

## The Book of Revelation

**Author:** most likely the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee

**Date:** likely 80s or 90s AD

**Purpose:** to comfort the church with a vision of Jesus's ultimate victory over sin and suffering (17:14)

**Genre:** epistle; prophetic; apocalyptic

### ➔ About Apocalyptic Literature

- The term “apocalyptic” comes from *αποκαλυψις* (apokalypsis), used in Rev 1:1. It means “unveiling” or “revelation.”
- The genre seeks to give a view of reality from God’s perspective, introduced by a specific historical crisis, using symbols and pictures to illustrate God’s victory that introduces the final state of heaven or hell.
- It was popular between the years 300BC - 300AD and has strong roots in Judaism.
  - Biblical examples: Daniel 7-12 and Zechariah 9-14. Extra-biblical examples: The Shepherd of Hermas, 4 Ezra, 1 Enoch.
- It is intentionally *surreal*. It disorients us so we can gain a renewed vision of God, our own present, and the end of history. It is designed to offer ethical guidance and present truths in unexpected and absorbing ways.
- The genre also has an evangelistic purpose, using vivid imagery and powerful narratives to communicate the urgency of repentance and the reality of divine judgment.
- **On Its Use of Symbolism**
  - The intentional use of symbols means we should interpret Revelation *literarily*, not *literally*.
    - “*We instinctively know that a sentence that begins: ‘the stars will fall from heaven, the sun will cease from its shining and the moon will drip blood’ will not end ‘and the rest of the country will be partly cloudy with scattered showers.’*” J. Barton
  - “*A symbol is an image, character, setting, or event that exists in its own right (even if it is fantastic rather than real), but also points to or represents one or more other things.*” — Phil Ryken
    - e.g., lamb = Christ; lampstands = churches
  - If an image does not make complete or adequate sense at a purely literal level, interpret it symbolically.
    - Symbolic vision: Jesus has a two-edged sword coming from his mouth (1:13, 16)
    - Meaning: the sword symbolizes the penetrating, decisive power of His word to judge, convict, and save (see 19:15)
  - Numbers are intentionally employed symbolically (notice the distinct uses of 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, and 12)
  - Some symbols are easy: *horn* always means “king” or “kingdom”. Some are harder: *water temperature* in ch3. (Historical context helps—Laodicea was known for its disgusting water.) Sometimes the symbols are intentionally mixed: Jesus as both lion and lamb.
  - We’re not meant to figure out each little detail of the symbolism. Don’t be afraid to allow for some ambiguity.
    - (Tip: notice how symbols are elastic and overlap. John sometimes *hears* something described one way, then turns and *sees* the same thing revealed in a slightly different way. See Rev 5:5, 6; 7:4, 9)

- **On Its Historical Vantage Point**

- Human history is revealed from a heavenly perspective, revealing that it is all orchestrated from God's throne room.
- It is presented in three horizons: near future, intermediate future, and end-time future. (Sometimes all three are in view and overlap with each other.)
  - e.g., *Babylon* = symbolic for the world (mankind set in rebellion against God). That would be the Roman empire for John's first audience. But "Babylon" has also been many other nations throughout history. It's always relevant as a symbol, but will be *ultimately* relevant at the end of history.
- Revelation was meant to provide hope and guidance for its first readers/hearers. So the historical context for the original audience must be kept in mind as we interpret.

- **On Its Recapitulation of Themes**

- Recapitulation is a common technique in apocalyptic literature. It's a way of revisiting a theme or event multiple times from different perspectives.
- It may be most appropriate to see John using the technique of recapitulation throughout chapters 4-22 instead of reading them in a strict chronological order.
  - This approach is supported by Revelation's repeated scenes of final judgment and salvation, reflecting a wave-like pattern of *judgment* followed by *salvation* across different parts of the book.
  - For example, in Rev 11:14-18, the eternal kingdom of God and Christ, as well as the final judgment of the impious and salvation of the faithful, is said to have been *completely* accomplished.

→ Romans communicates ideas through *a series of logical arguments*.

→ The Psalms communicate ideas through *poetry*.

→ John's Gospel communicates ideas through *a progressing historical narrative*.

→ John's Revelation communicates ideas through *a kaleidoscope of surreal visual clips*.

**We must faithfully interpret it according to the way it was designed to be interpreted.**

*"The book of Revelation ends with a hero on a white horse who kills a dragon, marries his bride, celebrates the wedding with a feast, and lives happily ever after in a palace glittering with jewels."* — Phil Ryken

## ➡ Three Main Ways to Relate the Old and New Testaments

### Covenant Theology

This view sees the Bible as unfolding through a series of covenants between God and humanity, with a primary focus on the covenants of works, grace, and redemption. Covenant Theology emphasizes continuity between the Old and New Testaments, seeing the church as the continuation of Israel and the covenants as central to God's plan of redemption.

### Dispensationalism

This view divides biblical history into distinct periods or "dispensations" where God interacts with humanity in different ways. It emphasizes a clear distinction between Israel and the church, with the belief that God's promises to Israel will be fulfilled in a future millennial kingdom separate from the church.

### Progressive Covenantalism

This intends to be a middle road between the first two. It views the whole Bible through the lens of the New Covenant established by Jesus. It emphasizes the fulfillment of Old Testament promises in Christ. Because Jesus fulfills Israel, its promises, and all that it signified, the church (made of both Jew and Gentile) now receives those blessings by virtue of faith union in Jesus.

## ➡ Three Main Ways to Interpret Revelation

### Preterist

- Revelation foretold events that *already* took place when the temple was destroyed in AD 70 (aside from chapters 21-22).
  - It mostly related to first-century Christians living in the Roman Empire.

### Futurist

- Revelation foretells a series of events that *will* take place in the future (except for chapters 1-3).
  - It will mostly relate to those living during the period immediately preceding the return of Christ.

### Idealist

- Revelation symbolically describes cycles of events which will eventually culminate in the return of Christ.
  - Its timeless truths, warnings, and promises relate to Christians in every generation.

## ➡ Four Main Views on the Millennium

The Millennium is the 1,000 years described in Revelation 20. *We should not be overly dogmatic about our conclusions.*

### Pre-millennial

- Jesus Christ will return before the millennium (a thousand-year reign), and He will reign on earth (either literally or symbolically) during this period.
- Supported by: Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus, many Puritans, Wayne Grudem and John Piper
  - NOTE: There has been a modified version ("*Dispensational Premillennialism*") since the 19th century, supported by Darby, Schofield, many Pentecostal Christians, and the Plymouth Brethren. This view is the basis for the popular *Left Behind* novels, which take a distinctly literal "dispensationalist" interpretation.

- Premillennialists may also talk about the Rapture and the Great Tribulation.
  - The **Rapture** in this school of thought is the sudden disappearance of all the Christians in the world, leaving non-Christians (and carnal Christians) shocked and confused. This is based on a reading of Matthew 24:36-42 and requires a secretive second coming of Christ before the more “official” public one at the end of the world.
  - A **Great Tribulation** (see Matthew 24:21) will occur lasting 3½ or 7 years. The rapture will occur either pre-, post-, or mid-tribulation.

### Post-millennial

- Jesus will return after the millennium. The millennium is a period, possibly starting after Christ’s resurrection, during which the world is gradually transformed by the power of the gospel, leading to a golden age before Christ’s return.
  - Supported by: Many Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, a growing number of “Reformed” Christians

### Amillennial

- The millennium is not a literal thousand-year period but a symbolic time that began with Christ’s resurrection. Christ currently reigns in heaven, and the “thousand years” represents the entire church age until His return.
  - Supported by: Augustine, Luther, Calvin

### New Creation Millennialism

- The millennium is viewed as the first stage of the new creation, combining elements of premillennialism and amillennialism. It sees the millennium as a symbolic period that inaugurates the new creation, where Christ’s reign begins to be realized.

### Suggested Outline

1. *1st Vision: Christ and His Lampstands* (1-3)
  - Jesus addressing his churches with tough love letters
2. *2nd Vision: Heaven and the Seals* (4-7)
  - God’s plan for history, judgment on earth, and the sure salvation of the elect
3. *3rd Vision: The Seven Trumpets* (8-11)
  - God’s judgment over creation and Jesus’s return from one angle
4. *4th Vision: The Relentless Hostile Dragon* (12-14)
  - The second coming again, as the great dragon, Satan, persecutes the church
5. *5th Vision: The Seven Bowls* (15-16)
  - God’s wrath poured out climaxing in a final battle
6. *6th Vision: The Beast and Babylon Fall* (17-19)
  - The world’s powers in opposition to God fall
7. *7th Vision: The Consummation* (20-22)
  - Christ’s ultimate victory over evil and the new heavens and new earth revealed