

THE BOOK OF
REVELATION



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Pacific Press[®]
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com

1 CHAPTER

The Gospel From Patmos

Revelation begins with a prologue (verses 1–8) that provide some introductory information about the book including the author, the recipients, the book’s central theme, the purpose of the book, and how it was written. It also introduces the key theme of the book.

The central theme of Revelation (1:1a)

The book begins with the opening statement “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” This declaration generates the title of the book, calling it “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word *apokalupsis* (apocalypse) means “unveiling,” “uncovering,” or “revealing.” The Apocalypse is, thus, an unveiling of Jesus Christ.

In the original language, the phrase “a revelation of Jesus Christ” may mean either that the revelation is from Jesus or that it is about Jesus as the One revealed. In a sense, both meanings are implied here. While the revelation came from God through Jesus Christ, who communicated it to John through an angel (Revelation 1:1; cf. Revelation 22:16), the rest of the book testifies that Jesus is the main subject of its contents. He is “the Alpha and the Omega” (that is, the A to Z) of the book’s content, “the beginning and the end” (Revelation

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21:6; 22:13), and “the first and the last” (Revelation 1:17; 22:13). The book begins and concludes with Jesus.

The book of Revelation is a gospel as much as the four Gospels are. Like the Gospels, Revelation talks about the same Jesus. But they focus on different aspects of His roles and existence. The Gospels portray Jesus as the preexistent Son of God who entered into human experience to save fallen human beings and who, after His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection, ascended to heaven. What is He now doing in heaven? Revelation unveils the answer to this question. The book reveals that after His ascension to heaven, Jesus was seated on the heavenly throne, ruling over the entire universe.

The Gospels also tell us that before His ascension, Jesus made two promises about His future interactions with His people: first, He will always be with them, until the time of the end (Matthew 28:20); and second, He will come again to take them to Himself (John 14:1–3). Revelation picks up on these two promises and describes, first, how Jesus fulfills the promise to be with His people throughout history, even to the end (Revelation 1–18), and second, how He will come at the conclusion of this world’s history and be united with them (Revelation 19–22).

Without Revelation, our knowledge of Christ’s ministry in heaven on behalf of His people would be vague. Revelation conveys the substance of the gospel as “the good news” and emphatically points to the glorified Christ as the One who, by virtue of His own death, conquered death and the grave (Revelation 1:17, 18). He will never forsake His people and will always be with them until He comes the second time to take them home.

Purpose of the book (1:1b)

The prologue further states that the purpose of Revelation is to show God’s people “the things which must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1). It is obvious that the portrayal of future events occupies much of the book. While the first half of Revelation (chaps. 1–11) delineates worldwide events that take place

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between the first century and the time of the end, its second half (chaps. 12–22) deals primarily with the time of the end and events leading to the Second Coming. This division suggests a question: How can the book be both the unveiling of Jesus Christ and the unveiling of events that will take place?

For one, the prophecies of Revelation explain, from God's perspective, why the predicted events will happen. They provide assurance that no matter what the future brings, God is in control. But the future events predicted in Revelation are evidently not the primary theme. They are not recorded to make the Apocalypse a divine fortune-telling book nor are the prophecies given to satisfy our obsessive curiosity about the future. Their primary purpose is to assure us of Jesus' presence with His people throughout history and its final events.

Christ knew, however, that the full impact of His promise to be with His people would not be effective without unpacking future events through His prophetic word. The graphic portrayal of these events in His message is designed to impress on us the gravity of the final crisis and our need to depend on God during this time. This time of crisis will remind God's people of Christ's promise to be with them in order to sustain them during difficult times. "These things I have spoken to you," Jesus said, "so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them" (John 16:4, NASB).

We must keep in mind that the fulfillment of end-time prophecies must not be a subject of speculation and sensationalism. Revelation informs us about events at the time of the end, but what it does not reveal is exactly when and how they will take place. Numerous books and websites have predicted exactly how these prophecies will be fulfilled, but most of the ideas expressed are misleading. They are drawn not from the Bible but rather from imaginings based on allegorical interpretations or headline news. The timing and manner of the unfolding of the final events are God's secrets and reserved only for Himself (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7). They will be clear to us only when they are fulfilled, not before (John 14:29; 16:4).

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When understood properly, the prophecies of Revelation serve practical purposes: to teach us how to live today and to prepare us for the future. Studying them should make us better people, motivate us to take our destinies seriously, and inspire us to try to reach others with the gospel message.

Symbolic language of the book (1:1c)

The prologue further explains that the contents of Revelation were “signified” to John in a vision. The Greek word *sémainó* (signify) carries the primary meaning “to show by signs or symbols.” This word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) where Daniel explained to King Nebuchadnezzar that by means of a symbol God had shown to the king “what will take place in the future” (Daniel 2:45, NASB). Similarly, by employing this word in the prologue of Revelation, John informs the reader that the things recorded in the book are visions and symbols that were shown to him on Patmos.

The book of Revelation does not provide photographic descriptions of heavenly realities or future events that should be interpreted literally. Although the scenes and events predicted are real, they were shown to John in symbolic presentations. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John faithfully recorded these symbolic presentations exactly as they were shown to him (Revelation 1:2). But due to the inadequacy of human language, John added symbols of his own. His attempts at putting heavenly realities in human words are identified by marker words such as *like* and *as*.

Keeping the symbolic character of Revelation in mind will safeguard against the literal application of symbols, which could distort the prophetic message. While reading the Bible in general presupposes a literal understanding of the text (unless it clearly points to intended symbolism), studying Revelation calls for a symbolic understanding of the scenes and events recorded, unless the text clearly indicates that a literal meaning is intended.

The symbolic language of Revelation was not born in a

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vacuum but was drawn from historical reality. Most of the symbolism in the book was taken from the Old Testament: some three-fourths of the book's text has direct or indirect allusions to the Old Testament. In portraying future events, Inspiration often uses the language of the past. God wants to impress upon our minds that His acts of salvation in the future will be much like His acts of salvation in the past. What He did for His people in the past, He will do for them in the future. There is no doubt that first-century readers of Revelation would have understood most of the symbols in Revelation in light of their Old Testament background.

Thus, in unlocking the meaning of the symbols and images in Revelation, we must first pay attention to the Old Testament. Many symbols in the book were also widely used in Jewish apocalyptic writings of the time. As such, they were part of people's vocabulary in the first century. Additionally, Revelation's images would have also evoked contemporary Greco-Roman scenes in the minds of first-century Christians.

The Trinitarian greeting (1:4-6)

Revelation was originally written in the form of an epistle. As such, it starts with the threefold opening of letters that was customary at the time. First, it introduces the sender and the recipients of the letter: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Revelation 1:4). John was one of the twelve disciples and the writer of the Gospel that bore his name. He was writing to seven Christian congregations in the Roman province of Asia (now the southwestern part of Turkey), which were mired in dire spiritual circumstances.

In Revelation, those seven churches represent the church throughout the Christian age. Seven is the number of fullness and completeness; although originally written to those seven churches, Revelation was thus also written for all God's people throughout the Christian age.

The second part of the letter's opening gives the common epistolary greeting among the early Christians: "Grace and peace to you" (verse 4; cf. Romans 1:7; 1 Peter 1:2). The phrase

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consists of the customary Greek greeting word *charis* (grace) and the Hebrew greeting word *shalom* (peace). In the New Testament, “grace and peace” is more than just a casual greeting. The order of these two words is always “grace and peace,” never “peace and grace.”¹ Robert H. Mounce points out that this is because “grace is the divine favor” bestowed upon human beings and “peace is that state of spiritual well-being that follows as a result.”²

The givers of grace and peace are the Three Persons of the Godhead. The first mentioned is God the Father, referred to as “the One who is, and who was, and who is coming” (Revelation 1:4; cf. Revelation 4:8). This tripartite title echoes the divine name “I am who I am,” which interpreted the Old Testament covenant name *Yahweh* and pointed to God’s eternal existence (Exodus 3:14, NASB).

The Second Person in the Trinity is called “the seven Spirits” (Revelation 1:4; cf. Revelation 4:5; 5:6). This name refers to the Holy Spirit, with seven being a number of fullness. The Old Testament background of this identification is the sevenfold designation of the Spirit, found in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 11:2, 3.³ In Zechariah 4, the seven lamps symbolize the universal activity of the Holy Spirit in the world (verse 2). In Revelation, “the seven Spirits” parallel the seven churches in which the Spirit operates. The phrase represents the fullness and universality of the Holy Spirit’s work in the church, enabling the church to fulfill its calling.

The list concludes with Jesus Christ, who is identified with a threefold title: “The faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5a). This threefold title echoes Psalm 89, in which the Davidic king is the firstborn of Yahweh, the exalted king on earth, and the faithful witness for Yahweh (Psalm 89:27, 37). These three titles of Jesus in Revelation 1:5a correspond to His titles of Prophet, Priest, and King. By virtue of His faithful witness during His earthly sojourn, Jesus has received the honor of the firstborn and has been exalted to the highest rank, above all powers and authority in heaven and on earth (Ephesians 1:20–22; 1 Peter 3:22).

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Having stated Jesus' true identity, John then describes what Jesus does (Revelation 1:5b, 6). This threefold activity corresponds to His three titles. In the original text, "[He] loves us" is an ongoing activity: He loves us continually. This love embraces equally the past, the present, and the future. The One who loves us has loosed us from our sins by His blood. In the original text, the verb "loosed" refers to the completed act in the past. On the cross, Jesus died and released us from our sins forever.

Revelation tells us not only what Christ has done for us but also what we may become in Him. He has made us "a kingdom, priests to His God and Father" (verse 6; cf. Revelation 5:9, 10). The redeemed enjoy this status because of what Christ did on the cross of Calvary. This status, originally promised to ancient Israel, was realized in their redemption from the slavery of Egypt and the promise that they would be His kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5, 6). This privileged title is now offered to the Christian church as the true Israel of God (1 Peter 2:9, 10). What was offered to Israel as a future promise, is now offered to Christians based on what Christ did in the past.

The keynote of the book (1:7, 8)

In concluding the prologue, John directs attention to the keynote of the letter: the return of Jesus in majesty and glory. He employs wording from Daniel 7:13 (coming with the clouds) and Zechariah 12:10 (whom they have pierced and they will mourn for Him) as well as the words of Matthew 24:30 from Jesus' Olivet discourse (coming on the clouds of the sky and all the tribes of the earth will mourn). John wants us to understand that Christ's coming is rooted in biblical prophecy and in Christ's promise to come again.

In the New Testament, Christ always refers to His coming with the words "I am coming" rather than "I will come." The futuristic present tense refers to the future event as already occurring, thus demonstrating the certainty of Christ's promise to come again. This certainty is affirmed with the statement "Yes, amen" (Revelation 1:7). In Greek, it reads as "*Nai*, amen."

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Nai is a Greek word that means “amen,” which is a Hebrew affirmative. When combined, the two words express an emphatic affirmation. This affirmation also concludes the book: “ ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

This text refers to the literal and personal coming of Christ in majesty and glory. In this way, Revelation is in line with the teaching of the rest of the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible does it teach an invisible and secret coming of Christ. On the contrary, every human will witness Him coming, and this includes “those who pierced Him” (Revelation 1:7). Nobody will be exempt. While His coming brings deliverance to those waiting for Him, it will bring judgment to those who have spurned His mercy and love.

The certainty of the Second Coming is rooted in the fact that it has been promised by God Himself, the great “I AM,” who is “the Alpha and the Omega . . . the One who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). A promise is as strong as the person giving the promise. It is as certain as the integrity and ability of the person to do what he or she says. In the Bible, the promise to come again is given by the God of the universe—a God who has always kept His promises.

1. Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 23.

2. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 68.

3. Lancelot C. L. Brenton, trans., *The Septuagint With Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986).