

REVELATION



Date of composition: between A.D. 92 and 96 at the end of the Emperor Domitian's reign. Written to churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Author: The Book of Revelation (or the Apocalypse) has traditionally been ascribed to St. John the Apostle. While absolute certainty is not possible, it is clear that St. John was the great authority in Asia Minor until the end of the first century, and would have at least inspired Johannine writings at that time. Any final redaction of his thought may have been carried out by disciples of St. John, including one named **“John”** in 1:1.

Purpose: The author wrote to encourage Christians in Asia Minor to remain steadfast in the faith. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Church was in a transitional and therefore a vulnerable period, trying to establish a firm structure and a sense of identity. For example, Christians were finding it increasingly difficult to avoid government pressure to take part in pagan rituals. As such, children saw their parents imprisoned or killed because their parents' faith made it impossible for them to yield to the imperial religion. Also, many Christians had become disillusioned because Jesus had not yet returned in glory. John commits to writing what he sees and hears in the vision to assure Christians that Rome will not ultimately conquer, that a glorious future of happiness and peace awaits those who suffer with patient endurance. Note: The Book of Revelation was intended to be read aloud all at once during liturgical celebrations so that its meaning could be grasped as a whole, and not verse by verse. (1:3).

God speaks to the church and the city (1:1—3:22)

“Asia” is the Roman province where Paul and his co-workers established churches during the mid-first century. During this time, John was exiled to the penal island of Patmos (1:9-10), where he received supernatural assurances in a vision. As the vision unfolds, John beholds the risen Jesus standing **“in the midst of the lampstands”** (1:12-13). These **“seven golden lampstands”** symbolize the local churches in this part of Asia Minor. The vision warns the churches to choose between compromise and faithfulness—the central tension throughout Revelation.

God judges the “Great City;” the Throne Room (4:1—5:14)

John is caught up into the heavenly throne room. Around God are creatures and elders representing all creation and nations who are giving honor and allegiance to the one true God. In God's hand is a scroll with seven wax seals containing the fixed purposes of God, that is, how God's Kingdom will come on earth as in Heaven.

No one is qualified to open the scroll until John finally hears of the One who can. It is **“the Lion of the tribe of Judah”** and the **“Root of David”** (5:5; Genesis 49:9; Isaiah 11:1). These are classic Old

Testament descriptions of the messianic king who would bring about God's kingdom through military conquest. However, what John sees is a sacrificed, bloody Lamb, standing ready to open the scroll.

This symbol of Jesus as the slain lamb is essential for understanding Revelation. John is saying that the Old Testament promise of God's future Kingdom was inaugurated *through* the crucified Messiah. Jesus' death on the Cross was his enthronement and the defeat of evil. The slain Lamb then begins to open the scroll, a gesture of his divine authority to guide history to its conclusion.

Following are three cycles of sevens: seven seals (6:1-8:1), seven trumpets (8:6-11:19), and seven bowls (15:5 – 16:21). Each cycle depicts God's kingdom and justice coming upon earth as in heaven. Here John intermingles visions of catastrophe with heartening pictures of the victory already won and still to come.

The Heavenly Worship: Opening the Sealed Scroll (6:1-8:1)

When the Lamb opens the seals of the scrolls, catastrophic violence is unleashed upon the earth. In the face of such terrors, the community confesses it does not control the universe and its destiny. None of the violence in these chapters is actual, but a glimpse of the future expressed in figurative language (9:7).

When the Lamb opens the scroll's first four seals, John sees four horsemen (cf. Zechariah 1:8) who symbolize times of war, conquest, famine, and death. The first is a white horse ridden by an Archer who is "crowned." This can mean only one thing in the imagination of the first-century listener—the dreaded Parthians (Iran). The Parthians—who were never subdued by Rome—were the only mounted archers in the first century who traditionally rode white horses. The image of victorious Parthians announces the beginning of the end of Rome, to be replaced by God's rightful sovereignty (11:15-19). The second horseman on a red horse represents war and bloodshed. The peace of Rome disappears and is replaced by internal violence (6:3-4). The third horseman on a black horse brings famine. The poor suffer but the wealthy continue to live as usual (" . . . **but do not harm oil and wine**," 6:6). The fourth horseman on a "**pale**" horse and trailed by the world of the dead, represents violent death by sword, famine, plague, and wild animals.

The four horsemen are not independent agents of destruction; they are permitted. For God/Christ are the actors hidden in the repeated verb, "**it was given**" (6:4). The conquering power of the rider on the white horse is the worldly power of death, not the true power of the Lamb who dies for others.

The fifth seal: the cry of the martyrs (6:9-11)

In John's understanding the death of Christians is not meaningless tragedy but sacrifice (Leviticus 17:11, 14). Imitating Christ, believers are not taken to heaven to escape suffering, but enter through their suffering and death. Christians who cry "**How long?**" (6:10) are encouraged to persevere in their witness, even unto death.

The sixth seal: the cosmos shakes at God's approach (6:12-17)

The people cry out, "**Who can stand before it**" (6:17)? This is the typical outcry for the end of history with its worldly catastrophes, culminating in the breakdown of the entire universe: stars fall and the sun and moon no longer function. It is the demolition of the world; all self-justifying confidence is removed.

Interlude: the Church militant and triumphant (7:1-17)

The signet ring provides a mark of protection on God's servants, signifying ownership. Christians belong to God who protects them during the Judgement. Placed on the forehead, it symbolizes one's open, visible allegiance to the Lamb (Christ). To John's listeners, the number of those sealed (144,000) is stunningly large. Along with "myriad" (literally, 10,000), "thousand" is the largest numerical unit in the Bible. Twelve thousand times twelve (the twelve Tribes of Israel), indicates that the Church is not only great but it is complete, and that the Church is the continuation of Israel.

John turns and sees the multitude of God's people from all over the world, fulfilling God's ancient promise to Abraham. This multiethnic "army" of the Lamb can stand before God because they have been redeemed by his blood. Those who have "conquered" are dressed in the white robes of the victors; for their martyrdom is seen only from its heavenward side of victory.

Heavenly worship: sounding the seven trumpets (8:1 – 10:11)

Finally, the Lamb's scroll is opened. The seventh and final seal is broken and there is only silence. The subsequent trumpet blasts recall the plagues sent upon Egypt; and the nations do not repent just as Pharaoh did not repent.

Measuring the temple (11:1-19)

John measures the temple because that which is measured is assured of God's protection. John is using the new temple as a symbol for God's new covenant people, just as the other apostles did (1 Corinthians 3:16; Hebrews 3:6). The persecution of Christians will not cancel their victory through the Lamb.

This idea is elaborated in the scroll's second vision. God appoints two witnesses as prophetic representatives to the nations. These "**lampstands**" represent the Church and must bear living and perpetual witness to Christ (Acts 1:8). Then a horrible beast appears who kills the witnesses (Daniel 7:1-8). But God brings them back to life and vindicates them before their persecutors.

The Lamb's scroll shows that God's Kingdom is revealed when the nations see the Church imitating the Sacrifice of the Lamb and loving her enemies. It is God's mercy, shown through the Church, that will move the nations to repentance. Then the last trumpet sounds and the glad announcement is proclaimed in heaven that God, the rightful Sovereign of the universe, has now begun his reign.

Exposé of the powers of evil (12:1 – 16:21)

The first sign reveals the cosmic, spiritual battle behind the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians. The woman reflects the historical experience of the people of God throughout history (Israel and the Church), yet she is also the cosmic woman—close to the sun with the moon under her feet and crowned with twelve stars—who brings forth the Messiah and is thus perceived as Mary, the Blessed Mother.

By identifying the "red dragon" with Satan, John symbolizes all the anti-God forces from Eden onward, whatever they may be called. As the dragon waits to devour the newborn child, all the forces of evil in this world and beyond, are concentrated against this saving act of God. The child is born and taken up to God—so quickly does the story move from the Messiah's birth to death and Resurrection. By dying, Jesus defeated the dragon and was exalted to God's right hand. John is showing the seven churches that neither Rome nor any other nation or human being is the real enemy. For the dark spiritual powers at work are conquered only when Jesus' followers remain faithful.

John combines into one image various characteristics of the four beasts in Daniel 7. The beast is the Roman empire, the archetype of secular powers that persecute the church. The seven heads represent the seven hills of Rome and seven kings. The mark of the beast—666—indicates those who oppose God and align with a corrupt system. While John does not say, it is generally believed that 666 represents the Emperor Nero, whose name—following the ancient practice of *gematria* to numbers that assigns numbers to letters—is 666. Standing opposed to the dragon is the slain Lamb who bears the marks of slaughter but still lives. The beasts from the earth and sea (13:1,11) "conquer," but their "conquering" is by the power of the sword. The real power is of Christ who conquers by love expressed in his own death.

Then John sees two harvests. One is a grain harvest where the King gathers up his faithful people. The other is a harvest of wine grapes, representing humanity's intoxication with evil that is to be taken to the wine press and trampled. The choice before the seven churches is clear: resist Babylon and follow the Lamb, or follow the beast and suffer its defeat.

John then replays a final cycle of seven divine judgments symbolized as seven bowls, but the people resist and curse God just as Pharaoh did. With the sixth bowl, the dragon and beasts gather the nations together to make war against God's people in Armageddon, a plain in northern Israel where many battles had been fought against invading armies (Judith 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29). John is not predicting historical events of the future, but giving an inspired interpretation of events in his own time. John's "battle of Armageddon" is not a date or a place on a map, but the climax of God's final Judgment when the kings of the East, including the feared Parthians, wage a final assault. Yet John pulls back from actually describing the destruction of Rome; for this final destruction of the symbol of worldly evil is God's own work, and in principle was already accomplished in Christ's death and Resurrection. Yet Christians are to stay awake.

“Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed” (16:15)! Note: A man wore loose fitting robes at the time, and so when he walked quickly or ran or climbed stairs, his robe could become untied and fall open. Staying clothed in a spiritual sense means believers need to be careful about their behavior.

The fall of Babylon (17:1-19:10)

Now the angel takes John into the wilderness, which has always been a place of refuge for the People of God. From this perspective John sees Rome as a woman, **“drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (17:6)**. In fact, not only in pagan but in the Jewish tradition, it was common to personify a city as a woman: Jerusalem the virgin (Isaiah 37:22); the faithful wife and mother (Isaiah 66:7-14); the married woman who became unfaithful (Ezekiel 16); and the harlot (Isaiah 23).

After repeatedly picturing the Rome as an embodiment of the beast, John gives a picture in which the beast and its allies (the ten kings, 18:12) turn on Rome and destroy it. Evil is not only judged and destroyed by God, evil itself is self-destructive (17:15-17).

Final victory (19 - 20:7-15)

Until now the Day of the Lord has been depicted with fire, earthquake or harvest. Now worship is the dominating note of the concluding vision. The hallelujah chorus is sung by the **“great multitude,”** reminiscent of the triumphant Church of faithful martyrs already in heaven (19:1).

Notice that the King (**“Faithful and True”** 19:11) is covered with blood before the battle begins (19:13). The blood is his own. Jesus shed his blood for his enemies, and holds accountable those who refuse to repent for the destruction they have caused in the world.

In the final battle that results in the vindication of the martyrs (20:1-6), the militaristic imagery may seem too alien to be applied to Jesus, the Prince of peace. However, the King of kings destroys his enemies not with an actual sword but with his Word, the Word of God which he himself is (Isaiah 11:4; 49:2).

John sees Gog and Magog (evil forces opposed to the people of God, 20:8; Ezekiel chap. 38-39) as operating under the sway of the ultimate power of evil, Satan, who must be released to deceive the nations and gather them for the last battle. That is, evil must be *magnified* before being destroyed forever. Yet the “last battle” is no battle at all, but a picture of the essential nature of the embattled Church.

The dragon, Babylon, and all those who choose them are eternally quarantined, never again able to spoil God’s new creation. Lastly there emerges a vision of the heavenly marriage of a **“new heaven and a new earth”** (21:1-22:9).

The new Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)

John portrays the End as the victorious return of a Mighty Conqueror amidst the last battle, the binding of Satan, and the thousand-year celebration of Christ with his followers on a liberated earth. The vision is of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, a Golden city. There is no temple in the City because God as the Lamb is himself the temple and the place of the divine-human encounter. John envisions salvation as a world in which all that is human is taken up and transformed. This City-without-a-temple ultimately redeems and makes worthwhile every effort to strive for a just and fulfilling society.

The vision ends (22:6-20)

The heavenly vision ends on the majestic strains of the hallelujah chorus (22:5). With these words John gives the worshipers the needed transition back to the familiar church setting of Asia. John gives a stern reminder to his listeners of the choice they must make to worship and obey (22:14-15). Finally, John joins the worshipping congregations in the liturgical prayer for Christ to come in power, **“Come, Lord Jesus”** (22:20)!

The Book of Revelation

(the Apocalypse)

Images and Symbols

Apocalyptic was a significant style of writing in the ancient world, particularly in Jewish and early Christian traditions (e.g., the Book of Daniel, chapters. 7-12). Such works typically include symbolic visions, heavenly journeys, cosmic battles, and divine judgment. The often fantastic imagery found in such texts does not reflect the physical world, but is used to invoke a sense of wonder of the new order to come.

These visions from heavenly messengers tell of both past and present events, as well as events that are to occur, which gives a sense of urgency to the message. Though at times the message is quite bleak, the future to behold is far more positive: a complete and universal reformation of all that God has created.

In the midst of the lampstands

one like a son of man (1:13) the seven lampstands are the seven churches representing all the churches in Asia Minor; Jesus is present among the churches, fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 7:13.

Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 21:6) the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the beginning and the end.

Seven Stars (1:16, 20) Caesars were often represented with seven stars in their right hands in order to affirm their universal domination. Not Caesar but Christ is the Lord of all things.

Two-edged Sword (1:16) the word of Christ who judges Christianity and the universe.

Four living creatures (4:7) represent all of creation: lion—nobility; ox—strength; creature with face of a man—wisdom; eagle—swiftness.

Scroll with Seven Seals (5:1) the scroll is perfectly sealed: no one can know or modify its contents. God's divine plan of salvation and judgment is revealed and fulfilled by Christ alone.

Four Horsemen (6:1-8) symbolize conquest, war, famine, and death – realities of human history under sin, allowed but restrained.

Seal of God (7:3) recalling Ezekiel 9:4, according to custom, a signet ring's seal was impressed on whatever was under the lord's protection (usually the Hebrew letter "tau" or ט).

144,000 (7:4) symbolic number representing the fullness of God's people (12 tribes of Israel x 12 Apostles X 1000 = perfection).

Seven trumpets (chap. 8-11) God's thunderous judgment as on Mt. Sinai, calling the world to repentance.

Woman clothed with the sun (12:1) the Blessed Virgin Mary, the woman who remains exposed to the dragon's hatred even after her son has been enthroned. She is a concretization of the law of suffering and renunciation, which marks the road to salvation.

Dragon (12:3)	The epitome of the forces of evil opposition to God.
Beast from the sea (13:1)	the Roman Empire, the archetype of secular power that persecutes the Church.
Beast from the earth (13:11)	personification of the Antichrist, embodied in the pagan priesthood that sought to draw all worship to the Emperor.
666 (13:18)	Most likely Nero, who was the first emperor to persecute Christians, and who embodied all the worst characteristics of the Beast.
Seven last plagues (15:1)	the definitive manifestation of God's anger.
Sea of glass, fire (15:2)	glass symbolizes the infinite distance that separates God from all creation; fire symbolizes God's demand for holiness.
Seven bowls (16:1)	recalls the plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7-12).
New heaven and earth (21:1)	creation must be renewed or refashioned to be suitable for redeemed humanity (Isaiah 65:17).

