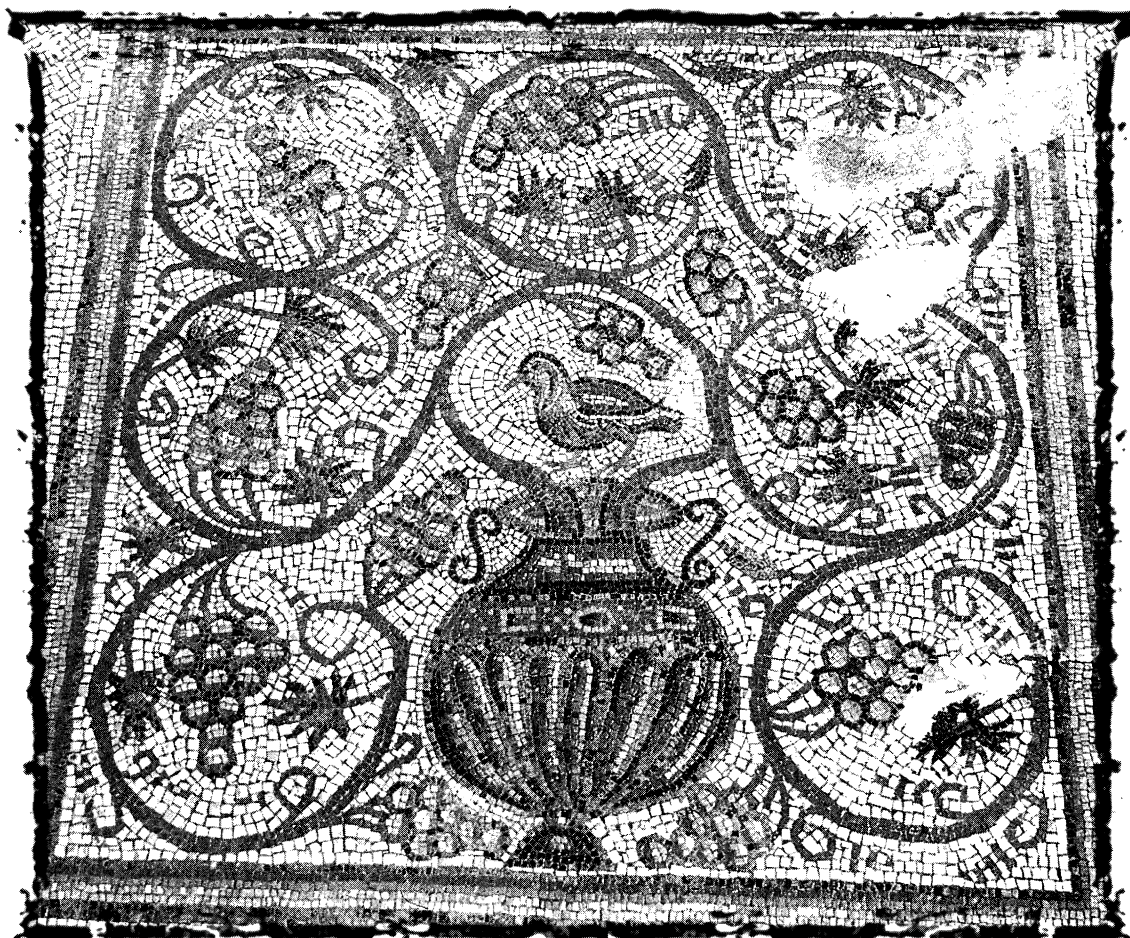


REVELATION



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Mosaic of grapevines from early Christian monastery

The final book in our survey of the Bible is the last book of the New Testament: the Revelation to John. The book's title—Revelation—comes from the opening word of the book. In Greek, this term is *apocalypse*, a word that has become a part of everyday speech in modern times. The word *apocalypse* means “a revealing” or “a making known.” We have come to associate the word *apocalypse* with ideas of the end of time. Revelation does have the end of time as a central theme.

The Revelation to John is the second apocalyptic book in the Protestant Bible. The other is the Old Testament book of Daniel. Although our Bible contains only

two books entirely of this type, Jews and Christians wrote many books in which they revealed hidden mysteries or the future course of history. The century before Christ and the century afterward were very productive times for such works. Several apocalyptic or revelation books from this period have survived. Among them are the books of Enoch, Baruch, and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The apocalyptic book of Second Esdras is part of the Catholic Bible but is not found in Protestant versions. Other biblical books contain apocalyptic segments, such as portions of Ezekiel and Mark.

Before we examine the Revelation to

John, let us mention a few things about apocalyptic literature. In apocalyptic literature a person has visions or is taken on a heavenly journey. In these visions or on this journey the mysteries of life or the future are made known. These mysteries are not presented obviously but are made known in symbols or images. These symbols or images are interpreted to the person by an angel or some heavenly figure.

In Revelation the writer—who calls himself John—has visions. He tells us that he had visions on the Lord’s day while on the island called Patmos. The Romans used this island, which lies off the coast of modern Turkey, as a place of exile for political troublemakers. John tells us he was sent to Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” We are not sure of the identity of John, the writer, since many persons in the early church had this name.

REVELATION 1-3

John sets out to make known what was revealed to him. In the opening verses of the book he stresses the fact that what has been made known is “what must soon take place.” John warns that “the hour of [God’s] judgment has come.” Read Revelation 1:1-3.

Persons write apocalyptic literature believing that the end of the world is near and that the triumph of God over the forces of evil is imminent. These writers want to make known the events between their day and the end. For John the second coming of Christ was near at hand Read Revelation 1:7.

After the introduction we can divide the Revelation into two sections. The first section contains letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. We find these letters in Chapters 2 and 3.

Several issues arise in these letters. The churches are suffering persecution and undergoing stress and trial. Christians are

dying and suffering martyrdom for the faith. However, some of the Christians are giving up their faith or are being tempted to do so. Some of the churches are listening to false teachers. In Revelation 2:20 John refers to “that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”

In John’s letters to the seven churches God challenges the members to remain faithful even in persecution and martyrdom. John views the churches’ conditions as a battle between God and Satan. Finally, Chapter 3 promises a speedy end to the ordeal, with the promise of reward for those who remain faithful and punishment for those who are unfaithful. Read Revelation 3:19-22.

John’s letters to the seven churches in Asia are found in Revelation 2 and 3. Read the verses listed here, and write the names of these seven churches.

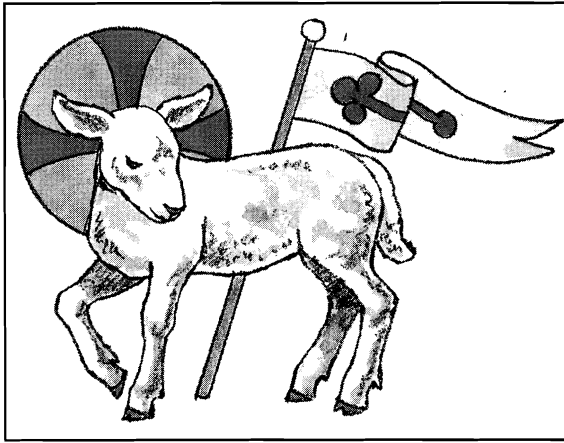
a. (2:1)

b. (2:8)

c. (2:12)

d. (2:18)

e. (3:1)



Revelation 5

f. (3:7)

g. (3:14)

REVELATION 4-5

The second main section of the book begins with Chapter 4 and contains the visions of John, which reveal the church's final triumph. The writer tells us that he is taken to the heavenly world. Read the opening verse of Chapter 4.

John then describes his vision of God seated on the throne, surrounded by twenty-four elders. Seven flaming torches and four creatures that have the forms of a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle are also present. God holds a scroll that is written inside and out, sealed with seven seals. The scroll contains the mysteries of things to come.

In Chapter 5 the writer introduces Jesus, whom he describes as "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." John depicts Jesus as a slain lamb, with seven horns and seven eyes. Only the Lamb is worthy to open the seals on the scroll and make known its mysteries.

1. In Chapter 4 John has a vision of the throne of God in heaven. He sees twenty-four elders and four strange creatures. They sing praises to God in antiphonal fashion. Write the words of praise each group sings:

The four creatures:

The elders:

2. In Chapter 5 the creatures and the elders together sing praises to the Lamb. Then angels take up a part of their praise. Write the praise of angels in verse 12.

REVELATION 6-11

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 contain the account of the breaking of the seals. As the Lamb breaks each seal, some tribulation is loosed. With the first four seals, John sees what have been called the four horsemen of the apocalypse. They represent war, anarchy, famine, and death. With the breaking of the fifth and sixth seals, John sees the souls of martyred saints and disasters in the natural world—earthquakes and darkness. Before the opening of the final seal, the writer describes an angel of God who places a divine seal on the foreheads of the faithful. They number 144,000 or 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. These thousands are joined by a vast throng who shout their praise of God and the Lamb. This multitude are the saved who are delivered from the tribulations.

In Revelation 8:1 the Lamb breaks the final seal, and silence falls upon the heavenly world.

Revelation 8:2 introduces seven angels, each of whom has a trumpet. When they blow these trumpets, disaster strikes the



Revelation 14:14

earth. Chapters 8 through 11 report the sounding of the trumpets and the distress accompanying it.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 contain the account of the breaking of the seals. When the Lamb breaks the seventh seal (Revelation 8:1-5), the blowing of the seven trumpets by angels begins. The seventh trumpet provides the conclusion in 11:15-18. Read this section, and write what the loud voices in heaven said when the trumpet was blown.

REVELATION 12-20

Chapter 12 begins another group of heavenly visions. Here we encounter the figures of the woman, the dragon, and the child. War breaks out in heaven, and Michael and his angels throw Satan out of heaven. On earth, he pursues the woman, who perhaps represents the church. Because of his successful pursuit, the dragon, that is, Satan, wages war on the woman's other offspring—"those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus."

Chapter 13 describes two beasts—one from the sea and one from the earth. John tells us that the second beast's number is 666. The emperor at the time of the writing is Nero. Each Hebrew letter has a numeri-

cal value. If one spells out the name Nero Caesar in Hebrew, the value of the letters equals 666. Read Revelation 13:16-18.

The visions in Chapter 14 and the account of the seven bowls containing the wrath of God in Chapters 15 and 16 lead to the vision of the fall of Babylon, which begins in Chapter 17. John describes Babylon as sitting on seven mountains and as a harlot and a persecutor. No doubt this description is John's understanding of Rome, which was persecuting the church. John identifies the present persecutor of the church in Revelation 17:10—the Emperor Domitian who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96. During his reign, a systematic persecution of Christians began.

The fall of Babylon in Chapter 18 is the prelude to the final triumph of the Lamb, which Chapters 19 and 20 describe. With the triumph of Christ an angel binds Satan for a thousand years and throws him into a pit. After this John depicts the first resurrection from the dead. The faithful who are resurrected will reign with Christ for a millennium, or a thousand years. After this Satan is loosed again. He is defeated a second time and cast into a lake of fire and sulphur to be tormented forever. The general resurrection and the final judgment then follow.

Revelation 20:11-15 describes the great white throne of judgment. Read this section, and answer these questions.

- a. How is the awesomeness of the judge depicted?

- b. Books were opened in this vision. One was the "book of life." What was written in it?

c. What was written in the other books?

REVELATION 21-22

The concluding two chapters, Revelation 21–22, tell about the new heaven and the new earth. A new Jerusalem will descend from heaven. John describes the city as an ideal, pure place. Read Revelation 21:1-8, 21-27.

The Revelation concludes by stating that its words are true and with the warning that no one should add to or take away from its contents. John gives the promise of Jesus, “Surely I am coming soon.”

Revelation 21–22 describes the new heaven and the new earth. Read 21:1-4, and find the answers to the questions below.

- a. In the new creation where will God dwell?

- b. Express in your own words the picture of God and God’s relationship to the people that this passage presents.

SUMMARY

In summary we can say that the writer of the Revelation to John, using all the symbols and imagery of the apocalyptic thought of his day, wrote to Christians who were suffering great persecution. He wrote to encourage their faithfulness, promising them that God was still supreme and that very shortly Christ and the church would triumph. Satan would be destroyed, and the intended creation would come to be.

Five main parts of Revelation that are important to remember are listed here.

- (1) John’s letters to the seven churches in Asia (Revelation 2–3)
- (2) John’s vision of God seated on a throne (Revelation 4)

- (3) The breaking of the seven seals on the scroll (Revelation 6–8)
- (4) John’s vision of the beast from the earth and the beast from the sea (Revelation 13)
- (5) John’s vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21–22)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Revelation 2–3 contains the letters to the seven churches. These chapters include several warnings to these churches and a few praises. Note particularly, 2:2-7, 10, 14-15, 19-20, and 3:1, 4-5, 8, 12, 15, 19-21. Imagine that John was writing to your church. What do you think he would find that would be praiseworthy? What would he condemn?
2. Writers of apocalyptic literature such as Revelation often used symbols. Persons cannot understand the real meaning of apocalyptic visions unless they have a “key” to the meaning of the symbols. Remember that the writer of Daniel was writing during a time of persecution and did not want his work to be understood by the wrong people. The same is true for the writer of Revelation. Why do you think John wrote his visions in such symbolic language? What effect does this practice have on later attempts to understand the biblical message?
3. In recent years Revelation has received considerable attention from those who see John’s visions coming to fruition in our times. Perhaps you or someone else in the group is familiar with some of these recent interpretations of Revelation. What value do you see in applying John’s visions to our times. What are the dangers in such an application?
4. Revelation closes with an invitation and a benediction (22:16-21). Read these verses. Do you feel that this is an appropriate ending to the book? Why or why not? How do you think that the persecuted and anxious Christians in John’s day would have received these final words?