

INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

Welcome: Revelation can be a difficult book to understand. Some people are so overwhelmed by the bizarre images and unfamiliar language that they choose to ignore it. Others try so hard to understand it they reduce it into a single-minded, overly literal interpretation of the end of the world.¹ However, in Revelation one can find the glorious redemptive message of the whole Bible, revealing who Jesus is and offering eternal hope. One could argue that this is the most important book in the entire Bible.²

Author: The author of *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* is identified simply as “John.” While there is some debate as to which John this refers to, the most common and widely held belief is that this book was written by the Apostle John,³ a disciple of Jesus who also authored the Gospel of John and 1, 2, & 3 John.⁴ John wrote Revelation on the island of Patmos which is 10 miles off the coast of Turkey. The Roman Empire sent those they considered “enemies of the state” to Patmos where they were most likely forced to do manual labor in rock quarries throughout the island.⁵ John was sent there for preaching the Gospel and staying true to his belief in Christ Jesus. (**Revelation 1:9**)

Date: The exact date of authorship is unknown. However, from historical context and outside sources it is believed that this book was likely written between AD 90 and AD 96,⁶ when Domitian was Emperor of Rome.

Original Audience: Revelation was addressed to the believers in seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These seven churches were not the only Christian churches in the province of Asia, and John would have expected

¹ Fee, xi; Ryrie, 10

² Johnson, 13

³ Early church leaders such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen all came to the conclusion that the author of Revelation was the Apostle John. There were some who disagreed, especially Dionysius, a bishop in the third century. He doubted it was John for these reasons: the author didn't claim to be a disciple, difficult Greek is used and it's a different writing style than other works by the Apostle John. Despite those few who dissent, the external evidence strongly supports the authorship of the Apostle John. (Duvall, 1-2)

⁴ Fee, xviii

⁵ Johnson, 24

⁶ This date is the most commonly held view. The early church father Irenaeus supported this date and modern scholars agree with him. Specifically, the context of the seven churches fits best when understood in this time frame. (Barton, xiv)

his work to be passed on from these seven to other churches in the area and beyond. Seven is often seen as the number that represents completeness.⁷ Therefore, in addressing seven churches, John was signifying that his message was addressed to those churches as representative of all churches.⁸

“Most ‘readers’ were originally, of course, hearers. Revelation was [meant to be read out loud] in Christian worship services (as in **Revelation 1:3**).”⁹ Its effect would be similar to a dramatic performance in which the audience enters the world of the drama and allows it to shift their perspective of the outside world.¹⁰

Map of the seven churches:¹¹



Type of Literature: This book is extremely unique, not only because of the content within but also because it contains three different types of literature: Epistle (letter), Prophecy and Apocalypse.

Epistolary (Letter) Literature: Revelation was written as a letter to seven churches in Asia. The first three chapters fit nicely into the Epistle genre.

⁷ Johnson, 51

⁸ Bauckham, 16

⁹ Ibid. 10

¹⁰ Ibid. 10

¹¹ “Seven Churches in Revelation in Turkey.” *Ephesus Tours*, 3 Apr. 2014, www.ephesustoursguide.com/ancient-cities-of-turkey/seven-churches-in-revelation-in-turkey.html.

Prophetic Literature: This type of literature can be both predictive (foretelling) and a proclamation of truth (forth-telling). Forth-telling compares the way people live to the way God calls them to live. The prophecy in Revelation most often includes commands to follow and obey God, although parts of Revelation speak to the future as well.¹²

Apocalyptic Literature: Traditionally, apocalyptic writers in Jewish history¹³ looked forward to the time when God would bring a violent, radical end to history, an end that would bring a triumph of good and a final judgment of evil. In modern culture, the concept of apocalypse typically refers to the catastrophic end of the world. However, in the Bible the word “apocalypse” is used to describe hidden things being uncovered, revealed, or made visible.¹⁴ The book of *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* reveals the world from heaven’s perspective, the ultimate victory of Christ, God’s plan for the end of evil and His righteous reign in heaven and on earth.

Imagery: Images are central to apocalyptic literature; in Revelation they are powerful and plentiful. They help the reader see something from a different perspective and with different emotions. Most of the images and symbols of apocalyptic writing seem to belong to fantasy. For example, the book of Revelation includes a beast with seven heads and ten horns (**Revelation 13:1**), a woman clothed with the sun (**12:1**), locusts with scorpions’ tails and human heads (**9:10**), etc. Some of the images represent the same thing throughout and some are more fluid; their meaning changes as they are used in different contexts.¹⁵ The images that are presented are meant to be viewed as a whole, not broken down to give each detail a specific allegorical meaning. They are not codes to be deciphered. While the details are there for a reason, sometimes they may be used to increase dramatic effect or to help amplify the main point.¹⁶

Readers’ note: The images can be overwhelming and hard to understand, but they are used strategically and are important. Don’t give up when they don’t make sense. The footnotes will help you along the way.

¹² Duvall, 5-6

¹³ The majority of these writers wrote between 200 BC and AD 200. (Barton, xvi; Duvall, 6)

¹⁴ “Apocalypse Please: BibleProject.™” *BibleProject*, bibleproject.com/podcast/apocalypse-please/.

¹⁵ Fee, xxi

¹⁶ *Ibid.* xxii

Numbers: Numbers were very significant and symbolic in the ancient world. Because the numbers used in Revelation are not necessarily literal, but are primarily symbolic, care must be used in their interpretation, taking context into consideration. Numbers in Revelation are not intended to be used to speculate on the timing of Christ's return or the end of the world. The significance of the numbers will be explained in footnotes throughout this study.

Use of the Old Testament: John, the author, reveals a vast and extremely intimate knowledge of the Old Testament. "... Remember that the strongly Jewish character of most of [the churches in Revelation] made the Old Testament much more familiar than it is even to well-educated modern Christians."¹⁷ There are hundreds of references or allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation, and many of them are explained in footnotes throughout this study.¹⁸ One cannot fully comprehend Revelation without realizing its deep connection to the rest of Scripture.

Not Linear: Revelation is not to be read as a chronological timeline. "Apocalypses in general, and Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed chronological account of the future. John's larger concern is that, despite present appearances, the sovereign God is in control of history and the Church. And, even though the Church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge His enemies and save His people."¹⁹

Readers' note: In this study we have intentionally not committed to a timeline for the events/visions of Revelation. There are too many possibilities and academic perspectives to be definitive or specific. We have instead chosen to focus on the very real suffering and persecution Christians face and will continue to face, as well as the tremendous truth that God is sovereign, He overcomes Satan, and He will ultimately reign on earth as He does in heaven. Our walk of overcoming is not helped by trying to form a timeline. In fact, believers are assured they will not know when the events of the end will happen or the day and hour of Jesus' return, only the Father knows that information (Matthew 24). The sustaining strength, protection, presence and comfort of God are what matters as Christians walk in faithfulness with Him.

¹⁷ Bauckham, 18

¹⁸ Johnson, 23

¹⁹ Fee and Stuart, 260-262

Interpretations: “There are five major approaches to interpreting Revelation:

Preterist: Revelation is directed to first-century Christians, encouraging them with a message of hope of how God plans to deliver them from the evils of the Roman Empire.

Historicist: Revelation offers a prophetic outline of church history from the first century until the future coming of Christ.

Futurist: Revelation is concerned with what will happen at the end of history, just before the second coming of Christ.

Idealist: Revelation is a symbolic description of the ongoing battle between God and evil. The book offers timeless spiritual truths to equip Christians for persevering in a world filled with suffering and injustice.

Eclectic: This approach combines the strengths of several approaches, taking seriously the message to the original readers, acknowledging portions of the book that await future fulfillment, and finding relevant spiritual messages for Christians of every age.”²⁰

Readers’ note: The authors of this study guide have tried to take the Eclectic approach to Revelation. Very intelligent, well-educated and Spirit-filled people land on different ways to interpret Revelation. We believe it is important to not be dogmatic about certain interpretations.

²⁰ Duvall, 6