place within a seven-year period. This “tribulation period” is the 70th week of Daniel 9:24-27. This method has almost nothing to do with the first recipients/hearers of the book. Also, it embraces a materialistic philosophy of the kingdom of God. The *Continuous-Historical* views Revelation as a forecast of the entire span of church history from the beginning through the

Revelation as yielding principles on the basis of which God deals with all men in all ages. Although there is some truth in this approach, it neglects the historical aspects of the book and its times. The *Preterist* method, which is the opposite of the Futurist, claims that all of the book was fulfilled in the days of the Roman Empire. Finally, the *Historical Background* approach is a combination of the good points of the Philosophy of History and Preterist approaches, emphasizing original and contemporary relevance, and respecting the nature of apocalyptic literature. This to me seems the most reasonable approach.

11. Fulfillment is “soon”

1:1,3 state unequivocally that the prophecies in the book are *soon* to be fulfilled. The immediacy of the fulfillment is maintained throughout the book, all the way to the final chapter (22:7, 10, 12, 20). Despite claims of many religious groups, very little of Revelation, apart from projections of chapters 20-22, can in any way be said still to await fulfillment!

12. Seven Beatitudes

The book contains seven blessings, from 1:3 (“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear”) through 14:13 (“Blessed are those who die in the Lord”), and 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7, all the way to 22:14 (Blessed are they who wash their robes”).

Why Rome Fell

1. Classic Reasons (traditional date 476 AD)
 - A. Natural disasters
 - B. Internal corruption
 - C. External invaders
2. Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (18th century)
 - A. Widening gulf between rich and poor
 - B. Obsession with sex
 - C. Increased desire to live off the state
 - D. Mounting show of luxury
 - E. Freakishness in the arts, masquerading as originality
3. David Berçot, Scroll Publishing (20th century)
 - A. Above factors, though this is not the real issue.
 - B. Deteriorating spirituality in the Christian church (especially lack of prayer)
4. The Book of Revelation
 - A. The Judgment of God on the oppressor
 - B. God’s love for his people

Recommended reading:

Gordon Ferguson, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, Woburn, Mass.: D.P.I., 1996 (888) DPI-BOOK.

Jim McGuiggan, *Revelation*, Fort Worth: Star Bible Publications, 1976 (800) 481-7809.

W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 (originally 1904).

Ray Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951.

O.T. Background: A Sampling

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Background (only one detail per location has been selected)</i>
1.	Son of Man – Daniel 7, 10; Ezekiel 1, 43
2.	Rod of iron – Psalm 2
3.	Book of Life – Exodus 32; Psalm 69; Malachi 3
4.	Living creatures – Ezekiel 1, 10; Isaiah 6
5.	Lion of Judah – Genesis 49; Isaiah 11
6.	Horses and riders – Psalm 45; Zechariah 1, 6
7.	Sealing – Ezekiel 9
8-9.	Trumpets and plagues – Exodus 7+, Leviticus 26!
10.	Angel swearing – Daniel 12
11.	2 witnesses – Zechariah 4
12.	Woman, child, dragon – Genesis 3; Psalms 2
13.	Beast out of Sea – Daniel 7, 2
14.	Winepress – Isaiah 63
15.	Song of Moses – Exodus 15
16.	Armageddon – Judges 5; 2 Chronicles 35
17-19.	Fall of Babylon – Isaiah 13, 14, 21, 46, 47, 48; Jeremiah 25, 50, 51; Daniel 2, 7; Habakkuk 3; see Ezekiel 37 (Fall of Tyre)
20.	Gog and Magog – Genesis 10; Ezekiel 38-39
21.	New heavens/earth/Jerusalem – Isaiah 65, 66; Ezekiel 48
22.	River of water of life and tree of life – Genesis 2; Ezekiel 47

False Doctrines: Many religious groups have come into existence, or found their distinctiveness, in their peculiar interpretation of the book of Revelation. “It has been extensively used by individuals and groups who have found that they could prove almost anything by manipulation of the symbols contained in it. For this reason their attention has been centered upon Revelation as the basis for strange systems of interpretation (Summers). The most colorful doctrines are usually those centered on the end of the world. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses, insisting they take Revelation “literally,” have again & again incorrectly predicted the end of the world – at least 6 times in this century alone! This sheet enumerates several false doctrines supposedly based on Revelation, and offers reasons these doctrines are false.

1. **“The end is near”**: This has been claimed by various groups almost since Revelation was written! But Revelation 1:1 claims to speak of events that will ‘soon’ take place! Daniel 8:26, referring to events less than 400 years away, speaks of the “distant future” – ‘near’ means many centuries (even millennia) away? Many believe Revelation prophesies events around 2000 AD. Now what would you think if someone prophesied and insisted an event would take place “soon,” that “the time was near” – yet when you ask him when it’s to take place, he replied, “Soon – in the 40th century”? Revelation speaks of the immediacy of the end – the end for the Roman oppressors of our early brothers and sisters. So let’s not play games with the clear meaning of the text!

2. **“The Rapture” will take the true church up to heaven**: It simply is not true that “we will be ‘raptured’ up into heaven while the wicked are left on earth to be tormented.” 1 Thessalonians 4 says Jesus will come and take us to be with him, but it nowhere says the wicked will be left on planet earth, a sinking ship, beset by plagues! The rapture is a prominent feature of Premillennial theology (e.g. the bumper sticker “In case of rapture, this car will be without driver”).

3. **“Coming’ always means the end of the world”**: Not so! Many times in Scripture God “comes” – typically in judgment on a nation or people. Isaiah 19:1, Deuteronomy 33:26, and Micah 1:3, to name a few passages, show that when God comes to help his people, the world is not about to end. Analogy: When the fire department “comes” and “rescues” those in need, is the world about to end? Understanding the truth about the “comings” of God and Jesus gives us fresh perspective on passages like Matthew 24 and all of Revelation. “Comings” are usually local, not global.

4. **“The Battle of Armageddon will take place in Israel”**: “Armageddon” is not the WW III to bring down the curtain on human history, just around the corner. Revelation 16:16 chooses the metaphor of Armageddon, Heb. *Har Megiddo* (Mountain of Megiddo, a site of many O.T. battles – involving Ahaziah, Barak, Gideon, Josiah, Saul...) to represent the final show-down between the forces of good and evil. There is no way to twist such passages as Ezekiel 38-39 and

prophecy! Hal Lindsay & others have insisted this is so, but each passage has a specific context and fulfillment. Any claim to the contrary is irresponsible exegesis. It may turn a big profit in the Christian bookstores, but it lacks any biblical basis.

5. **“Only 144,000 will go to heaven”**: Revelation 7 and 14 employ the image of 144,000 saints in heaven. If this is indeed a *literal* number – as the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim – and not a symbolic figure, then what about the other details of the passage? If 144,000 (Revelation 14:4) is a literal number, then in being consistent we should also insist that only men will go to heaven, and even then only those who’ve never slept with a woman. (Sorry, married brothers!) Oh yeah, these men have to be Jews (Revelation 7:4) – even then, those descended from the tribe of Dan are excluded! This is ludicrous. So are most attempts to force symbolic language into a literal mold. Don’t worry – “In my Father’s house there are *many* rooms,” the Lord said (John 14:2)! The New Jerusalem, though it teaches us much about heaven, is said to be “coming down *out of* heaven” (21:2). How can it fully *be* heaven if it comes *out of* heaven? Moreover, do you really think the streets will be *literally* “paved with gold”?

6. **“Revelation is a timetable of future events”**: Many churchgoers believe Revelation is a panorama of church history from the Great Apostasy to the Reformation to contemporary Christendom. Not so! Revelation uses many images, many times over, to depict the same truths in many different ways. The appearance of sequence in such symbolic passages proves nothing as far as a timetable of prophecy fulfilled. Revelation is true, of course – yet *this truth is theological, much more than chronological*. “When one sees all the confusion that arises in trying to work out the eschatology of the New Testament, he is inclined to believe that the Lord has a reason for leaving it that way. Man needs to know that there is going to be a resurrection, a judgment, and eternal life after death. It is not necessary to his spiritual progress that he know all the details of those matters. If it had been, God would surely have revealed it in a plainer way. It is in line with the economy of God’s revelation that he shows to man what he sees that man needs to know for his spiritual progress. Other things must be left for God’s own knowledge... “(Summers).

7. **“The number ‘666’ is connected with an international economic conspiracy”**: Huh?! Yes, that’s the sensationalism many would-be evangelists are peddling these days. 666 (Revelation 13:18) is a number supposedly to appear in the international bar code, conveniently stamped onto silicon credit chips implanted in the consumer’s hand or forehead. Nor is “Babylon” the European Economic Community! Bible twisters claim the 10 horns (Revelation 13:1) are “10” (hah!) nations of the Common Market. Do not – repeat, do not allow yourself to be conned into this system! Actually, in apocalyptic literature numbers often have a numerological significance. 666 is the number of (sinister) imperfection repeated the divine number of times. 777 would be a “perfect” number. 888 in early Christian (extrabiblical) prophecy represented Jesus Christ, who was raised on the “8th” day, the day after the Sabbath. 666 represents an evil one, who impersonates God. This most likely refers to the emperor worship which was common in the Roman Empire, especially in the eastern Mediterranean. Occasionally numbers with alphanumeric value secretly spell the name of a human being. But the text does not say 666 is the number of a (specific) man, only that it is “*man’s* number.” In a similar grammatical construction, Revelation 21:17 speaks of “*man’s* measurement” – not at all implying that this is the measure of a particular person. 666 emphasizes humanity & depravity, not a Hitler-type of “antichrist” (1 John 2:18) for our own time.

8. **“The ‘millennium’ will bring 1000 years of peace to the earth”**: Not so! Revelation 20 is just one more way of assuring Christians they’re on the winning side! Yes, the 1000 years are symbolic of God’s victory: (10 x 10 x 10, or 10³ = man’s number raised to God’s power).

9. **“Revelation 3 tells sinners how to get saved”**: Probably the most harmful teaching to be squeezed from Revelation is the dubious doctrine that one is saved by “praying Jesus into your heart.” The passage is clearly written to Christians (vv. 14, 22) who were hot initially but now are lukewarm; they’ve pushed the Lord out of their hearts! Interesting, isn’t it, how those preaching Revelation 3:20 as a salvation doctrine skip verse 19!

THE BIG LESSONS: (1) Live for Him, (2) You Know who’s (3) Get ready for
 not for sin! gonna win! the end!

¹ One example is L = 30, a = 1, t = 300, e = 5, i = 10, n = 50, o = 70, j = 200. *Lateinos*, or *Latinus* in Latin, is the Latin church. Thus these letters, which total 666, refer to Catholicism (the Roman church.) Another ingenious solution is to take *Neron Kaisar* (Greek for Nero Caesar), and translate it into Hebrew, which becomes *NRWN QSR*: n = 50, r = 200, w = 6, n = 50, q = 100, s = 60, r = 200. Again, the total is 666. The Roman system (we are all familiar with I, V, X, L, C, etc.) has no numerical value for most letters, which become 0s. In Latin, *VICARIUS FILII DEI* (“in place of the son of God”) is a term for the Pope. By this ingenious method, V = 5, I = 1, C = 100, A = 0, R = 0, I = 1, U = 5 (U and V are the same letter in classical Latin), S = 0; F = 0, I = 1, L = 50, I = 1, I = 1; D = 500, E = 0, I = 1. Once again, a “proof”! Someone even suggested letting our own alphabet take on the