

Revelation

Peter S. Williamson



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Williamson, Peter S.

Revelation / Peter S. Williamson.
pages cm. — (Catholic commentary on sacred scripture)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8010-3650-7 (pbk.)

1. Bible. Revelation—Commentaries. 2. Catholic Church—Doctrines. I. Title.
BS2825.53.W555 2015
228'.077—dc23

2014040101

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June 19, 2014

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To my wife, Marsha Daigle-Williamson,
and to my mother, Beulah Pederson Williamson,
with gratitude and love

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Editors' Preface

“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.”

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

“Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking

through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying

the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of suggested resources, an index of pastoral topics, and an index of sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Note to Readers

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of the Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross references given in the commentary.

Abbreviations

†	indicates that a definition of the term appears in the glossary
//	indicates where the same episode occurs in two or more Gospels
ACCS 12	Williams C. Weinrich, ed. <i>Revelation</i> , Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005)
Beale and McDonough	G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, “Revelation,” in <i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i> , ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic: 2007), 1081–1161
Catechism	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (2nd ed.)
CCSS	Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture
DS	Denzinger-Schönmetzer, <i>Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum</i> (1965)
ESV	English Standard Version
JB	Jerusalem Bible
Lectionary	<i>The Lectionary for Mass</i> (1998/2002 USA Edition)
LXX	†Septuagint
NABRE	New American Bible (Revised Edition, 2011)
NET	New English Translation
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
Osborne, <i>Revelation</i>	Grant R. Osborne, <i>Revelation</i> , Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002)
OT	Old Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
v(v).	verse(s)

Books of the Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Num	Numbers	Judg	Judges
Exod	Exodus	Deut	Deuteronomy	Ruth	Ruth
Lev	Leviticus	Josh	Joshua	1 Sam	1 Samuel

Abbreviations

2 Sam	2 Samuel	Ps	Psalms/Psalm	Joel	Joel
1 Kings	1 Kings	Prov	Proverbs	Amos	Amos
2 Kings	2 Kings	Eccles	Ecclesiastes	Obad	Obadiah
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Song	Song of Songs	Jon	Jonah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Wis	Wisdom	Mic	Micah
Ezra	Ezra	Sir	Sirach	Nah	Nahum
Neh	Nehemiah	Isa	Isaiah	Hab	Habakkuk
Tob	Tobit	Jer	Jeremiah	Zeph	Zephaniah
Jdt	Judith	Lam	Lamentations	Hag	Haggai
Esther	Esther	Bar	Baruch	Zech	Zechariah
1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Ezek	Ezekiel	Mal	Malachi
2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Dan	Daniel		
Job	Job	Hosea	Hosea		

Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew	1 Tim	1 Timothy
Mark	Mark	2 Tim	2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb	Hebrews
Rom	Romans	James	James
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Gal	Galatians	1 John	1 John
Eph	Ephesians	2 John	2 John
Phil	Philippians	3 John	3 John
Col	Colossians	Jude	Jude
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	Rev	Revelation
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians		

Introduction

No book of the Bible stands more in need of commentary than Revelation. Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse, is manifestly different from the other, more familiar books of the New Testament. Its arcane symbolism can strike readers as strange and its wild imagery as frightening. Further, few Christians today have the biblical knowledge to catch even half of the author's several hundred allusions to the Old Testament.¹ The historical circumstances in which the book was written are unfamiliar to many. The structure of the book is difficult to discern, and its literary characteristics differ greatly from modern ways of communicating. Finally, the fact that one of its principal topics is the last judgment and the end of history raises the stakes. The sensationalist interpretations that circulate both among believers and in the secular media make informed interpretation of this book all the more necessary.

My aim is to help contemporary readers meet these challenges by seeking to offer an interpretation of Revelation that is faithful to the text, enlightened by both contemporary scholarship and traditional interpretation, in harmony with the whole of Scripture and Christian doctrine, and relevant for the Church today.

This introduction provides a brief overview of Revelation's genre, author, historical setting, structure and literary features, interpretation and message, and its relevance to Christian life today. Readers interested in more background information can consult the Suggested Resources at the back of this book or additional articles provided online in the Revelation Resources at www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

1. Estimates range from slightly more than two hundred to one thousand allusions, depending on the criteria that are used.

Genre

How does the author of Revelation present his work, and how would first-century Christian readers have classified it? Ancient books were rare and copied by hand, and the original audience of this book, the members of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia named in 1:11, would have first laid eyes on the scroll that contained Revelation at the liturgy. I say “audience,” since most would never have the opportunity to read the book themselves but would hear it read to them by a church leader or by a messenger who brought the scroll to the Christian community in their city. The mere size of the scroll would have indicated to those present that they were about to hear a book-length text, in contrast, for example, to some of the brief letters included in the New Testament canon.

The first couple of sentences indicate the book’s content, presenting it as “the revelation of Jesus Christ” made known to “his servant John,” who is “reporting what he saw” (1:1–2). Although the Greek word for revelation is *apokalypsis*, that word did not yet have the associations with end-times catastrophes that “apocalypse” has for people today. Paul’s Letters, which were probably familiar to the churches of Asia (present-day southwestern Turkey), use this word to refer to prophetic words or visions (e.g., 1 Cor 14:6, 26; 2 Cor 12:1, 7). The next verse pronounces a blessing on those who read and listen to “this prophetic message.” Those listening would thus have classified what they were hearing as a book of Christian prophecy comparable to Old Testament prophetic books such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

At the same time, Revelation’s earliest audience would have recognized it as a circular letter. After its unusual prologue (1:1–3), Revelation resembles other early Christian letters for a few verses. The sender identifies himself as “John,” and his recipients as “the seven churches” in Asia, then extends a greeting of “grace . . . and peace.” He proceeds to offer a prayer of praise and thanks to God (1:5b–6).

As the original audience listened to the scroll being read, they would have noticed both similarities to and differences from the Old Testament prophetic books with which they were familiar. One difference is that the primary revealer in this book of prophecy is the risen Lord Jesus, although he relays a message he has received from God the Father, just as he did during his earthly ministry (1:2; John 8:26; 12:49–50). He conveys this message to the prophet John through an angel and through “the Spirit” (2:7, 11, etc.), whom the early Christians recognized as the source of prophecy.

John’s original audience would not have found Revelation as strange as it seems to us today because it belongs to a type of religious literature that was

popular at the time. This literary genre, which originated about 200 BC and remained widespread among Jews and Christians until a century or two after Christ, was later called “apocalypse,” due in part to the use of that word at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Scholars debate how best to define apocalypse.² An apocalypse typically explains unseen spiritual realities behind human events or looks forward to history’s end. It is characterized by dreams, visions, and other highly symbolic ways of communicating. Several noncanonical †apocalypses prior to or contemporary with Revelation (*1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*)³ illustrate the genre, and it is likely that John and some of his readers would have been familiar with these or similar works.

Author

Four times the author of Revelation refers to himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), implying that he expects his readers to know who he is. Important early Christian authorities, including Justin Martyr (AD 165), Tertullian (220), Irenaeus (180), Clement of Alexandria (200), Hippolytus (235), Origen (254), and Athanasius (350), identify this John as the apostle John, whom they also consider to be the author of the Gospel and the Epistles that bear his name. Western Church tradition has generally followed their lead.

Revelation has some similarities to the other Johannine writings. Like the Gospel, and unlike other New Testament writings, it refers to Jesus as the Word of God (Rev 19:13; John 1:1, 14) and as the Lamb (John 1:29, 36, although Revelation uses a different Greek word for “Lamb”). Like the Fourth Gospel, Revelation speaks of “life-giving water”⁴ and alludes to Jesus being “pierced” (Rev 1:7; John 19:37; see Zech 12:10). In addition, Revelation shares vocabulary with the Gospel and the Letters of John that is not common elsewhere in Scripture: to “conquer” or “be victorious,” to “keep” the word or the commandments, “dwell,” “sign,” “testimony,” and “true.”

However, there are some difficulties in identifying the author of Revelation with John the apostle or with the author of the Gospel and Letters that bear his name. First, the author of Revelation never refers to himself as an apostle

2. See John C. Collins, “The Apocalyptic Genre,” in *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–42.

3. For more on the relation of Revelation to other apocalypses, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5–12; and Wilfred J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 1–5.

4. See Rev 7:17; 22:1; John 4:10–11; and 7:38; the precise wording differs slightly among them.

but indicates he is a prophet (1:3) and a brother among the prophets (22:9), a group he distinguishes from the apostles (18:20). When Revelation speaks of the twelve apostles of the Lamb as the foundation stones of the wall of the new Jerusalem (21:14), there is no suggestion that the author includes himself in their number.

Second, from ancient times, learned readers have found weighty stylistic reasons to question whether the author of the Gospel of John and 1 John was the same person who wrote Revelation.⁵ Writing in the mid-third century, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, identified significant differences in the Greek writing style, phraseology, and patterns of thought between the works. In contrast to the elegant Greek of the Gospel of John, the Greek of Revelation is heavily influenced by Hebrew or Aramaic. Dionysius also pointed out that the author of the other biblical books attributed to the apostle John does not name himself, while the author of Revelation identifies himself four times, and never in the ways the Gospel or 1 John refer to their author (“the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the “Elder,” the “one who testifies”). Dionysius points to the commonness of the name John and concludes that the author was another John who resided in Ephesus, noting the existence in his day of two tombs bearing the name of John and venerated by the church of Ephesus.

Other prominent Church Fathers in the East—including Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Eusebius, and Theodoret—did not consider the apostle John the author of Revelation or even regard it as part of the canon of Scripture. Some of their uneasiness was due to problematic interpretations of the book and to the use made of it by the Montanists, members of a heretical early Christian sect.

The striking style differences noted by Dionysius continue to persuade most scholars that the author of Revelation was not the same person who wrote the Gospel and Epistles of John. However, some scholars maintain that the apostle John did write Revelation and explain the stylistic differences as due to the book’s apocalyptic genre, or to the apostle John’s use of a secretary (an amanuensis) in the composition of his other books, not available to him on Patmos.⁶

Unless new information is uncovered, we cannot know for sure who wrote Revelation. There is no reason to doubt what the author says about himself—

5. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.

6. Gordon Fee takes the second position in *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), Kindle edition, 384. Other scholars suggest that Revelation is pseudonymous, like many apocalyptic writings, and that in calling himself John, the author is (falsely) claiming to be the famous apostle. However, the absence of any claim to apostleship or acquaintance with Jesus during his earthly life makes this unlikely.

namely, that he is a Christian prophet and his name is John. His Greek style shows his native language to be Hebrew or Aramaic; his extraordinary familiarity with the Old Testament supports the impression that he is a Jewish Christian. On the basis of the similarities to the Fourth Gospel and the Letters mentioned above, we may conclude that he has at least read those works. Regardless of whether he is the apostle John, the Church receives the book of Revelation as divinely inspired and canonical Scripture.

Historical Setting and Purpose

Date

There are two leading hypotheses as to when Revelation was written. Some scholars think it was written in the mid- to late 60s of the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (AD 54–68).

For Christians, Nero was undoubtedly a symbol of the worst possibilities of Roman imperial power, since in 64 he initiated the first large-scale government persecution of Christians, resulting in the martyrdom of many, including Peter and Paul (see sidebar, “The First Martyrs of the Church of Rome,” p. 216).

However, the majority of interpreters, ancient and modern, hold that Revelation was written in the mid-90s, during the reign of the emperor Domitian (81–96).⁷ Irenaeus, writing in *Against Heresies* (5.30.3) around the year 180, states that John “beheld the apocalyptic vision . . . not a very long time ago, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.” Other ancient writers, including Victorinus, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, support his view.

A key question is which period better fits the circumstances depicted in the book. Some passages in Revelation depict persecution, and there seems to have been persecution of Christians by Roman

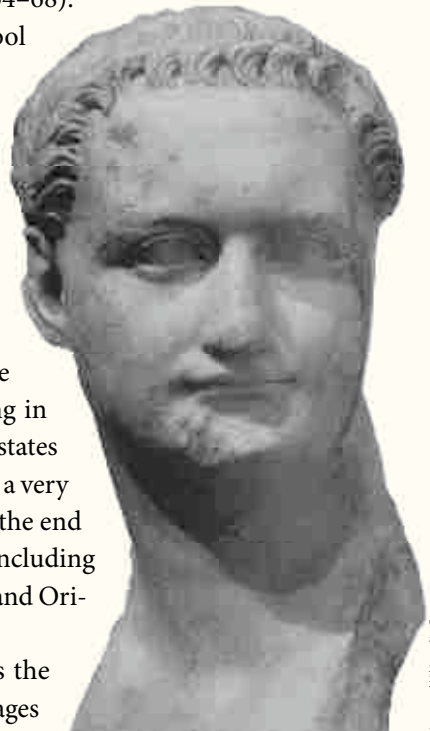


Fig. 1. A bust of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), regarded by some as a second Nero.

7. David Aune, a leading Revelation scholar, takes a middle position, proposing that some of the visions were written down beginning in the 60s but that the book reached its present form in the 90s. See Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Dallas: Word, 1997), Iviii.

authorities during Domitian's reign. Although the extent of Domitian's persecution of Christians is debated, some evidence for such a persecution exists. In AD 96, toward the end of Domitian's reign, Clement of Rome writes guardedly of "sudden and unexpected happenings and experiences that have befallen us" (*1 Clement* 1.1),⁸ and some second-century Christian authors allude to persecutions by Domitian.⁹ The fact that some of Domitian's pagan contemporaries regarded him as another Nero is consistent with this possibility.¹⁰ Other details in Revelation better fit the 90s than the 60s—for instance, the prosperity of Laodicea (3:17), which suffered a major earthquake in AD 60, and the line "do not damage the olive oil or the wine" (6:6), which might allude to an edict of Domitian about vineyards in Asia in 92.¹¹

This commentary will presuppose the majority view, that Revelation was written in the 90s, but will occasionally consider the possible implications of an earlier date for interpreting the book.

John's Audience

John writes to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, a region that today comprises the southwestern part of Turkey. Ephesus was the chief city of the province, and its church was the leading church, due to both the city's prominence and its very successful evangelization by the apostle Paul and his coworkers in the mid-50s (see Acts 19, especially 19:10, 26; 20:17–38). The churches of Asia included Jewish believers but consisted primarily of Gentile converts from paganism. Although it has been common to assume that John's readers were all suffering persecution, a careful reading of the messages to the churches (chaps. 2–3) finds mention of persecution only in the †oracles to Smyrna (2:10), Pergamum (2:13, a reference to the past), and Philadelphia (3:8–10). These references suggest that at the time the book of Revelation was written, its addressees were experiencing periodic and localized persecution—not the worldwide pressure to worship the beast and persecution that the book foretells (11:7; 12:17; 13:7).

8. After recalling the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (chap. 5) and of the Roman martyrs (chap. 6), Clement writes, "We are in the same arena, and the same contest lies before us" (7.1).

9. Eusebius reports a persecution and martyrdom of Christians in Domitian's final year (96). Melito of Sardis petitions the emperor (ca. 170–80), claiming that only Nero and Domitian persecuted Christians (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.25). Tertullian says the same. See Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 805–9.

10. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 410.

11. These are selected from details supplied by Osborne, *Revelation*, 9.

Christians and Jews of the first century distinguished themselves from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture by their refusal to worship anything other than the Creator God of Israel. Worship of the pagan gods was so woven into daily rituals and civic life that the refusal of many Jews and Christians to participate in these rites seemed narrow-minded and antisocial, if not downright unpatriotic. Jewish abstinence from pagan rituals enjoyed legal protection because Judaism was a recognized ancient religion, but Christians did not enjoy the same privilege. Prior to the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Roman authorities considered Christians a sect within Judaism, but afterward they gradually began to treat Christians as a distinct religious group lacking legal recognition and therefore obliged to participate like everyone else in the †imperial cult.

Theological Presuppositions

If Revelation was written in the 90s, John and his readers would have been familiar with the Synoptic traditions about Jesus, probably by possessing one or more of the †Synoptic Gospels. I have already mentioned why it is likely that John was at least familiar with the Gospel and Letters of John. It is also likely that he and his readers were familiar with some or all of the Pauline literature, since Ephesus was a major Pauline center and Paul's Letters were in circulation from quite early on (Col 4:16; 2 Pet 3:15–16). Recognizing the likelihood that John and his readers were familiar with the Old Testament and many of the New Testament writings is a tremendous key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation.

Revelation manifests faith in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus and in his divine status. It likewise presupposes hope in Jesus' future glorious return and, despite its vivid symbolic presentation, reflects an †eschatological outlook similar to that of other New Testament writings. Like them, Revelation anticipates times of trial and persecution for Christians during the time of their testimony to the gospel. While Revelation's depiction of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet adds details not found in other sources, it builds on Jewish eschatology and lines up with early Christian understanding regarding Satan and eschatological opposition attested elsewhere (Dan 7; 2 Thess 2; 1 John 2:18).

Structure and Plot

The elaborate structure of Revelation is both fascinating and bewildering at the same time. Unlike some Old Testament prophetic books that offer a loosely organized collection of oracles, Revelation provides a narrative that progresses

toward the consummation of history, although by a circular rather than a direct route. After a prologue and an opening greeting, John presents his book as what was shown to him in a prophetic experience when in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9–11). The risen Jesus commands him to write what he has been shown that pertains to two time periods, “what is happening, and what will happen afterwards” (1:19).

The seven messages to the churches that follow (2:1–3:22) reveal “what is happening,” the condition of the churches in Asia in John’s day. The transition to the second part of the book, John’s visions of the future, occurs in 4:1, when John hears the risen Lord invite him to enter heaven: “Come up here and I will show you

what must happen afterwards.” As a spectator in heaven’s throne room, John witnesses the Lamb receiving a scroll from the hand of God that represents God’s plan for the world. As the Lamb opens the seven seals, human history unfolds, directed from the heavenly throne room.

Several structural markers enable John’s audience to track their progress through the narrative of these chapters (6:1–22:11). First, three series of seven follow the oracles to the seven churches—the opening of seven seals, the blowing of seven trumpets, and the pouring out of seven bowls. In a schematic fashion these series of sevens reveal the events that unfold between John’s vision and the end of history. The series are placed inside one another like Russian nesting dolls: the content of the seventh seal (8:1) is the blowing of the seven trumpets and the accompanying events (chaps. 8–9); the content of the seventh trumpet (11:15) is the pouring out of the seven bowls and the accompanying events (chaps. 15–16).

Two major series of visions sit on either side of the pouring out of the seven bowls. The first series begins with a second commissioning of the prophet John (chap. 10), a turning point located at the middle of the book. John is instructed to prophesy words of judgment against “many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings” (10:10–11). The other visions in this series reveal the background (the story of the woman, the male child, Michael and the dragon, 12:1–17), other principal actors (the two witnesses, the two beasts, and the Lamb’s companions, 11:1–13; 13:1–14:5), and previews of history’s outcome (the worship, testimony, persecution, and vindication of the Church, 11:1–13; the fall of Babylon and the harvest of the earth, 14:6–20).

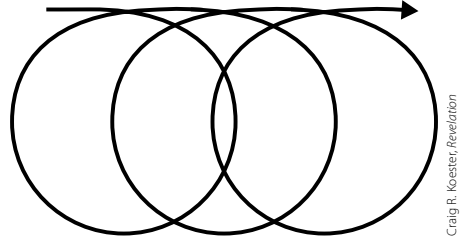


Fig. 2. Revelation’s story advances by circular repetitions rather than in a straight line.

Craig R. Keester, *Revelation*

After the pouring out of the seven bowls, parallel visions interpreted by angels contrast the whole Babylon and her fate (17:1–19:10) with the Bride Jerusalem and her future [†]glory (21:9–22:11), the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Between the visions of Babylon’s fall and the descent from heaven of the new Jerusalem, four visions reveal how God judges the enemies of his people and brings salvation.¹² An epilogue and a final greeting complete the work (22:12–21).

Another structural feature of Revelation is the alternation between fearsome visions of judgment on earth and consoling visions of God’s throne in heaven. This oscillation serves two purposes. First, the consoling visions give relief to John’s audience through his account of otherwise terrifying visions. Second, and more important, the visions of undisturbed worship and celebration in heaven despite great tumult on earth reveal a central theme of the book: God is on his throne, the Lamb is in control. With God in heaven are powerful angelic beings and the faithful [†]saints and martyrs, now comforted, protected, and at rest. Nothing on earth disturbs them, for the Lamb has conquered and the outcome of earth’s history is secure. Indeed, they reign with Christ and exercise a role of priestly worship and intercession while God’s plan for human history unfolds (7:9–17; 15:2–4; 20:4–6).

Probably the most important point to note about Revelation’s structure is that its plot does not advance chronologically. Although the visions unfold one after another in an orderly manner, the story advances by a spiral rather than a straight path, like a road that circles its way up a mountain, offering diverse vistas of the terrain below. Sometimes multiple visions depict a single event. For example, the relationship between the series of seven seals, trumpets, and bowls is not strictly sequential, since the sixth item in each series seems to position the reader at the same moment just short of the end of human history, while the seventh seems to signal the end. Moreover, the forward movement of the visions is disrupted by flashbacks, such as those that recall the birth and exaltation of the Messiah (5:5, 9; 12:5) and by atemporal visions of heavenly worship in which God’s victory is celebrated as already achieved (7:9–17; 11:15–18; 15:2–4; 19:5–8). Despite these nonchronological elements, the narrative of Revelation does progress from the prophet’s first vision of the risen Christ (chaps. 1–3), to a vision of the heavenly throne room (chaps. 4–5), through increasingly severe chastisements of the world and trials for the Church during her time of testimony (chaps. 6–20), to the return of Christ (chap. 19) and the full arrival of God’s kingdom in the final two chapters.

12. They depict (1) the victory of the [†]Messiah over the beast, the false prophet, and their army (19:10–21); (2) the two-stage victory of God over Satan, with the reign of the saints during the intervening “thousand years” (20:1–10); (3) the final judgment of the dead and of Death itself (20:11–15); and (4) the new creation and the new order (21:1–8).

Literary Features

Besides its intriguing structure, Revelation has other literary features that make it challenging to interpret.

Recapitulation

Like visions in other biblical books (e.g., Dan 2; 7), Revelation's visions often repeat or †recapitulate the same theme. When John's visions offer more than one account of the same event, they do not merely repeat for emphasis, like Pharaoh's dreams of seven fat and lean cows and seven fat and lean ears of corn (Gen 41:1–7). Instead, motifs that reappear add new information at each repetition. So, for example, 12:6 speaks of a woman who represents the people of God and flees to the wilderness, where she is taken care of by God for twelve hundred and sixty days. The story is repeated in 12:7–18, but this lengthier version tells of Satan's warfare against the woman, and the role of Michael and the martyrs in the victory over the devil. Chapter 13 elaborates with additional information about *how* Satan wages war against the Church: through the two beasts.

Biblical Allusions

A striking feature of Revelation is its numerous allusions to the Old Testament—more than in any other New Testament book.¹³ What is unique in Revelation is that John seldom explicitly quotes the Old Testament, as other New Testament authors do (e.g., Matt 1:22–23; Rom 8:36), but weaves allusions into his reports of what he sees and hears. John's knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures is extraordinary; he must have virtually memorized them.

Revelation interprets the Old Testament prophets in light of what God has done in Christ. It confirms that their eschatological prophecies of judgment, salvation, and a transformed world began to be fulfilled through Christ's death and resurrection (e.g., Rev 5:9; 12:5) and will be completely fulfilled when Christ returns. Sometimes John signals that what he sees is the same reality that an Old Testament prophet foresaw, but that the eschatological fulfillment is different and greater than anyone imagined. For example, the new Jerusalem fulfills Ezekiel's prophecy of a future temple (Ezek 40–48; Rev 21:10–27). Likewise Revelation shows that many promises that originally applied to Israel now

13. Revelation alludes most to Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Psalms. There are also allusions to the Pentateuch and historical books, including many references to the plagues in Egypt and the exodus.

apply to eschatological Israel, the Church, which includes people from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation.

Yet not every allusion to the Old Testament indicates the fulfillment of a prophecy. In each case it is necessary to discern, by the content and context of the allusion, whether John is saying, “This *is* what Ezekiel prophesied” (e.g., the new Jerusalem is the new temple) or “This is *like* what Ezekiel prophesied” (e.g., John’s prophetic commissioning in chap. 10 is similar to Ezek 3:1–4), or is simply reusing biblical language or imagery to add solemnity to his message. One of the ways Revelation alludes to the Old Testament is by using names from Israel’s past, such as Balaam (2:14) or Jezebel (2:20–23) to refer to people at the time of his writing. At other times it names Old Testament places, such as Babylon, Sodom, or Egypt (11:8), to refer to non-geographical spiritual realities.

Figurative Language and Symbolism

An especially challenging feature of Revelation is its extensive use of images, symbols, and figurative language. Contemporary readers may ask, “Why doesn’t the author speak plainly? How can we know what should be taken symbolically and what literally?”

Many people today are more literal in their thinking than ancient peoples, perhaps because of the esteem with which our age regards technology and the exact sciences. The literature and iconography of both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture of the era in which Revelation was written manifests a love for symbolic communication that the early Christians shared with the people of their day.

Revelation makes frequent use of similes, metaphors, and symbols. A simile compares two unlike things by the use of “like” or “as,” while a metaphor attributes the qualities of one thing to another without using “like” or “as.”¹⁴ Revelation employs over seventy similes, beginning with the vision of “one like a son of man,” who is described by using nine similes (1:10, 13–16). These similes illuminate particular aspects of Jesus’ person and role, while conveying that the risen Jesus surpasses anything his readers have experienced. Among Revelation’s many metaphors is the risen Lord’s diagnosis of the spiritual condition of the church at Laodicea: “lukewarm . . . poor, blind, and naked” (3:16–17). A symbol is something that stands for something else. Although they occasionally function as mere place markers for the things they refer to, symbols can be used to communicate depths of meaning that go far beyond mere reference. The harlot

14. See James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 19. His introduction to Revelation from a literary perspective is quite helpful.

Babylon is a symbol of Rome, but also of every proud civilization that resists God, persecutes his people, and idolizes wealth and pleasure.

John draws his figures of speech from a wide range of human experience. From nature he draws comparisons to the sky, sun, moon, stars, land, and sea to refer to transcendent realities, whether good or evil. The face of the risen Christ shines “like the sun at its brightest” (1:16), while the sea represents the world of chaos and evil (13:1; 20:1). The animals of Revelation that act and speak as personal beings, whether good or evil—the Lamb, the lion, the four living creatures, the dragon, the beasts, the eagle, the locusts, the horses—all represent superhuman entities. Powerful disruptions of nature, such as earthquakes, the sun ceasing to shine (9:2), and the moon turning to blood (6:12), indicate the intervention of God, who controls the elements of nature. These †cosmic events do not necessarily refer literally to natural disasters, since Scripture sometimes uses the language of cosmic upheaval metaphorically to refer to God’s dramatic intervention to bring salvation or judgment (e.g., Judg 5:4–5; Ps 18:4–20). On the other hand, Jesus prophesied that cosmic events would precede his coming, and it is likely that Revelation sometimes alludes to these.

The vast majority of John’s symbols come from ordinary life and social interactions known to his readers. Items of clothing reveal the status and nature of the figures in John’s visions. Familiar activities such as harvesting, winemaking, shepherding, and buying and selling are given metaphorical meanings. Colors indicate the quality of a person or thing, although the meaning varies with the context. Riding a white horse signified military victory in the Greco-Roman world. On the other hand, a bride wearing white signifies purity, while the white garments of saints and angels emphasize their participation in the resurrection or eternal life of heaven. The red color of the second horse in 6:4 and of the dragon in 12:3 indicates their readiness to shed blood.

Revelation uses numbers symbolically—that is, qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Seven and ten normally represent completeness (perhaps from seven days in a week, ten fingers and toes). On the other hand, three and a half, which is half of seven, represents partiality and incompleteness. Four represents the world—the four winds and four points of the compass—and therefore what is universal. Twelve is the number of the people of God—twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of the Lamb; twenty-four (twelve plus twelve) represents God’s people under both covenants. A thousand, and multiples of a thousand, indicates a very large number rather than a precise quantity; in some instances it may allude to a large military unit (as often in the OT).

Some of Revelation's numerical symbolism appears in the frequency with which key words are used in the book. For instance, "Lord God almighty" is used seven times; "the one who sits on the throne," seven times; "Christ" seven times; "Jesus" fourteen times (twice seven); "Lamb" twenty-eight times (four times seven); and the "Spirit" fourteen times. John carefully avoids multiples of seven in using words that refer to Satan (eight times), the dragon (thirteen times), the beast (thirty-eight times), and Babylon (six times).¹⁵

John often combines multiple symbols in his description of a single figure. Thus the Lamb (Jesus) is described as standing (resurrection) as though it had been slain (the crucifixion), having seven horns (signifying fullness of power) and seven eyes (fullness of knowledge). Descriptions in Revelation, whether of individuals or of events, are descriptions of the symbols rather than of the realities themselves.¹⁶ Each symbolic element needs to be thought through and interpreted rather than taken as literal description. For example, the feast of the vultures in 19:17–18 is a biblical allusion likely indicating that Christ's victory at the end of history will fulfill Ezekiel's prophecy about the utter destruction of those who oppose God (Ezek 39:17–20), not a prophecy of a literal battlefield scene.

The symbolic language of Revelation engages the reader far more powerfully than it would if its message were stated in literal prose. Some readers find the visions of Revelation so objectionable or frightening that they are eager to seize upon any congenial symbolic or metaphorical interpretation. Others, however, are suspicious of any interpretation of a biblical text that is not literal. Readers who were introduced to Revelation through a literal interpretation may be reluctant to reconsider what they learned, rightly on guard against rationalist interpretation that undercuts the miracles of the Bible through allegorizing or moralizing. Often younger readers are especially resistant toward nonliteral interpretation, impressed by Revelation's dramatic narrative and concerned lest symbolic interpretation empty the text of relevance to the real world. Whatever one's predisposition, it is best to approach Revelation as objectively as possible, conscious of one's inclinations, yet open to discovering afresh what John and the Holy Spirit who inspired him are saying through the text.

Interpretation of Revelation and History

The relation of Revelation to history has been a matter of great debate since the early Church. Prominent Church Fathers held sharply divergent views (see

15. See Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 36; for a detailed consideration of Revelation's numerical symbolism, see 29–37.

16. Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 14, 91.

“Excursus: Interpretation of ‘the Millenium’ through History,” p. 329). In both ancient and modern times misguided individuals have announced the imminent end of the world, basing their claims on interpretations of Revelation. In our own day, †dispensationalism, a school of interpretation followed by fundamentalist Protestants and some evangelicals, popularized in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’ *Left Behind* novels, interprets Revelation as predicting events in the twentieth or twenty-first century.¹⁷ In reaction to interpretations of this sort, many interpreters, both ancient (Origen, Jerome) and modern, have avoided interpreting Revelation as predictive prophecy by drawing allegorical lessons for the moral life or by mining Revelation for its theological riches (liturgical, christological, or ecclesiological), leaving aside the question of its relation to history. However, refusing to think about the relation of Revelation to history means rejecting, in part, the message of the book. The prophet John clearly invites his readers to discern the forces of evil and the hand of God within the political and religious events of their day in the light of his prophecy and to respond appropriately. Jesus too, in his eschatological parables and prophecies, taught his disciples to interpret events in the light of prophecy, urging watchfulness and attention to the signs of the times (Matt 16:3; 25:13). Other apostolic writings say the same (e.g., Rom 13:11–14; 2 Thess 2; 2 Pet 1:19). While the New Testament urges attention to the signs of the times and promotes awareness that the end is near, it does so not to satisfy our curiosity or to titillate us with insider knowledge but to exhort one and all to conduct our lives in light of ultimate realities.

Scholars commonly distinguish between four views of the relation of Revelation to history, although in practice most interpreters combine more than one view.

The *historicist* view holds that Revelation foretells in a linear way the history of Christianity. The problem with this view is the difficulty of mapping church history onto the narrative of Revelation in a convincing manner.

The *preterist* view holds that Revelation speaks primarily, if not exclusively, of events in the first century AD. A problem for preterists who regard Revelation as inspired Scripture is that it presents the fall of Babylon at or near history’s end (16:17–21; 17:16–18:24) and the defeat of the beast as brought about by the second coming of Christ (19:11–21). If the beast or Babylon simply refers to the Roman Empire or Jerusalem, as some preterists maintain, how is it that Christ has not yet returned?

17. See the Revelation Resources at www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com for more on dispensationalist interpretation of topics such as the †rapture, Armageddon, and the millennium.

The *futurist* view, famously held by dispensationalists, holds that most of the book of Revelation (chaps. 4–19) pertains to the last few years of human history before the return of Christ. However, this view raises the question of why God would reveal this information to the seven churches of Asia in the first century, and it reduces the relevance of Revelation to all but the final generation.

Finally, the *idealist* view holds that Revelation provides images and narratives of the struggle between good and evil that have no specific relation to history; they are intended to encourage and comfort Christians engaged in the struggle. A difficulty with this view is that, even though the imagery varies and is challenging to interpret, John presents a specific narrative about how history will end (chaps. 17–20).

The approach to Revelation taken in this commentary draws insights from each of these views without adopting any one of them. Christian faith in the inspiration of Sacred Scripture maintains that the Holy Spirit, who inspired this biblical book, intends it to speak to the Christian people throughout the ages. It is therefore important to be able to understand Revelation in relation to three periods of time: the time of its writing in the first century, the end of history, and the time of the Church that lies in between.

Like other biblical books of prophecy, Revelation was intended by its inspired human author to address the situation of his contemporaries. Consequently, understanding the book's first-century historical context is essential for interpreting it correctly. However, it is also clear that Revelation claims to depict the Church's trials leading up to the return of Christ. While John regards these events as future, he considers his visions as instructive for Christians of his day, as the many exhortations throughout the book indicate. In John's view, the spiritual dynamics of the final trial are already present in the temptations and persecutions that confront the Church in his day. Other eschatological writings in the New Testament share this perspective (1 John 2:18; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7). From our vantage point centuries later, we can see that the prophet John saw the end of history through the lens of the trial facing the first-century churches of Asia in the Roman Empire. Like other eschatological biblical prophecies, those in Revelation seem not to distinguish the author's day from that of history's end.

The principle of biblical interpretation that links the past, the present, and the ultimate future is [†]typology. Typology recognizes that God works in recognizable patterns throughout history and that those who oppose God follow predictable patterns. History may not repeat itself, but often it rhymes. Persons,

events, places, and institutions of an earlier stage in salvation history foreshadow those in a later stage. Biblical prophets often understand the trials and crises of their day in relationship to analogous crises in the past: they envision the salvation that God will bring as resembling his famous acts of salvation known from the historical or prophetic Scriptures.¹⁸

Just as biblical typology shaped John's prophetic message, it also provides a key to interpreting Revelation throughout the history of the Church. When individuals, governments, and cultures behave like the enemies of God's people depicted in Revelation, readers can recognize the resemblances and respond accordingly. For example, Nero, perhaps Domitian, Hitler, and Stalin—and the empires presided over by each—behaved like the beast and are rightly recognized as its agents. Revelation links the idolatrous materialistic culture of the Roman Empire with Babylon. For those with eyes to see, the consumerist, sexually immoral, and murderous (if we consider abortion and euthanasia) secular culture of the twenty-first century bears many of the same traits. In every age Christians must discern the manifestations of these evil powers by their fruits and respond appropriately.

This does not mean that the adversaries depicted in Rev 13–20 can be *reduced* to types that share common attributes and arise from time to time in history. Rather, despite its figurative language and elusive symbolism, Revelation seems to say some specific things about the end of history that do not fit the fall of Rome or any empire since. So in addition to a general application of Revelation to trials that arise in the history of the Church, Revelation awaits a definitive fulfillment at the end of history. Jesus said, “Of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone” (Matt 24:36). Not only has God reserved to himself the timing of the end; he also has not revealed precisely how he will accomplish his plan, even in Revelation. It is therefore wise both to do our best to discern what is happening around us in the light of biblical prophecy and to respond faithfully, while at the same time remaining modest about our understanding of exactly how God will accomplish his purposes. My study of Revelation has left me with immense respect for all who attempt to interpret this book for Christian faith and with amazement at how the Lord is able to speak to people through it despite the difficulty of the text and the diversity of our fallible interpretations.

18. Biblical prophecies sometimes have multiple fulfillments. Ezekiel's prophecy that God would gather his people in their own land and cleanse them and bless them abundantly (36:24–38) is fulfilled in the return from exile that began in 539 BC, in the gathering of God's people through the gospel of Christ, and definitively, in the eschatological gathering of God's people in the new Jerusalem.

Message of Revelation

The content of John's prophecy can be summarized as revelation—†*apokalypsis*—about four things: (1) the condition of the churches of Asia; (2) God's sovereignty and Christ's lordship over history; (3) the conflict and tribulation before Christ's return; and (4) a preview in general terms of how God will fulfill his promises, defeat evil, and save his people. Throughout the unveiling of these realities, John weaves exhortation summoning his readers to an appropriate response.

The Condition of the Church of Asia

Chapters 2 and 3 contain Jesus' messages to seven churches of late first-century Asia Minor. In each message the risen Lord, who sees with perfect clarity, gives his evaluation of the condition of a local church, which often differs from what appears on the surface. The number seven and the geographic distribution of the churches suggest that John understood these messages as intended for *all* the churches of Asia. Churches in other times and places rightly discern their own conditions in light of these inspired messages. Indeed, each oracle concludes with the exhortation, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the *churches*" (Rev 2:7 NRSV, emphasis added)—that is, pay attention to *all* the messages.

God's Sovereignty and Christ's Lordship

Revelation unveils God's sovereignty and the lordship of the risen Christ. The Christians to whom John addressed his letter were a small minority living in a time and place in which the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political forces that opposed them seemed overwhelming. They were tempted to say along with the rest of the †world, "Who can compare with the beast or who can fight against it?" (13:4). But John's visions show the true situation: the true lord and judge is "one like a son of man" who stands unseen in the midst of the churches and speaks to each. Moreover, the true throne from which human history is determined is not the throne of any king on earth but God's throne in heaven. Christ has conquered, and the blood of the Lamb allows Christians to be victorious as well. Christ holds the keys of death and the netherworld (1:18). Those who die in his faithful service enjoy healing, comfort, protection with him in heaven, worshiping in his temple as priests and sharing in his rule (7:9–17; 15:2–4; 20:4–6). From the beginning to the end of the book, Revelation declares that God and his Messiah are completely in control.

The Church's Trial before Christ's Return

Revelation lifts the veil on the conflict in which the Church is engaged and reveals its principal actors. First among the adversaries of God's people is the "huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan" (12:9), who seeks to destroy the Messiah and then pursues the woman and her children (12:4, 13–17). He is "the accuser of our brothers" (12:10) and the principal yet hidden enemy of the Church, as other New Testament writings also affirm (Eph 6:11–13; 1 John 5:19). It is the dragon who summons and empowers two beasts to carry out their attack on God's people. Satan's principal agent, the beast (13:1–10), bears a perverse likeness to Christ, in that it was mortally wounded, yet lives. It is a demonic power that manifests itself in a government presided over by a particular human ruler who persecutes God's people and receives the world's idolatrous submission. The second beast, also called the false prophet, speaks on behalf of the dragon and advocates a deceptive ideology or religion (13:11–17). Last to be unveiled among the adversaries of God's people is the harlot Babylon (17:1–6), a society that is the polar opposite of the Bride-Church, a civilization and culture that seduces by wealth, luxury, immorality, and idolatry, and that persecutes God's people.

The Church consists of the faithful people of God of the Old and New Testaments, depicted corporately as a woman, the mother of the Messiah (12:1–2, 5). The members of the Church are the offspring of the woman, "those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus" (12:17). Their role in the conflict is to bear witness to Jesus and remain faithful in the face of persecution and temptation. As the end of the book, Christ appears as the victorious "King of kings and Lord of lords," to destroy the adversaries of God's people (19:11–21).

Preview of Promises Fulfilled: Salvation and Judgment

The Gospels and other New Testament writings show how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures in his birth, life, death, and resurrection. However, the arrival of the Messiah did not immediately bring the kingdom of God in its fullness and the fulfillment of *all* God's promises. Instead, Jesus taught his disciples that before the end comes there will be an interim period during which the gospel is to be preached to all nations (Matt 24:14; Luke 19:11–12; Acts 1:6–8). Revelation, the only book of prophecy in the New Testament, discloses how Scriptures not fulfilled at Christ's first coming will be fulfilled at his second coming and in the events that lead up to it. For example, Revelation teaches that God will establish his kingdom as a new paradise in a new creation free

from evil and defilement. The covenant of God and his people is fulfilled in the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride; their wedding feast is the great banquet of the kingdom. God's temple is definitively established as he dwells with his people in the new Jerusalem, an eschatological holy of holies (21:16), wiping away every tear from their faces (21:4; Isa 25:8).

Meaning for Today

Nearly twenty centuries have passed since John wrote down the visions he received for his fellow Christians in Asia Minor. Although the world today is very different, many of the circumstances facing Christians of the first century are present today in different guise.

After centuries in which Christianity was the dominant religious and cultural force in Western civilization, today in many places the Church exists in a secular culture whose mass media, entertainment, and educational systems are often hostile to her beliefs and morals. In many places adherents of other religions seek to eliminate the Christian testimony by force, while governments of both secular and religious nations persecute those who “keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus” (12:17). Meanwhile an international, materialistic, consumerist, sexually immoral culture seduces many away from their Christian faith. While literal idolatry—the worship of pagan gods and their physical images—is less common today than in the first century, spiritual idolatry—manifest in excessive love for and ultimate trust in created things rather than in God, whether wealth, pleasure, science, technology, governments, institutions, celebrities, or leaders—is stronger than ever.

Revelation reminds Christians today, as it did its original readers, that despite appearances, Jesus Christ is Lord. God is seated on his throne, directing history toward the goal he intends.

In the midst of conflict and temptation, every Christian is summoned to conquer, to be “the victor” who will eat of the tree of life, avoid the second death, and receive a new name and all the other eschatological rewards promised in this book. Despite persecution, Christians are summoned to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed like the two witnesses (11:3–13). This entails relying on God for protection and the power of his Spirit for boldness, signs, and wonders. If testimony to Jesus costs us our lives, we are not afraid since we await a resurrection that all the world will someday see, like that of the two witnesses.

Twenty centuries after Revelation was written, we know that the consummation of all things may or may not be “soon” in the time frame of our world, but

a response to the gospel is nevertheless urgent in the life of every person and society. Revelation reminds us that our ultimate hope is not merely to die and go to heaven, but rather to see the glorious return of our Lord, the resurrection, and the marriage of heaven and earth when the new Jerusalem descends like a bride. Our destiny as Jesus' disciples is the wedding feast of the Lamb in an eternal city that defies description, where we will see God face-to-face.

In closing this introduction, I wish to express my gratitude first to my parents, who from childhood taught me “the sacred writings which are able to instruct [us] for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15 RSV). I am grateful to the teachers who first made Revelation intelligible to me, Stephen Clark and Ugo Vanni. I also thank the scholars and friends who took time to read part or all of the manuscript and to give me their feedback: Leslie Baynes, Peter Collins, Matthew Daniels, Mike Gladieux, Michael Gorman, Andreas Hoeck, Bishop Francis Kalabat, Donal McIlraith, and John Whiting, and especially my coeditors Mary Healy and Kevin Perrotta. Of course, any remaining errors or faults are entirely my own. Finally, thanks to my wife, Marsha Daigle-Williamson, who offered many helpful comments on the final draft and persistently exhorted me to finish this commentary lest the descent of the new Jerusalem precede its publication.

Outline of Revelation

- Prologue, Greeting, and Initial Vision (1:1–20)
- I. What Is Happening: Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)
 - II. What Will Happen Afterward (4:1–22:11)
 - A. The Worship of Heaven; the Lamb and the Scroll (4:1–5:14)
 - B. Warning Signs (6:1–9:21)
 - 1. Opening of the First Six Seals (6:1–17)
 - 2. God’s People before and after the Great Tribulation (7:1–17)
 - 3. The Seventh Seal: Six Warning Trumpets (8:1–9:21)
 - C. The Opened Scroll and the Recommissioning of the Prophet (10:1–11)
 - D. The Church at Worship, the Two Witnesses, the City’s Response (11:1–13)
 - E. The Seventh Trumpet; Overview of the Church’s Story (11:14–14:20)
 - 1. The Seventh Trumpet, Worship, and Appearance of the Ark of the Covenant (11:14–19)
 - 2. Background: The Woman, the Dragon, and the Male Child (12:1–18)
 - 3. The Two Beasts (13:1–18)
 - 4. The Companions of the Lamb (14:1–5)
 - 5. Three Angel Heralds and the Eternal Gospel (14:6–13)
 - 6. The Harvesting of the Earth (14:14–20)
 - F. Preparation and Pouring Out of the Seven Bowls of Wrath (15:1–16:21)
 - G. Conclusion: Judgment and Salvation (17:1–22:11)
 - 1. Revelation of the Harlot and the Beast; Judgment of Babylon (17:1–19:10)

2. Visions of the Victory of Christ and of God (19:11–21:8)
 - a. Victory of Christ over the Beast, the False Prophet, and Their Army (19:11–21)
 - b. The Thousand-Year Reign and God’s Victory over Satan and (20:1–10)
 - c. Final Judgment of the Dead and of Death (20:11–15)
 - d. New Heaven, New Earth, New Jerusalem (21:1–8)
 3. Revelation of the Bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem (21:9–22:11)
- Epilogue and Greeting (22:12–21)

A Revelation from Jesus Christ

Revelation 1:1–20

The last book of the New Testament is altogether unique. The Gospels tell the story of the life and teaching of Jesus in the third person. The Epistles communicate teaching and exhortation about following Christ from the apostles and other teachers of the first Christian generation. But Revelation presents its readers with a vision of the risen Lord himself, who entrusts his servant John with an urgent word of prophecy for the seven churches of Asia, and through them to the whole Church in all times and places. Thus while the whole New Testament addresses us as Jesus' disciples, in Revelation Jesus addresses us in an especially direct way.

Prologue (1:1–3)

¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.

OT: Dan 2:28–47; 12:4; Amos 3:7

NT: John 5:20; 15:15; 18:37

Catechism: reading Scripture, 2653; imminence of Christ's coming, 673

Peter S. Williamson, Revelation
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The prologue tells us the title of this book, the divine origin of its content, the way it was transmitted, and the blessing that awaits all who read, hear, and heed it.

1:1–2

Although we are used to calling it the book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, the full title of the book is **The revelation of Jesus Christ**. The Greek word translated “revelation,” *apokalypsis*, literally means “unveiling.” Beside this single occurrence in Revelation, the word appears seventeen times in the New Testament in reference to Christian prophecy (1 Cor 14:6, 26; 2 Cor 12:1), the disclosure of God’s previously hidden plan (Luke 2:32; Rom 16:25), or the manifestation of a new order at the second coming (Rom 2:5, 8:19; 1 Cor 1:7). When Revelation was written, *apokalypsis* had not yet come to connote what people today commonly mean by “†apocalypse.”

This revelation originated with God, who **gave** it to Jesus Christ for us.¹ The reason God did this was so that **his servants**, his people, would be prepared for the events that **must happen** in God’s plan. By saying **soon**, John intentionally contrasts the urgency of his prophecy with the book of Daniel, where the prophet is told that his message is for the distant future (Dan 2:28–29; 12:4). John’s allusion to Daniel here will be made explicit at the end of the book (22:10).

Jesus conveyed this message through **his angel** to **his servant John**, a Christian prophet.² The angel who mediates the revelation of this book appears and speaks in 10:8–9 and in 22:1, 6–10. John identifies himself not as the author but as the one who **gives witness** (“testified,” NRSV) that this really is **the word of God** and Jesus’ **testimony**. He accomplishes this by faithfully **reporting what he saw** in the visions of this book.

1:3

This **prophetic message** (literally, “prophecy”) is intended to be read in the liturgical gathering of the Christian community. John pronounces a blessing on the lector who **reads** this divine message and to the members of the congregation who **listen** and **heed** (literally, “keep”) its teaching. They are **blessed**, the same word found in the Beatitudes of Matt 5:3–8 and Luke 6:20–22. A beatitude pronounces someone fortunate or happy and praises the behavior that is the basis of the person’s happiness. This is the first of seven beatitudes in the book of Revelation, each focusing on the conduct that characterizes a faithful disciple awaiting Jesus’ glorious return.³ Revelation is about ethics as well as †eschatology; it provides guidance about how its readers should conduct themselves. Despite our very different circumstances, we who read, listen to, and heed the message of Revelation today are also “blessed.”

1. See John 5:20; 16:15.

2. In the OT God often refers to “my servants, the prophets” (e.g., Jer 7:25; Ezek 38:17), and that phrase occurs in Revelation as well (10:7; 11:18; see 22:6).

3. The other beatitudes are found at Rev 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14.

What Christ Means by “Soon”

Prophetic language that says the end will be soon is not unique to Revelation. The prophetic books often refer to final judgment as near. Some texts say only “a brief moment” more and God’s decisive salvation will be revealed,^a using an expression similar to “a little while” in Rev 6:11; 12:12; 20:3. The prophets also speak of God’s imminent salvation with the same words Revelation uses for God’s intervening or Jesus’ coming “soon” or “quickly,” or of his being “near.” “Near is the great day of the LORD, / near and very swiftly coming,” says Zeph 1:14. According to Baruch, mercy “will swiftly reach you”; †Zion’s neighbors will “soon see God’s salvation come to you” (Bar 4:22, 24).

The New Testament has its share of urgent end-time preaching. John the Baptist and Jesus proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt 3:2; 4:17), and indicating that God’s judgment would be soon. Judgment did in fact descend on Israel within a generation when Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. Although the kingdom of God *did* arrive in the person of Jesus, the full establishment of the kingdom has not yet come. Yet Jesus’ resurrection marks the end of the old age and the beginning of the new (1 Cor 15:22–23), so that the †parousia could happen at any moment (see sidebar, “The Timing of Jesus’ Return,” p. 182). Thus St. Paul also speaks of the imminence of the end and of the need to be ready at all times (Rom 13:12; 16:20; 1 Thess 5:2–8), as does St. Peter (1 Pet 4:7).

Whatever the prophets, other biblical authors, and John may have understood when they wrote “soon,” centuries later it is clear that the Holy Spirit, who inspired them, was not speaking literally in the way that human beings reckon time. Rather, it seems the Holy Spirit’s intention was to stir people to action now for the sake of God’s salvation and judgment that just might come to pass in their lives sooner than they expect.

a. Isa 10:25; 26:20; Jer 51:33; Hag 2:6.

BIBLICAL
BACKGROUND



The Greek does not include the word **aloud** after “reads.” The NABRE translators added it since most Bible reading in the early Church took place in community gatherings (1 Tim 4:13) due to the fact that books were expensive and most people were illiterate. Communal reading had the advantage of allowing for explanation of what was read, which would have been especially valuable in reading Revelation.

The prologue concludes by stressing the urgency of responding to the message of the book, **for the appointed time is near**. The words “near” and “soon” (1:1)

occur frequently in Revelation in reference to the return of Christ and other events prophesied in this book. Sometimes, as in these verses, the precise event that will happen soon is not explicitly stated. Readers are left with an encouragement to keep their eyes peeled for the fulfillment of God’s plan, since it is not far off.

Reflection and Application (1:1–3)

Perhaps some misunderstanding is inevitable when God, who lives in eternity, communicates with human beings, who live in time. From God’s eternal perspective, our final salvation is already present, while for us it lies in the future. C. S. Lewis describes the two perspectives this way:

If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all.⁴

When God tells us that our salvation will be “soon” or “in a very little while,” it is a way of bridging the gap between the divine and the human points of view. Like a parent truthfully assuring an impatient child that Christmas really is not far off, God speaks to human beings from his superior perspective on time (2 Pet 3:8–9) encouraging us to persevere in hope and warning us to be vigilant. When we ourselves pass from time to eternity, we will see with perfect clarity how soon, even immediate, were his loving response to our prayers and the fulfillment of all his promises.

The time when each of us will be summoned to render an account of our life before “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5:10) will arrive sooner than we think—perhaps unexpectedly, at the hour of our death or when the Lord returns. Consequently, the repeated warning of Revelation and the rest of the Bible that the end is near is salutary if we “listen” and “heed” (1:3).

Greeting, Praise of Christ, Prophecy (1:4–8)

⁴John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, paperback ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 147.

the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, **“who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.**

**⁷Behold, he is coming amid the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him.
All the peoples of the earth will lament him.
Yes. Amen.**

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.”

OT: Exod 19:6; Isa 41:4; 44:6; Dan 7:13; Zech 12:10

NT: John 19:37; 1 Tim 2:6; 6:13

Catechism: the baptized as a holy priesthood, 1140–44; prayer to the one who can save in past, present, and future, 2854

Lectionary: 1:5–8: Chrism Mass, Thursday of Holy Week; Solemnity of Christ the King (Year B); Masses for the Triumph of the Cross and the Precious Blood during Easter Season

This brief passage consists of four parts, the last two of which (vv. 7–8) seem to interrupt the flow of the text. One of my former teachers believes that what we have here is the script of a liturgical dialogue that took place when Revelation was read.⁵ The person presiding at the liturgy “announces the subject, the audience, and the author of the communication (vv. 1–2) and pronounces a blessing (the beatitude in v. 3) on the lector and on the attentive audience (the community).”⁶ The lector begins by reading the greeting of the author John (vv. 4–5a). The congregation responds with a †doxology praising Jesus for what he has done for us (vv. 5b–6). The lector then declares the faith of the Church in the future return of Christ, and the congregation replies, “Amen” (v. 7). Then the lector concludes by solemnly pronouncing words that identify the God who is the source and master of all that unfolds in this book and in history (v. 8). Whether or not this surmise is correct, it certainly works to read the text aloud as a liturgical dialogue. The prophetic poetry of verses 7–8 announces key ideas of the book: Jesus will return in †glory, and God is sovereign over all of history.

We will consider the identity of **the seven churches in Asia** where more is said about them in verse 11.

John begins with a prayer-wish found in the greetings of nearly all the letters in the New Testament. He invokes on his readers a blessing of **grace** (*charis*)

1:4–5a

5. Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1988), 106–9.

6. Charles H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 37.

and **peace** from God. This salutation alters slightly the common †Hellenistic greeting “rejoice” (Greek *chairein*) and combines it with the common Jewish greeting “peace” (Greek *eirēnē*; Hebrew *shalom*), since the joy of God’s favor and true peace are now available in Christ.

What distinguishes this greeting is that it names the three Persons of the Trinity, whereas most of the other greetings in the New Testament only name God and Christ. However, John speaks of the Father and the Spirit in a very distinctive manner. He refers to the Father as **him who is and who was and who is to come**, drawing on God’s revelation of his name to Moses in Exod 3:14–15. There God reveals himself, saying, “I am who am.” The longer phrase in Revelation is probably a deliberate counterclaim to a title ascribed to the pagan god Zeus: “the one who was and who is and who will be.”⁷ By saying that God “is to come,” John expresses a major theme of the book—that God is *coming* to save his people and to judge the wicked.

The Holy Spirit is described in a very unusual way as **the seven spirits before his throne** (see sidebar, “The Seven Spirits of God,” p. 46).⁸ This description probably derives from two Old Testament texts. The Septuagint of Isa 11:2–3 depicts the Spirit of the Lord resting on the †messiah to bestow seven attributes—wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.⁹ In Zech 4 the prophet receives a vision of a lampstand with seven lamps drawing oil from one source, which symbolizes the power of God’s Spirit that will enable the people to rebuild the temple: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech 4:6 RSV). As in the time of Zechariah, the present stage of salvation history is one in which God is overcoming opposition and building his temple—that is, the Church—through the action of the Holy Spirit (see Eph 2:21–22; Rev 3:12; 11:1). The Spirit’s activity will attain its goal in the new Jerusalem (21:3, 16, 22).

Jesus is mentioned in third place, rather than in usual Trinitarian order, because John has singled him out for a longer description, followed by a doxology focused uniquely on him, anticipating his central role in this book. Jesus is identified by four titles. The title **Christ** refers to God’s anointed king descended

7. Osborne, also citing other scholars, *Revelation*, 60.

8. Some have interpreted the “seven spirits” as the seven angels that Jewish and Catholic tradition understand as standing before God’s throne. But in Revelation the seven angels have another role (chaps. 8 and 15). Furthermore, according to Richard Bauckham, “although the term ‘spirit’ could certainly be used of angels (as frequently in the Dead Sea Scrolls), it very rarely has this meaning in early Christian literature and never in Revelation” (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 110). Besides, it would be very strange for seven angels to be placed parallel to God the Father and Jesus in bestowing grace and peace.

9. Catholic tradition subsequently identifies these qualities as the gifts of the Spirit.

The Seven Spirits Correspond to the Seven Gifts of the Spirit

Apringius of Beja, a sixth-century Latin Church Father who wrote a commentary on Revelation, interprets “the seven spirits” in relation to Isa 11.

Here the seven spirits are introduced, which are one and the same Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit, who is one in name, sevenfold in power, invisible and incorporeal, and whose form is impossible to comprehend. The great Isaiah revealed the number of its sevenfold powers when he wrote: “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding”—that through understanding and wisdom he might teach that he is the creator of all things—“the Spirit of counsel and might”—who conceived these things that he might create them—“the Spirit of knowledge and piety”—who governs the creation with piety by the exercise of his knowledge and whose purposes are always according to mercy—“the Spirit of the fear of the Lord”—by whose gift the fear of the Lord is manifested to rational creatures. This [description reveals] the sacred character of the Spirit who is to be worshiped.^a

a. *Tractate on the Apocalypse* 1.4, in ACCS 12:4.



from David. He is **the faithful witness** who came into the world “to testify to the truth” (John 18:37), which he did to the point of laying down his life. The Greek word for “witness,” *martyrs*, later came to mean “martyr,” probably because of this verse and the example of other witnesses to Christ who gave their lives (e.g., Antipas in 2:13 and Stephen in Acts 22:20). A major theme of Revelation is the call for Christians to imitate their Lord as faithful witnesses, even to the point of laying down their lives if necessary (12:11). Next Jesus is called **the firstborn of the dead**, a title also mentioned in Col 1:18, to indicate that he is the first member of the human race to pass from death to eternal life (see 1 Cor 15:20). Jesus is the conqueror of death, and stands at the head of the multitude who die and rise after him. Ever since his resurrection, he is the **ruler of the kings of the earth**, holding supreme authority over every other power (Eph 1:20–23), including the Roman emperor.

John’s response to the grace and peace bestowed by God, the Spirit, and especially Jesus is to offer a word of praise on behalf of his readers. It is the only doxology in the New Testament addressed solely to Jesus. Like some memorable texts from Paul’s Letters (Rom 8:34; Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25), it focuses on Jesus’ personal love expressed in his death on the cross for our sake. In Greek, **to him who loves us** is a present participle, implying continuous or

1:5b–6

The Seven Spirits of God

Revelation mentions “the seven spirits” of God four times (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). Richard Bauckham explains that John understands the seven spirits as a symbol for the Spirit of God on the basis of Zech 4, a key passage for John’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in the world.

In a vision the prophet Zechariah sees a golden lampstand with seven lamps on it (Zech 4:2), like the seven-branched lampstand that stood in the holy place in the temple (see Exod 25:31–40; 40:4, 24–25). When Zechariah asks about the seven lamps (Zech 4:4), he is told that God will accomplish his plan “Not by might, and not by power, but by my spirit” (4:6). A little later he is told that the seven lamps “are the eyes of the LORD that range over the whole earth” (4:10), John interprets this to mean that the seven lamps symbolize the seven eyes of the Lord—that is, God’s own Spirit. Similarly, when John sees seven torches burning before the divine throne, he identifies them as the seven spirits of God (Rev 4:5). Like the seven lamps in Zechariah’s vision, the seven spirits belong to the divine One, which is why John includes them in the Trinitarian blessing of 1:4–5.

While the allusions to Zechariah point to the relationship of the seven spirits to God, John also shows the seven spirits’ relationship with the Lamb. He describes the Lamb as having “seven horns and seven eyes, . . . the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world” (Rev 5:6). John’s understanding of the relationship of the seven spirits to the Lamb corresponds to the common early Christian understanding that the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ—that the Spirit is the way in which the exalted Christ is present and active in the world (Acts 2:33; 16:6–7; Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19).^a

a. Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 115; this sidebar summarizes 110–15.



habitual action—the one who *is* loving us. Christ is the main actor in Revelation, and at the outset this expression provides a premise that must not be forgotten amid all the trials his followers will face. It is Christ’s covenant love for his Bride, the Church, which will be celebrated at the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:7–9) and consummated in the new Jerusalem (21:2), that shapes all of Christ’s interventions in this book. The proof of his love is what he has already done: **he has freed us from our sins by his blood.** The power of Christ’s blood is a recurrent theme of Revelation (5:9; 7:14; 12:11). Here the nuance is that Christ has “freed us” (literally, “loosed us”) from our sins by his death, obtaining forgiveness through his atoning sacrifice and liberating us from

sin's power.¹⁰ Having dealt thus with the evil root that afflicts the human race, Christ is in the process of eradicating all its bitter fruit. How he will do this provides the overarching story line of Revelation.

God's promise to make Israel "a kingdom of priests" in Exod 19:6 has been fulfilled in a new and greater way as a result of Jesus' death on the cross.¹¹ Christ **has made us into a kingdom**; "kingdom" here means not only a people that is ruled by a king, the Messiah, but also a royal people who already reign with him. Obviously, our present reign with Christ is incomplete¹² and awaits its fullness in the future establishment of God's kingdom. Israel's priestly identity was originally expressed through observance of the laws of purity and worship of the †Torah. By removing the obstacle of sin through his sacrifice, the Messiah Jesus established God's covenant people as **priests** at an entirely new level, granting access in the Spirit to **his God and Father**. John, like Paul, understands his Gentile Christian readers to be fully incorporated into this privilege of Israel (Eph 2:11–22; see sidebar, "The 'Seal' in Scripture and Tradition," p. 142).

Those baptized into Christ present priestly worship by offering their whole lives as "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet 2:5; see Rom 12:1) in union with Christ in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16–21), as well as giving alms (Heb 13:16) and interceding for the whole world (1 Tim 2:1–2). Revelation will return to speak of the royal and priestly role of Christians in 5:10 (see comments there) and 20:6, which depicts the royal and priestly role of the saints and martyrs.

John completes his doxology: may **glory and power**, praise and kingly rule, belong to Christ **forever!**

The word **Behold** here signals a prophetic announcement. Up to this point John has been speaking in his own voice, but in the next two verses he utters prophetic †oracles as the Old Testament prophets often did. Abrupt changes in the person who is speaking are common in Hebrew prophecy and in the book of Revelation. The NABRE and some other translations lay out this verse and other portions of Revelation as poetry. They do so on the basis of parallelisms, allusions, or other content that suggests that the author intends to speak in an elevated or poetic manner.

This first prophetic message announces the principal theme of the book, the glorious return of Christ at the end of history. The fact that he is **coming**

1:7

10. Some ancient manuscripts say "washed" instead of "loosed"; the Vulgate, JB, and NJB follow this alternative reading, which anticipates "washed" in 7:14.

11. Following the LXX, 1 Pet 2:9 likewise draws on Exod 19:6 to affirm that Christians have become a "royal priesthood." For more on Christian priesthood in Rev 1:6; 5:10; and 20:6, see Albert Vanhoye, *The Old Testament Priests and the New Priest* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1986), 279–309.

12. Other NT texts that refer to Christians reigning with Christ in this life include Rom 5:17; 6:11–12; Eph 2:6; Col 3:1–4. See also Catechism 908–12.

amid the clouds recalls Daniel’s vision of “one like a son of man” (7:13) and various New Testament texts promising that Jesus will return with the clouds (Mark 14:62; Acts 1:11). His return will be public: **every eye will see him, / even those who pierced him**. This prophecy echoes Zech 12:10 (cited in John 19:37), which foretells Jerusalem’s mourning in repentance over one they have pierced, an intense mourning that is followed by a complete purification from sin (Zech 13:1). Here, however, it is not only Jerusalem but also “all the tribes of the earth” (NRSV) who **lament him**,¹³ echoing a similarly worded prophecy of Jesus (Matt 24:30). Although this mourning could be interpreted as the nations mourning in regret as they face judgment, the precedent in Zechariah and a nuance in the wording point to a much more positive outcome. The phrase that refers to those who mourn is from God’s promise to Abraham: “in you *all the tribes of the earth* will be blessed” (Gen 12:3 LXX, emphasis added), an expression that the Old Testament uses only of this promise.¹⁴ When Jesus returns, he will be greeted not only by a repentant Israel but also by many other repentant peoples, whose contrition results in purification from sin. The certainty of his glorious return is indicated by the double affirmation, **Yes. Amen**.

1:8 Another oracle follows. This time **the Lord God** himself speaks in the first person. In words that recall similar declarations in Isaiah (41:4; 44:6), God identifies himself as **the Alpha and the Omega**, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, indicating his authority over all of history from beginning to end and echoing his claim in Isaiah to be the first and the last (Isa 41:4; see Rev 1:17). He also identifies himself by the same title as in 1:4, **the one who is and who was and who is to come**, and by the title **the almighty**,¹⁵ a common †Septuagint translation of “LORD of hosts.” God speaks similar words directly once more, near the end of the book (21:5–6). By revealing his identity and presence at the beginning and the end, God certifies the message of this book.

John’s Commissioning (1:9–11)

⁹I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus. ¹⁰I was caught up in spirit on the Lord’s day and heard behind me a voice as

13. More literally, “wail on account of him” (RSV) or “mourn over him” (NJB).

14. See Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 321. The phrase also occurs in Gen 28:14; Ps 72:17; and Matt 24:30.

15. Greek *pantokratōr*, “ruler of all.”

loud as a trumpet, ¹¹which said, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

NT: Acts 14:22; 2 Cor 1:7; 2 Tim 2:12

1:9

Now we hear the voice of the prophet **John**, who emphasizes his unity with those who will read or hear this book by referring to himself as **your brother** and “partner” (a literal translation, NJB) in **the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance** that are **in Jesus**. All Christians are united to Christ and in him to one another through faith and baptism (Gal 3:27–28). In Greek, the words for “distress” (“tribulation,” RSV), “kingdom,” and “endurance” are preceded by only one article, indicating that John understands them as inseparable elements of Christian life. Jesus promised rewards to his disciples “with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come” (Mark 10:30). Hardship goes with the territory.

John recounts his reception of the prophecy contained in this book. He had been exiled to **Patmos**, an island in the Aegean Sea about forty miles from Ephesus, because he was evangelizing: he **proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus**.¹⁶ Exile was a common punishment in the Roman Empire. John may not have remained long on Patmos. If he was exiled in the mid-90s (see “Historical Setting and Purpose” in the introduction, pp. 21–22), he would have been released when the emperor Domitian died in AD 96, since his successor, Nerva (96–98), gave a general amnesty to exiles.

1:10–11

John describes an experience of being in the Spirit.¹⁷ While all of Christian existence can be described as life “in the spirit” (Rom 8:9), there are times when Christians particularly experience the Holy Spirit’s presence—for instance, in prayer or when exercising a spiritual gift or ministry (1 Cor 12:3; 14:2; Eph 5:18–20; 6:18). John’s prophetic experience may have occurred in the context of the liturgy, since it happened **on the Lord’s day**, the day of Jesus’ resurrection. This is the first and only use of this expression in the New Testament, and it refers to Sunday, the Christian day of worship (see Acts 20:7). John hears behind him a **voice as loud as a trumpet** (“loud voice like a trumpet,” RSV). Many of the messages in this book come with the “loud voice” of an angel, but here it is Christ who is speaking.

16. Other versions translate this literally: “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (RSV).

17. Although the NABRE rendering “in spirit” is possible, it seems better to interpret this and the other three uses of this phrase in Rev (4:2; 17:3; 21:10) as referring to the role of the Holy Spirit in prophecy (see Ezek 37:1; Matt 22:43; 1 Cor 12:3).

The Spirit in Revelation

While John uses the term “seven spirits” to refer to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world (see sidebar, “The Seven Spirits of God,” p. 46), he uses “Spirit,” singular, to refer to the prophetic activity of the Holy Spirit in the Church. He names the “Spirit” precisely fourteen times. Seven instances occur in the oracles to the churches, indicating that the words of the risen Lord come by means of the Spirit: “Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2–3). Four times John uses the phrase “in the Spirit” (RSV)^a to indicate that the Holy Spirit is the source of his visions (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). Twice more John refers to what the Spirit directly says, probably through prophecy (14:13; 22:17), and once he uses “Spirit” to identify the testimony of Christians to Jesus as Spirit-inspired prophecy (19:10).^b

a. Greek *en pneumatī*.

b. Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*, 118.



The voice commands John to **Write** what he sees and send it to **the seven churches**, and then names seven cities in the Roman province of Asia. They are listed in the order that the bearer of the letter would likely carry them, starting with Ephesus, the chief city of the province, then making a circuit in a clockwise direction. Each city lies two or three days’ walk from the previous one. We know there were churches at this time in other Asian cities not named here—for instance, in Colossae and Hierapolis, just a few miles from Laodicea (Col 4:13). The seven churches were probably selected as centers of communication for the churches nearby. From early on, Christian interpreters of Revelation have pointed out that “seven” symbolizes completeness, suggesting that this book was intended by the Holy Spirit for the whole Church, not only in Asia but also in the whole world.

Reflection and Application (1:9–11)

If you found yourself exiled for your Christian faith to a remote island, cut off from all your family and loved ones, how would you respond? Would you continue to pray without Mass or your parish community to support you? Would you consider yourself a partner in “the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus” (1:9) with all your brothers and sisters in Christ around the world? Would you be ready to hear God speak to you, not just

about *your* trying circumstances but also about his people and his purposes? The best way to know what you would do is to reflect on what you do now. Do you maintain your prayer life when there is no one else praying around you? Do you remember with your prayers and alms those who are suffering for their faith around the world?

When we face hardships, let us do our best to remember that it is not all about us, but about God and his kingdom, and pray and act accordingly.

Vision of the Son of Man (1:12–20)

¹²Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, wearing an ankle-length robe, with a gold sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hair of his head was as white as white wool or as snow, and his eyes were like a fiery flame. ¹⁵His feet were like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing water. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars. A sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun at its brightest.

¹⁷When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, ¹⁸the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld. ¹⁹Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards. ²⁰This is the secret meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and of the seven gold lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

OT: Dan 7:7–14; 10:5–10; Zech 4:1–10

NT: Matt 17:1–8

Catechism: Jesus, the one who passed through death, 625, 635

Lectionary: 1:9–11a, 12–13, 17–19: Second Sunday of Easter (Year C)

When John turns to see the source of the loud voice he has heard, what he sees literally takes his breath away: a divine figure who resembles a human being. The figure is described in extraordinary images that appear strange if they are pictured literally. However, if the meaning of each image is sought, they reveal a great deal about this heavenly being. Only through his words in verse 18 does his identity become absolutely clear: he is the risen Jesus in the midst of his Church.

1:12–13 The **seven gold lampstands** recall both the menorah—a single, seven-branched lampstand of pure gold with seven lamps that the priests kept burning every night (Exod 25:31–40; 27:21)—and the ten gold lampstands in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:49). In the midst of the lampstands is **one like a son of man**. “The Son of Man” is the term by which Jesus often refers to himself in the Gospels. In Hebrew and Aramaic idiom, it simply means “human being,” in contrast to an angel or animal, and it has this sense in Ezekiel and the Psalms. But the exact phrase, “one like a son of man” occurs only once in the Old Testament:

As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming with the clouds of heaven

One like a son of man.
 When he reached the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him,
 He received dominion, splendor, and kingship;
 all nations, peoples, and tongues will serve him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 that shall not pass away,
 his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed. (Dan 7:13–14)

This mysterious text describes a humanlike figure ascending to God, “the Ancient of Days,” and being given everlasting, universal kingship, something that belongs by right only to God. When Jesus was questioned at his trial by Caiaphas, the high priest, he revealed himself as this Son of Man (Mark 14:61–62).

To return to John’s vision, the person speaking to John is **wearing an ankle-length robe**.¹⁸ In the Septuagint, this word refers almost exclusively to the garment of the high priest. Although Revelation generally focuses more on Christ’s kingship than on his priesthood, the priestly dimension is not absent (this dimension of Jesus’ role is explored in Hebrews). As a priest, Christ communicates divine revelation to human beings (1:1), stands before God in the heavenly temple (Heb 9:12; Rev 5:6), and has consecrated his people as priests (1:6; 5:10).¹⁹ The **gold sash around his chest** indicates his great authority; the only other figures in Revelation to wear a gold sash are the seven angels close to God’s throne who are entrusted with the seven last plagues (15:6).

1:14–16 The **hair** of the one like a son of man is **white as wool or as snow**. In Dan 7:9 it is God himself, the “Ancient of Days,” whose hair is “white as wool” (LXX),

18. Greek *podērēs*.

19. Although the death of Jesus is not explicitly presented in Revelation as a priestly offering as it is in Hebrews, the idea may be presupposed in Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11 and in the symbolic depiction of the martyrs’ deaths as sacrifices (6:9).

symbolizing his eternity and infinite wisdom. Here the “one like a son of man” possesses this attribute. As often in Revelation, Jesus is depicted with divine attributes.

His **eyes** are like a **flame** of fire and his **feet** like **polished brass**. These images resemble the description of the glorious angel who appears to Daniel (Dan 10:6; see also Ezek 1:7). The fiery eyes suggest penetrating vision, able to discern and judge (Sir 23:19; Rev 19:12). His **voice** is powerful, **like the sound of rushing water** (literally, “many waters,” NRSV), like Niagara Falls or the waves of a Mediterranean storm pounding the shoreline.²⁰

In his **right hand** he holds **seven stars**. A first-century reader might have thought of the stars as representing heavenly powers that influence earthly events. The Roman emperor was often pictured with symbols of the planets around him. Enhancing the impression of awesome power is a **sharp two-edged sword** issuing from **his mouth**. Isaiah 11:4 says that the Messiah “shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, / and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked”—a text that St. Paul applies to Christ’s defeat of the man of lawlessness at the end of history (2 Thess 2:8). Isaiah 49:2 says that the Lord made the mouth of his Servant a “sharp-edged sword.” This description of the risen Christ combines both images, and the sword in his mouth represents the all-powerful word of God by which God created the world and brings judgment (Wis 18:1; Rev 19:13). Finally, completing the impression of heavenly [†]glory, John tells us that **his face shone like the sun at its brightest**. Various Old Testament texts compare the splendor of God to the sun (Ps 84:12; Isa 60:19), and Christians will recall that Jesus’ “face shone like the sun” at his Transfiguration (Matt 17:2).

John’s reaction to this vision of “one like a son of man” is like Daniel’s when he saw a heavenly messenger (Dan 10:9): John **fell down at his feet as though dead**. The heavenly being places **his right hand** on John, expressing favor and reassurance, tells him not to be afraid, and gives him a powerful reason not to fear by disclosing his identity in solemn words: **I am the first and the last**. These are words that God uses to identify himself three times in Isaiah, distinguishing himself from the lifeless pagan idols (Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). The next sentence makes his identity more explicit: **Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever**. Jesus has come back from the dead, clothed with divine authority, and will never die again. The good news for us is that he has wrested control from humankind’s perennial enemy: **I hold the keys to death and the netherworld**

1:17–18

20. The “roaring of many waters” is an image used to describe the awesome sound of the wings of the living creatures in Ezek 1:24 and of the Lord’s coming in 43:2. The phrase appears again in Rev 14:2 and 19:6 to describe thunderous heavenly worship.

(literally, “Hades,” the Greek word for the place of the dead that the Jews called “Sheol”). Jesus holds the keys! The Greco-Roman world knew itself to be powerless in the face of death, hoping only for some shadowy continuing existence in Hades. Although death and the netherworld will continue to exist until their final judgment at the end of history (20:14), their final defeat is confirmed by this magnificent declaration of the risen Lord.

1:19 In light of his decisive victory over death, **therefore**, the risen Lord tells John to write what he has **seen** (the vision we have just read), **what is happening** (the present situation the Son of Man is about to reveal in prophetic messages to the seven churches in chaps. 2 and 3), and **what will happen afterwards** (God’s plans for the future, which the Lamb will reveal in the remainder of the book). Although these words provide a rough outline, the content of Revelation cannot be simply divided between present and future. The messages to the churches look forward to the end, and the visions of God’s plan for the future often reflect the past. Both parts—chapters 2–3 and 4–21—offer guidance to the Church in her present spiritual struggle.

1:20 Before communicating messages to the churches, the risen Jesus explains the meaning of the seven stars and the seven lampstands. A heavenly being explaining visions is one of the characteristic features of †apocalyptic literature that occurs several times in Revelation (e.g., 5:5; 7:13–14; 17:1–18).

The fact that the **seven churches** are symbolized by **seven gold lampstands** is significant. A lampstand is an apt symbol for the church. Jesus called his disciples “the light of the world” and said that the proper place for a lamp is to be “set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house” (Matt 5:14–15). Furthermore, while the temple in Jerusalem still stood, the menorah, a seven-branched gold lampstand with seven lamps, provided light and symbolized the radiance of God’s presence (Exod 40:35–38). Analogously, the seven churches, enlightened by Christ and indwelt by the Spirit, shine in the darkness of the world with divine light, bearing witness to the truth.²¹ The change from one gold menorah with seven lights to seven lampstands in seven cities symbolizes the light of the one Church shining not only in the churches of Asia but in the whole world. The location of the sacred lampstands of God’s temple in the world hints that he is in the process of making the whole of creation his temple (see 11:1–2), a goal finally achieved in the new Jerusalem (21:1–22:5).

The **angels** of the seven churches refer to the bishops or to the guardian angels of the local churches (more on that in the next chapter). In either case, those in charge of the churches are entirely in the firm grasp of Jesus. The explanation

21. See also Matt 5:14–16; Eph 5:8–14; Phil 2:15; Rev 11:3–7; 12:11, 17; 19:10.

of these two symbols at the end of John's report of his vision sets the stage for his messages to each of the seven churches.

Reflection and Application (1:12–20)

I was dead, but now I am alive forever. The joy and hope of these words remind me of a scene from the conclusion of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. After falling unconscious when the Ring was destroyed, Frodo's friend Samwise awakens and sees someone he thought had died months earlier: "Gandalf, you're alive! I thought you were dead! I thought I was dead! Is everything sad going to come untrue?"

The message of Revelation, epitomized in these opening words of Jesus, is a definitive "Yes! Everything sad is going to come untrue!" The revelation of the risen Lord presented in the book and the inner understanding that it evokes of who this Jesus is will enable Christians to face whatever challenges and circumstances come their way.

Seeing Jesus in Revelation. Richard Veras reflects on this awesome depiction of Jesus in light of the Gospels:

The fiery eyes of Jesus are the eyes that looked at Peter after his denial, the eyes that looked upon the rich young man with a love greater than that sad man had for himself, the eyes that moved Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman to follow him because the gaze of Jesus burned to the very cores of their hardened hearts. The face of Jesus, which shines like the sun, is the face of the one who called himself the light of the world.²²

Revelation provides us with three diverse visions of Jesus—the glorious son of man and ruler (1:13; 14:14), the slaughtered Lamb (5:6), and the divine warrior (19:11)—each emphasizing different aspects of his person and work. As we study, meditate, and pray about Revelation, we also will become more deeply aware of the awesomeness of Christ.

22. Richard Veras, *Wisdom for Everyday Life from the Book of Revelation* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, 2009), 3.