THE BOOK OF THE REVELATION

ORIENTING DATA FOR THE REVELATION

- **Content:** a Christian prophecy cast in apocalyptic style and imagery and finally put in letter form, dealing primarily with *tribulation* (suffering) and *salvation* for God's people and God's *wrath* (judgment) on the Roman Empire
- **Author:** a man named John (1:1, 4, 9), well known to the recipients, traditionally identified as the apostle, the son of Zebedee (Matt 10:2)
- **Date:** ca. A.D. 95 (according to Irenaeus [ca. 180])
- **Recipients:** churches in the Roman province of Asia, who show a mix of fidelity and internal weaknesses
- **Occasion:** the early Christians' refusal to participate in the cult of the emperor (who was acclaimed "lord" and "savior") was putting them on a collision course with the state; John saw prophetically that it would get worse before it got better and that the churches were poorly prepared for what was about to take place, so he writes both to warn and encourage them and to announce God's judgments against Rome
- **Emphases:** despite appearances to the contrary, God is in absolute control of history; although God's people are destined for suffering in the present, God's sure salvation belongs to them; God's judgment will come on those responsible for the church's suffering; in the end (Rev 21–22) God will restore what was lost or distorted at the beginning (Gen 1–3)

OVERVIEW OF THE REVELATION

The cult of the emperor flourished in the province of Asia more than elsewhere in the empire; the result was that by the end of the first Christian century, the church in all its weaknesses was headed for a showdown with the state in all its splendor and might. By the Spirit, John sees that the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13) and John's own exile (1:9) are but a small foretaste of the great havoc that the state will wreak on the church before it is all over (see 1:9; 2:10; 3:10; 6:9–11; 7:14; 12:11, 17).

As a Christian prophet, John also sees this conflict in the larger context of the holy war—the ultimate cosmic conflict between God (and his Christ) and Satan (see 12:1–9)—in which God wins eternal salvation for his people. The people's present role is to "triumph over [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, … not lov[ing] their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:11). As God has already defeated the dragon through the death and

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resurrection of Christ (the Messiah is caught up to heaven, 12:5), so he will judge the state for her crimes against his people.

The book plays out these themes in a variety of ways. The earlier parts (chs. 1–6) set the stage for the unfolding drama, starting with a vision of the Risen Christ, who holds the keys to everything that follows (1:12–20), while letters to selective churches represent their varied strengths and weaknesses (chs. 2–3). These are followed by a vision of the Reigning Creator God and the Redeeming Lamb (chs. 4–5), to whom alone belong all wisdom, glory, and power and before whom all heaven and earth will bow. As John weeps because no one can be found to break the seals of the scroll (which is full of God's justice and righteous judgments), he is told that the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (5:5; see Gen 49:9–10), the "Root of David" (Isa 11:1–2, 10), has "triumphed," but the only lion John sees is God's slain Lamb (echoing the Exodus Passover [and Isa 53:7]), who has redeemed people from all the nations. Such a Conqueror can set the drama in motion by breaking the seals (Rev 6), which offer a kind of "overture" (striking all the themes) for what follows (conquest, war, famine, death [first 4 seals]—followed by many martyrdoms [seal 5], to which God responds with judgment [seal 6]). It is especially important to note that, apart from his role in the final battle (19:11–21), the only way Christ appears from here on in the narrative is as the slain Lamb; this is how his followers are expected to triumph as well (12:11).

The two interlude visions (ch. 7)—of those whom God has "sealed" from his coming judgments, but pictured in battle formation for their role in the holy war, and eventually redeemed—are then followed by the opening of the seventh seal, which unfolds as the vision of the seven trumpets (chs. 8–9). These "judgments" echo the plagues of Egypt, and like those plagues, announce temporal (and partial) judgments against their present-day Pharaoh. But as with the Egyptian Pharaoh, the plagues do not lead to repentance (9:20–21). The interlude visions between the sixth and seventh trumpets (10:1–11:14) call on the church to prophesy and bear witness to Christ, even in the face of death, while also pronouncing the certain doom of the empire, and ending with a foretaste of the final glorious reign of God and of the Lamb (11:15–19).

The remaining visions (chs. 12–22) offer explanations for and apocalyptic descriptions of the final doom of the empire. Chapters 12–14 thus give the theological and historical reasons for both the suffering and the judgment. The doom of Rome itself is portrayed in the vision of the seven bowls (chs. 15–16), which echo the trumpet plagues—but now without opportunity to repent. The whole then concludes as the (original) "tale of two cities," represented by two women (the prostitute [Rome] and the bride of the Lamb), in which the city that represents enmity against God and his people is judged (chs. 17–18). This is set against the backdrop of God's final salvation and judgment (chs. 19–20) and of the final glory of the bride as the city of God, the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven (chs. 21–22).

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING THE REVELATION

You may easily find yourself in the company of most contemporary Christians, for whom the Revelation is difficult to read, mostly because we are so unfamiliar with John's medium of communication—apocalyptic literature with its bizarre imagery. Thus, along with knowing about the historical context and the way John works out his overall design (noted above), two

other items will greatly aid your reading of this marvelous book—(1) to take seriously John's own designation of his book as "the words of this prophecy" (1:3) and (2) to have some sense of how apocalyptic imagery works, even if many of the details remain a bit obscure.

By calling his work "the words of this prophecy," John is deliberately following in the train of the great prophets of the Old Testament, in several ways: (1) He speaks as one who knows himself to be under the inspiration of the Spirit (1:10; 2:7; etc.). (2) He positions himself between some recent past events and what is about to happen in the near future. (3) He sets all forms of earthly salvation and judgment against the backdrop of God's final end-time judgments (see *How to 1*, p. 201) so that the fall of Rome is to be seen not as the end itself but against the backdrop of the final events of the end.

And (4) most important for good reading, John sees everything in terms of the *fulfillment* of the Old Testament. He has over 250 specific echoes of or allusions to the Old Testament so that every significant moment in his "story" is imaged almost exclusively in Old Testament language. This begins with the picture of Christ (1:12–18, with its extraordinary collage from Dan 7:9; 10:6; Ezek 43:2; et al.), climaxing in Revelation 5:5–6, where the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Gen 49:9), the "Root of David" (Isa 11:1), turns out to be a slain Lamb (from the Passover and sacrificial system). The church is imaged in the language of Israel in every possible way, beginning in Revelation 1:6, with its echoes of Exodus 19:6; its sins are expressed in terms of Israel's failures (Balaam/Jezebel), and its redemption in Revelation 7 is pictured first as a remnant of the twelve tribes and second as a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, thus including the nations. So also the judgment against Rome (e.g., 14:8; 18:1–24) is expressed in the language of the prophetic judgments against Babylon (Isa 13–14; 21:1–10; 47; Jer 50–51), so much so that Rome is simply called "Babylon." The climax of the fulfillment is found in Revelation 22:1–5, with its restoration of Eden and total overturning of the curse. It is hard to imagine a more fitting way for the biblical story to end!

About John's use of apocalyptic imagery, you need to be aware of the following (for more details, see *How to 1*, pp. 255–56): (1) The imagery of apocalyptic is primarily that of *fantasy*—a beast with seven heads and ten horns; a woman clothed with the sun. (2) John himself interprets the most important images (Christ, 1:17–18; the church, 1:20; Satan, 12:9; Rome, 17:9, 18), which give us our essential clues to the rest. (3) Some of his images are well known and fixed—a beast coming out of the sea represents a (usually evil) empire; an earthquake represents divine judgment—while others are fluid and are used to evoke feelings as well as mental pictures. (4) Visions are to be seen as wholes and not pressed regarding all of their details, that is, the details are part of the evocative nature of the imagery, but the *whole* vision is what counts.

If you keep these various matters in mind as you read, you should be able not only to make your way through the Revelation but begin to appreciate some of its utter majesty.[1]

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et al. *et alii,* and others

[1] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 426–430.