

Yale Bible Study
The Book of Revelation
Introduction

The early Christian movement, born on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and growing around the shores of the Mediterranean, was rooted in the proclamation by Jesus of Nazareth that the Reign of God was near at hand. That proclamation was rooted in traditional Jewish hopes for liberation from oppression, the Exodus experience that lay at the heart of Israel's sacred story. The forces that oppressed Israel in the first century of the common era consisted of a complex array of political and economic realities. Over them all stood the military might of the Roman empire, which had extended its sway over the land of Israel in 63 BCE, when Pompey's legions intervened in a local civil war between descendants of the Hasmoneans. Since that conquest, Rome had been initially content to rule through a client king, first the last Hasmoneans, and then, after 40 BCE Herod the Great and his heirs. By Jesus' time, Rome had assumed direct control over the heart of the ancient land of Israel, Jerusalem and the areas of Judea and Samaria. Herod's sons, Herod Antipas and Philip, ruled as Tetrarchs in the north, in Galilee, southern Lebanon and what is now known as the Golan heights. They followed in the footsteps of their father and engaged in a process of modernization, or what we might call "globalization" of their territories. The land of Israel was unified briefly under Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I, but then Rome resumed its direct administration after his death in 44 CE. A series of Roman procurators confronted an increasingly restive people until revolt erupted in 66 CE. That revolt resulted in disaster for the people of Israel. A massive Roman force under command of Vespasian invaded the land and first subdued Galilee and the Golan. Imperial politics delayed the campaign. The emperor Nero, last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, whose increasingly erratic

behavior undermined confidence in his rule, committed suicide in 68. Leading generals decided that it was time for a major change and for a brief period, four contenders wrestled for imperial power. The last one standing was Vespasian, who returned to Rome and left his son, Titus, in charge of the campaign in Israel. It was Titus who then supervised the siege of Jerusalem that preceded its destruction and the burning of the Temple in 70 CE. Rome had proven itself to be more than a new Egypt, keeping the people of Israel in bondage. It was a new Babylon, the imperial power that had devastated Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE.

The political situation that led to the watershed moment of 70 CE and the desolation that followed it generated an array of literature that expressed hopes for liberation as it condemned the forces inimical to the wellbeing of Israel. This “apocalyptic” literature was rooted in ancient prophecy, such as Ezekiel and Zechariah, with their symbolic portrayals of contemporary political reality. Apocalyptic literature was also heir to imaginative works such as the Books of Enoch, which described heavenly journeys and explored fundamental theological issues such as the cause of sin and corruption. Many of these texts find echoes in the pages of the Book of Revelation, but foremost among the predecessors of the New Testament’s “apocalypse” is the Book of Daniel, also a product of a critical time in Israel’s history. Written around 164 BCE, Daniel told tales of a Jewish visionary at the Persian court who predicted the events of the second century, the attempt by the Greek king Antiochus IV Epiphanes to suppress traditional Jewish practice, and his eventual demise. Those visions used imagery of beastly empires that tried so suppress the people of Israel, symbolically represented by a “Son of Man” or “Human Being.” Daniel’s hopes that the defilement of the Temple in his day would be rectified were fulfilled when Antiochus IV reversed his policies shortly before his death. The success of Daniel’s prophecy gained it a place among the texts that the people of Israel revered.

Followers of Jesus, grounded in his proclamation of God's inbreaking reign, participated in the hopes for liberation of their day, and, like other heirs of Israel's heritage, expressed their anxieties and their judgments on contemporary history in the symbolic forms of visionary, "apocalyptic" literature. Passages in the Gospels and in Paul attest to their hopes and fears, such as the "Synoptic Apocalypse" of Mark 13, or Paul's consolation to his converts in Thessalonica that the "dead in Christ" would be the first to greet him on his return (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The Book of Revelation is the one major example of a literary "apocalypse" that frames its message of judgment and hope in the symbolism of visionary literature.

The date of the book of Revelation is debated. Second-century tradition places it in the last decade of the first century, under the emperor Domitian, the second son of Vespasian, who was assassinated in 96 CE. Some elements within the book, such as the symbolic list of "kings" of what must be Rome in chapter 17, suggest a date of composition at the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome, after the suicide of Nero, but before Vespasian gained control over the empire, but the depiction of Rome as a new "Babylon" seems to indicate a date after the destruction of Jerusalem. It may be that the author of the book used earlier prophetic pronouncements in his final product.

Tradition identifies the author of the book, who tells us his name was "John" (Rev 1:1, 4, 9), with John the Son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve disciples of Jesus, whom tradition also connects with the Fourth Gospel. That identification has led to the inclusion of the book of Revelation in the corpus of "Johannine" texts. Imagery associated with the visionary of this book has also been used to depict the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel, often assumed to be the Beloved Disciple, John the Son of Zebedee. It is, however, highly unlikely that the Gospel and Revelation were written by the same hand. There are too many marked differences in the use of

Greek in the two works to have come from the same author and the two works display very different forms of belief in Christ. Some readers have suspected that the John of Revelation was the Son of Zebedee, and that the Gospel was written by some disciple or group of disciples. This suggestion seems unlikely in light of the way the author of Revelation refers to the Church as an entity founded on the Twelve Apostles (Rev 21:14). Although other readings are possible, it seems most likely that the author here refers to a group of witnesses of the past.

Whoever the author was, his situation is somewhat easier to discern. The book begins (1:4-3:22) with a series of “messages” to seven local churches in the Roman province of Asia, i.e., Western Turkey (or Asia Minor). These messages suggest that the author was addressing a community of believers in Jesus who felt very keenly the oppressive regime of local aristocrats, who supported and benefitted economically from imperial Roman power. These followers of Jesus understood themselves, like many others in their day, to be members of the people of Israel, whatever in fact their genealogies may have been, and some probably were of Gentile origin (cf. 14:6). They stood in opposition to others who claimed Jewish heritage, the “Synagogue of Satan,” who were probably Jews who rejected claims that Jesus was the Messiah. They also were in tension with another group, who were probably believers in Jesus the Messiah like themselves, but who had a different attitude toward participation in the culture of the Greek cities of Asia Minor. The author refers to them symbolically as followers of Balaam and Jezebel. Their fault was to “eat meat sacrificed to idols” and “fornication” (Rev 2:14, 20), probably a symbolic reference to a practice that the author considered idolatrous. These rivals sound a good deal like the believers whom Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians, and perhaps they were Christians who had been influenced by something like Paul’s version of the Gospel.

This community of followers of Jesus in the Roman province of Asia had suffered some persecution and at least one of their number had been martyred (Rev 2:13), perhaps for refusing to participate in worship of the Rome and the emperor. The community also knew of the destruction of Jerusalem by that same imperial power. The sometimes poetic, sometimes bizarre visions of the Book of Revelation speak to the situation of those followers of Jesus. They offer an interpretation of the difficult realities of the present situation by placing them within a framework defined by three points of reference, God's present sovereignty over all that is, the victory of Jesus over the powers of evil in his death and resurrection, an event of the past that shapes the present, and the future manifestation of God's sovereignty and Christ's victory in a world restored to its pristine form. While eschatological hope looms large in this complex vision, John the seer also affirms that the divine victory can already be experienced in the community founded on the witness of Jesus and his apostles. That community testifies to the truth that it knows whatever the cost, sharing in the victory that the lamb has won.

The book that conveys this message displays a clear, if complex, structure, built on sequences of sevens: seven messages to churches (ch. 2-3), a heavenly scroll with seven seals (ch. 6-7), seven angels blowing their trumpets (8-9), seven visions, each introduced by the same formula, "and I saw" (ch. 12-14), seven angels who pour out the contents of seven bowls (ch. 16) and another set of seven visions, each introduced by the "and I saw" formula (ch. 19-21). Many of the visions in these sequences consist of pictures of gloom and doom, and declarations of judgment on the sinful. Interspersed with these visions are special vignettes: of a heavenly liturgy (ch. 4-5), of Jerusalem besieged (ch. 11), of the peaceful "glassy sea" of heaven (ch. 15), of a harlot on a beast (ch. 17-18), symbolizing Rome, and of a bride, symbolizing the Church. The material in the first half of the book is woven together with references to a sequence of three

“woes.” The first two are explicitly identified (9:12; 11:14). The third is not, leaving the sequence open to what lies outside the text. Also interwoven with the visions are poetic interludes, like choruses in a Greek drama that offer important interpretive comments on the visions. Appearing at 11:15-18; 12:10-11; and 19:1-8, these are particularly important articulations of the claims of the book that the decisive divine victory has already been won.

Reading the Book of Revelation is not a simple process and interpreters have adopted many different strategies for exploring its message. One that is well known in the US today, in part because of the prominence of the “left behind” series and apocalyptic predictions of some evangelical pastors, takes the book as a prophecy of events of our own day. Readers adopting this perspective try to find correspondences between elements of Revelation’s visions and contemporary political or military events. That approach to the book has a long history in Christian circles, although the immediate roots of the most widespread readings of this sort are in Dispensationalism, a movement within English evangelical circles of the early nineteenth century. Rather than understanding the book, which describes itself as prophetic (Rev 1:3) as prophecy in the sense of a set of predictions of end-time events, we suggest that the book is prophecy in a classical sense of proclaiming what the visionary, John, understands to be the word of God for his time. He expresses that word in a complex set of images drawn from Scripture. The word is a message of judgment on the unjust and oppressive structures of the first century, a word of consolation for those who suffer from those structures, and a word of hope for a future that is in the hands of a gracious God whose Son has already achieved victory over evil. Translating that message into a contemporary idiom can be a challenge, but it is well worth the effort.



Further Reading

General Introduction

Justo and Catherine Gonzalez, *Revelation* (Westminster Bible Companion: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 1-11. This book will be used for general orientation throughout this Bible study.

Christopher Rowland, “Revelation,” *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12: 501–736.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Revelation,” in Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, eds., *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 407–27.

The Challenges of Interpretation

David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Interpretation* 38 (1964) 39-50.

Brian Blount, “Reading Revelation Today: Witness as Active Resistance,” *Interpretation* 54 (2000) 398–412.

Adela Yarbro Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986) 229–42.

Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004). ([Available Upon Request from the Yale Divinity School Library](#))