



Revelation

Revelation (also sometimes called the Apocalypse) is a call to Christians to remain faithful in the face of the disasters that they saw happening all around them. The underlying message of Revelation is that, despite the fact that it might appear that evil was unconquerable, God was waging battle in heaven and there is no doubt at all that he would win. The book is a series of visions and it can sometimes help to understand Revelation if you try and see in your mind's eye what is being described. Despite its weird imagery, it contains a message of great hope and reassurance.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 1 hour 15 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-8; 4.1-5.14; 19.11-22.21



Genre

Apocalyptic literature



Anything tricky?

Apocalyptic literature is not easy to read – and Revelation is a particularly difficult example of apocalyptic literature. Revelation contains odd imagery and visions that are hard for us to comprehend.

Revelation is made more complex by the vast numbers of interpretations that have been produced over the years about 'what it really means'. Probably the best thing to do is to try, as far as you can, to read it at face value and see what impression you get of it then.



Inspiring quotes

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. (*Revelation 3.20*)

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (*Revelation 21.1-4*)

¹ Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (*Revelation 22.1-2*)



About the Author

The book of Revelation states in 1.1 that it contains the revelation of Jesus Christ which God made known by sending his angel to his servant John.

Church tradition has identified John as John son of Zebedee, one of the 12 apostles. It is worth noting, however, that John never makes this claim in the book and so could be, as some suggest, an early Christian prophet who was also called John (then, as now, John was a common name).

Another point of importance is whether this John is connected to the John who is thought to have written the fourth gospel. Many scholars today would say that the theology and tone of the two books are very different (even down to using different Greek words for 'lamb') which suggests that they are not written by the same person. It is possible, though that they both belonged to the

same community of thinking – in its theology, Revelation is much closer to John's Gospel than to Paul's letters.

What do we know about him?

If the author is John the apostle, then he was the brother of James, called by Jesus to follow him early in his ministry. He is often thought to be the beloved disciple of John's Gospel (see introduction to John's Gospel for more on this). If he was then when Jesus was on the cross, he handed over care for his mother to him. Christian tradition states that he took her to live in Ephesus, where he lived to a ripe old age (around 100).

If the author is a different John, then we know much less about him. He was a prophet in the early church and spent some time living on Patmos, possibly as a result of having been exiled, where he received his vision.



About the times

Most people think that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century ad 85-95, though a few would point to an earlier date just before the Jewish war (ad 68-9).

What were people feeling?

What is clear is that the book was written at a time of persecution and upheaval. It looked as though the world as the people knew it was coming to an end and that evil was going to win. The whole book is concerned with reminding people of a different view of the world.



How is it structured?

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| 1.1-3.22 | The letters to the seven churches |
| 4.1-7.17 | A vision of the heavenly throne and the opening of seven seals |
| 8.1-11.19 | The angels blow seven trumpets |
| 12.1-15.8 | The victory over the dragon and the beast |
| 16.1-19.10 | The vision of seven plagues and the fall of Babylon |
| 19.11-22.21 | A vision of the new Jerusalem |



What kind of Book is it?

The book of Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic literature. The word apocalyptic comes from a Greek word 'apocalupsis' which means revelation (in other words, the book of Revelation is called Apocalypse in Greek). Apocalyptic literature, then, was concerned with revelation, most particularly revealing the world as God saw it rather than as human beings saw it. Some, though not all, apocalyptic texts are interested in what will happen at the end of the world.



Look out for...

Many people struggle to 'make sense' of Revelation. As you read don't try to make sense of it, just try to see it in your mind's eye. Think of it as a large and complex picture – sometimes this helps.

One theme that runs all through the book is the way in which what is going on in heaven affects what is happening on earth – look out for this as you read.

Above all Revelation is a book of hope – look out for themes of hope (no matter how unlikely) as you read.



What could this mean for me?

Throughout the centuries the people who have related most closely to Revelation are people who are going through great suffering. Reflect on this and see if you can work out why.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Some people read Revelation too much; others read it far too little. Where do you fall on the book? Why do you think people react to it so differently?
- Did reading the book all the way through (if you managed to that is!) make any difference to your view of it? What do you think is the best way to make sense of it?
- Why do you think that Revelation has been such a source of encouragement to people who are experiencing great suffering? Is there something to learn from this about how to read the book?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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