

# Revelation: A New Testament Apocalypse

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The Greek name of the book of Revelation, *Apocalypse*, is probably the most important clue to interpreting this last book of the New Testament. Since this work belongs to the literary genre of apocalypse, it bears many identifying marks of apocalyptic eschatology: revelatory visions about the end time; portrayal of messianic woes, including battles between powers of good and evil; destruction of this world and its evils; final judgment with just reward for the righteous and the unrighteous; and numerous symbols.

The bizarre symbolism of Revelation holds great fascination for many today, perhaps because the present time seems to be an age of “messianic woes” such as international conflicts, uncontrollable diseases, and natural disasters. Though many have interpreted the symbols of Revelation as predictions for the twenty-first century, there is no need to look beyond its own historical situation for interpretation. As with other books of the Bible, understanding emerges from placing the book in its own historical, theological, and literary contexts. In fact, in some cases, the meanings of symbols are explained within the book itself.

Revelation was composed ca. 95 CE, during or shortly after a persecution of Christians. The Roman Caesar Domitian was revered as a god in some parts of the empire; there is no evidence that he required such worship universally, but in some areas, especially Asia Minor, local governors demanded it as a sign of patriotic loyalty. The author of Revelation situates himself in this region, and John’s community seems to have been suffering effects of local persecution of Christians who refused to worship the emperor as divine. The author, who calls himself “John” (1:9), cannot be identified; most scholars today agree that he is neither John the apostle, who most likely had died by this time, nor John the evangelist, whose language and theology are somewhat different from that of Revelation. Some suggest that the author may have been part of the Johannine community, but this is far from certain.

The major themes of Revelation address an audience experiencing persecution and death, offering the encouragement and hope of all apocalyptic literature. Three related emphases or themes might be summarized thus:

1. Christ will soon come in full glory, bringing the final age to completion; in the final judgment, good will be rewarded, evil punished.
2. Have hope and courage in the face of persecution, for Christ is coming soon to judge and reward good and evil as each deserves.
3. For those who are faithful, blessing will follow, but not replace, death.

Revelation can be divided into four sections, outlined below. With this structure in mind, a few comments on major symbols in Revelation follow.



# An Outline of the Book of Revelation

## 1. PROLOGUE (1:1–8)

The author receives a revelation of the future with a vision of Christ, the resurrected Son of Man alive in God: “Behold, he is coming amid the clouds, and every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7).

## 2. SEVEN LETTERS TO SEVEN CHURCHES (1:9–3:22)

After commanding the author to write down his vision of what will happen soon, the risen Christ reassures John and so his audience: “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld” (Rev 1:17–18).

Christ then instructs John to write a letter to each of seven churches in Asia Minor. (The number *seven*, symbolizing perfection and completeness, appears repeatedly in this vision of God completing the eschaton.) These letters call the churches to follow Christ whole-heartedly, even in the face of persecution, because the risen Christ holds final power over even death. Some letters rebuke certain churches for various failures: turning away from early faithfulness; accommodation to pagan practices; lukewarm commitment to Christian faith. Other letters encourage churches that have remained faithful, even in persecution, promising that Christ will soon come again, bringing the fullness of the eschaton and with it the reward of eternal life.

## 3. SEVEN GROUPS OF VISIONS CONCERNING THE END TIME (4:1–22:5)

(1) Visions of heavenly worship, the scroll with seven seals, and Jesus, triumphant Lamb of God

(2) Vision of seven trumpets: messianic woes

(3) Struggle between the woman and the dragon

(4) The beasts with whom the dragon shares power: beast of the sea and beast of the earth

(5) Seven plagues of judgment

(6) The fall of “Babylon,” the “harlot”

(7) Christ, “King of kings and Lord of lords,” defeats the Beast; those who were faithful in persecution come to life again and reign with Christ “for a thousand years” in the new, heavenly Jerusalem.



#### 4. EPILOGUE (22:6–21)

The risen Christ once more assures the author, “I am coming soon,” and the writer responds, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).

## Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

Because many symbols in Revelation are interpreted in different ways today, the following discussion focuses on the second half of the book and its elaborate symbolism. As will be evident at this point in exploring the Bible, a contextual approach interprets this book, as any biblical text, in its own historical, theological, and literary setting. The key to numerous symbols in Revelation lies within the apocalyptic book itself and its context of religious persecution. Once these are taken into account, the original author’s meaning for his audience emerges.

A preliminary reminder about number symbolism in the Bible provides beginning insight. Throughout the Bible, certain numbers reappear as sacred, particularly seven, ten, and twelve. Seven and ten usually indicate completion or perfection, while twelve points to the ancient tribes of Israel. Since this book is apocalyptic literature, focusing primarily on the end of this world and the final age of salvation, numbers symbolizing perfection and completion are appropriate.

Biblical authors often multiply sacred numbers to intensify meaning. In the Gospels, for example, Jesus tells Peter he must forgive “seventy-seven times” (Matt 18:22), combining two “perfect” numbers. In other words, Peter must put no limit on forgiveness. Revelation speaks of one hundred forty-four thousand who are saved and belong to the new age (7:4); this represents a multiple of the number of the tribes of Israel (twelve) and a perfect number (ten). Thus the number of the saved points to a new Israel, the church of the new and perfect age. Readers of Revelation also need to be aware that the ancient world represented numbers with letters of the alphabet, so numbers could stand for names of people or places. Such use of numbers also appears in Revelation, as seen below.

## The Woman, the Dragon, the Beasts

The second half of the book includes classic elements of apocalyptic thinking: cosmic battle between powers of good and evil, final destruction of evil and a new age in which God rules, final judgment presided over by the enthroned Messiah, and lasting punishment of evil and reward of the righteous. Chapter 12 depicts a dragon, identified as Satan (v. 9), pursuing a woman about to give birth. The woman represents the church, laboring to bring Christ into the world. After a great battle in the heavens between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his forces, Satan is cast down to earth where he continues to make war on the woman and her offspring. Here John depicts his audience’s life situation: Christians suffering under Roman persecution for refusal to worship the emperor as a god.

In chapter 13, the author’s situation is symbolically described in greater detail. As the eschatological battle between good and evil continues, a great beast rises out of the sea. This beast, which receives authority from the dragon, is worshipped by many and makes war on God’s people. A second beast rises from the earth, putting to death anyone who will not worship the first beast as a god. Again, the historical situation of the late first century is clearly symbolized: the Roman Empire, urged on by Satan, expected citizens to worship the emperor as divine; Christians who refused were put to death. The beast from the sea represents the Roman Empire, while the beast from the land represents the local Roman



establishment in Asia Minor, insisting that people worship the first beast (i.e., worship the emperor); the author presents them as agents of Satan in his war against God. Revelation refers to the first beast with the number “666, a number that stands for a person” (Rev 13:18). Identity of this person is debatable, but in Hebrew number symbolism, 666 could refer to Caesar Nero. His persecutions, beginning 64 CE, cost the lives of many Christians, including the apostles Peter and Paul. The number 666 might also point to the imperfection of Rome’s leaders, since this number falls short of a perfect 777.

In chapter 14, the messianic Son of Man appears with a sickle in his hand, to begin cutting the harvest over the whole earth; harvest is a common biblical symbol for the eschaton. Symbolically, the message is clear: this world will soon end, which means that final judgment is not far off. Just as at harvest time farmers separate good wheat from stalks, God’s judgment will distinguish between good and evil people, rewarding each as they deserve. Faithful Christians who endure even death for their faith will be rewarded, while those who persecuted them will be condemned to lasting punishment. Apocalyptic visions continue through the next several chapters, showing God’s wrath poured out upon the world’s evils.

Defeat of evil reaches its climax in chapters 17–18, with the downfall and punishment of “Babylon,” the “harlot.” Babylon, an empire that brought destruction to God’s people long ago, is used by the New Testament author to symbolize an empire threatening the new Israel, the church. The harlot “Babylon” clearly represents the Roman Empire. Revelation 17:9 refers to “seven hills upon which the woman sits”; the city of Rome, capital of the empire, was well-known as the city built on seven hills.

## Just Rewards for Good and Evil

“Babylon,” or Rome, falls before the power of the slaughtered but resurrected Lamb of God, Christ appearing in full glory as “King of kings and Lord of lords.” In Revelation 19 he appears on a white horse, calling all to judgment. Then an angel of the Lord seizes the dragon, Satan, chaining him for a thousand years. But all the faithful who refused to worship the beast, those who died rather than deny Christ by bowing to the emperor, “came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (Rev 20:4). In both cases the thousand years, a multiple of the perfect number ten, symbolizes eternity. This meaning is confirmed when the author states that the devil “was thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:10).

After a climactic struggle between good and evil, destruction of this world and its evils, and judgment resulting in reward and punishment, the book comes to a close with a beautiful vision of the new age. Chapters 21–22 describe “a new heaven and a new earth” and a glorious new Jerusalem. John portrays fulfillment of Isaiah’s ancient promise of new creation when God brings history to its culmination: the risen Christ, the “one who sat on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new’” (Rev 21:5).

## Key Messages of Revelation

Readers who realize the apocalyptic character of Revelation already have major clues about its primary message. In its historical context, the book’s symbolism clearly depicts the situation of first-century Christians suffering under Roman persecution; the author intends to encourage these Christians by offering a vision of the ultimate end beyond death. The fundamental message of Revelation is that of most apocalyptic writings: in the future, God will put an end to things as they are and bring a new and better future. In this new age of God, every evil, even death, will be destroyed and the faithful will be rewarded; therefore, remain true to God in the face of all opposition or persecution. For obvious reasons, Christian funerals often use readings from the book of Revelation. Its message can still speak of hope and courage



in the struggle to live Christian life in a world of contrary values. To this day, Revelation proclaims that the God who raised Jesus holds ultimate power over human history, even over death. "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

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