

Introduction

REVELATION

The Kingdom Yet to Come

Introduction to Revelation: © The Kingdom Yet to Come

Introduction

No book in the Bible fascinates us more than the book of Revelation. Scholars have produced countless interpretations of this volume, from the ridiculous to the sublime. Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton said it best: "Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators." Amazingly, he said this nearly a hundred years ago. Consider the sheer number of books on the "end times" that have been published in just the last thirty years. Some of them are among the best-selling books of all time! *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey (published in 1970) has sold more than fifteen million copies. The more recent *Left Behind* series has sold a staggering sixty-two million volumes. Growing tensions in the Middle East, predictions of pandemics, killer storms, and tsunamis all feed the flame. No one questions that there is a growing fascination with the book of Revelation and its connection to our time, but, unfortunately, this recent phenomenon has produced more heat than light, and few have studied the book in its original setting and considered its original audience. Even fewer have written studies from a Catholic perspective. Recognizing the great need for a sound and sane study of this book and in response to the growing desire of thousands of Catholics around the country, *The Great Adventure* series has turned its attention to this remarkable and life-changing text.

The ancient title of Revelation is *Apokalypsis*, which literally means to "pull back the veil" or the covers. It is bridal language. The book of Revelation ushers the reader into the sacred bridal chamber of the Lord and his Bride, the Church. In fact, one may frame the entire book with this theme in mind. Revelation 1-11 is an "unveiling" of our Divine Groom, and chapters 12-22 lift the veil of his Bride, allowing us to see the nature and beauty of the Church.

Even with a cursory glance at Revelation, one realizes that it is not like reading one of the Gospels or one of Paul's carefully crafted letters. This book is full of images, numbers, colors, and creatures unfamiliar to a twenty-first century reader. Though the images in this book may seem fantastical, once the rich symbolism is understood, you will find it very relevant to your daily life.

This study uses the Revised Standard Version-Catholic Edition (RSV-CE) of the Bible.

Authorship

Although modern scholars differ on the issue of authorship, the book itself (Revelation 1:4, 1:9; 22:8) and the most ancient testimony in our Sacred Tradition identify St. John the Apostle as the author of the book of Revelation. The earliest witness is St. Justin, a member of the Ephesus community, writing around AD 135. This is particularly significant since Ephesus is both a recipient of the book (see chapter 2) and the traditional site where St. John himself served as a bishop. Additionally, St. Melito (bishop of Sardis; see chapter 3), is quoted by Eusebius (our first Church historian) as affirming Johannine authorship. Other second-century authors agree, including St. Papias (bishop of Hieropolis, a neighbor to the cities cited in Revelation 2-3), and ancient Gaul's St. Irenaeus, who frequently quoted Revelation in his treatise *Against Heresies*. Many who question Johannine authorship point to differences in language and style with St. John's gospel. Supporters of John's authorship remind us that the book of Revelation is a genre very different from that of the four gospels and that even so, many similarities exist between the two volumes. For example, both volumes use the image of Jesus Christ as a lamb, both emphasize his deity, and of all the New Testament books, only John's gospel and the book of Revelation call Jesus "the Word of God". Additionally, both volumes draw heavily upon series of sevens, a liturgical or festal calendar, and use numbers in a highly symbolic sense.

Time/Space/Place

Stepping into the pages of Revelation is also like passing through the magical wardrobe in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The reader is entering a land of magical creatures and frightening figures. Though these images were familiar to the first hearers of Revelation, given their study of the Old Testament, they remain a visual obstacle to most of us. It is important to realize that these images were designed to deepen believers' understanding of the message of Revelation, not to distract, confuse, or frighten them. We will help you journey back in time and unveil these images for you so you can feel the full force they would have had on their first-century audience.

As you study the book of Revelation, it might be helpful to take off your watch as a reminder that you are entering not just a different time but a different treatment of time. Revelation does not follow a simple, linear succession of events from beginning to end. It is a different way of storytelling that comes from a different vision of history. This approach is called *recapitulative* history. This was recognized by the earliest existing Catholic commentary on Revelation, by St. Victorinus. It means simply that the book returns to the same events recounted earlier to tell about them in a different way, each time portraying them with greater intensity. We will show you how this works as you go through the study.

Date and Setting

Both the book itself and the earliest sources (St. Irenaeus, St. Victorinus, St. Jerome, and Eusebius) set John's vision on the island of Patmos, off the coast of present-day Turkey. The visions he receives occur on the Lord's Day—an early identifier of Sunday, the day celebrating Christ's Resurrection.

Establishing the date of composition is a more difficult task. There are two major positions. Most scholars place the historical setting during the reign of Roman emperor Domitian (AD 81-96), following the lead of St. Irenaeus. The difficulty with this position is that there is growing evidence there was no significant persecution during his reign. An emerging and convincing minority position places the setting of Revelation before the fall of Jerusalem (AD 60s) during the violent persecutions of Emperor Nero (Sts. Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome during this time). Although this is an ongoing discussion among scholars, an increasing number are shifting to the earlier dating of the book. This study assumes an earlier composition of Revelation. For students who wish to pursue this issue in more detail, see Kenneth Gentry's *Before Jerusalem Fell: An Exegetical and Historical Argument for a Pre-AD 70 Composition*.

Themes

There are dozens of themes one could trace through the book of Revelation. We have selected the ones that will have the most relevance to the 21st-century Catholic. Three primary themes to keep in mind as you study this book are:

- **Revelation as a Book of Liturgy:** One of the things that most surprises those who begin their study of Revelation is that it is a book about worship. In it we will see the heavenly liturgy and hear the chorus of elders, angels, and martyrs in heaven. (Note: For a deeper look at parallels between the liturgy of the Mass and the book of Revelation, see *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* by Scott Hahn.)
- **Revelation as a Handbook of Discipleship:** Revelation is a book about what it means to fully and faithfully follow Christ. Woven through its images and events are many key texts on how to live as a disciple in a world increasingly hostile to Christianity.
- **Revelation as the Final Exodus of the People of God:** In Revelation, John dabs liberally from the palette of the book of Exodus to paint the final exodus of the people of God. While he uses the familiar colors of the Exodus narratives, he employs them in creative and beautiful ways to paint a landscape that is uniquely his own. You will see allusions to the plagues of Egypt, the manifestation of God on Sinai, etc.

Approaches to Interpreting the Events of Revelation

Scholars distinguish between four approaches to the events recounted in the book of Revelation. They are the historicist, preterist, futurist, and idealist. Let's look at each of these briefly.

- **Historicist:** This approach argues that the events of Revelation are fulfilled throughout the centuries-long history of the Church, over successive "dispensations." This was until recently one of the most common Protestant interpretations of Revelation.
- **Preterist:** This approach argues that the majority of the events in Revelation occurred within the lifetime of the book's original audience, since the book itself tells us in the opening verse that the book will reveal "what must soon take place." Some preterists agree that the final chapters of the book are not yet fulfilled, e.g., the return of Christ and the final destruction of sin, death, and evil.
- **Futurist:** This approach argues that virtually all of the events in Revelation have not yet occurred but will be fulfilled soon. This is the most popular approach now in Protestant circles, thanks to the wild popularity of "end times" fiction.
- **Idealist:** This approach is sometimes called the symbolic approach. It argues that Revelation is a symbolic drama depicting purely spiritual realities rather than historic events. Therefore, the book can be applied to every age.

Although the Church doesn't place herself within artificial boxes or approaches to interpreting John's visions, the authors of this study believe that the preterist approach is the closest to the teachings of the Church. We believe that while most of the events happened within the first century (the destruction of the Temple, etc.), there remains to come a final trial that will shake the faith of many, religious deception, the spirit of anti-Christ, and a painful Passover through which the Church must pass in order to enter the Resurrection of Christ (see *Catechism* Nos. 675-676).

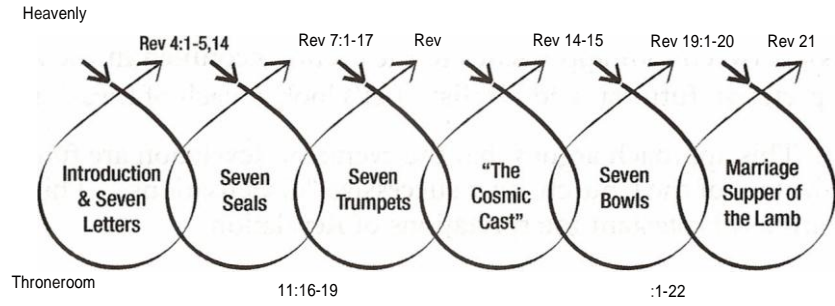
At the same time, there are things to learn from the futurist and idealist approaches. We can agree that elements of the book can be seen in the unfolding events of our Church's history and that the book is full of spiritual principles that apply to every generation.

Structure

The Revelation to John is laid out in an orderly fashion. Getting an overview of the structure will help you follow along and understand what is happening. At the start, John is taken up into the heavenly throne room where he sees Jesus in the midst of the churches. Next he receives a series of visions: he's given messages to seven churches; three times he sees judgment poured out upon the wicked in a sevenfold series of either broken seals, sounding trumpets, or emptied bowls; he is shown who are the key players on the heavenly battlefield; and he is shown a vision of the final battle, God's ultimate victory, and the final state of Christ's Bride in eternity.

These sets of "earthly visions" are intense. Between each, some relief and an eternal perspective on the events is provided as John is again taken up into the heavenly throne room and the worship of the saints. The following diagram illustrates this: Starting from the top left in the heavenly throne room, John looks down onto earth to deliver the seven letters to the churches before seeing an open door in heaven and returning there to witness God's glory and heavenly worship. He then hears about the earthly vision he will view next. This cycle continues in a spiraling fashion across the following diagram, which is printed at the top of each lesson so you can place yourself in the overall drama as you read:

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Earthly
Visions

• **Study Outline**

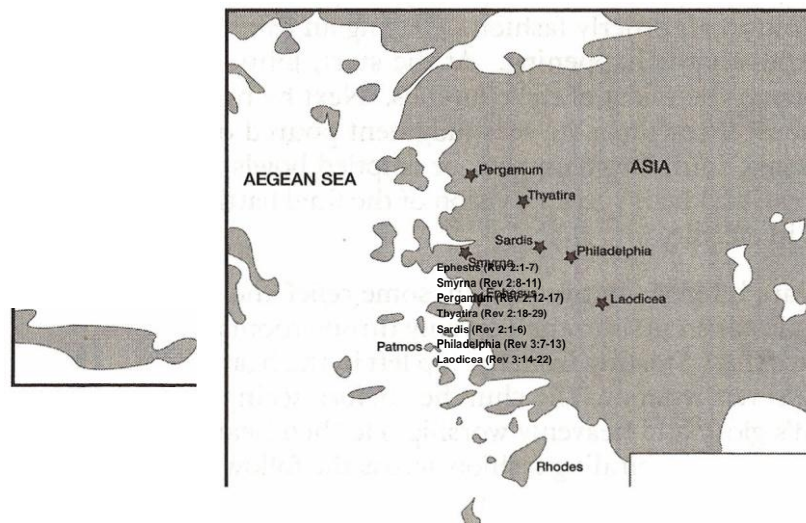
Session

Topic

- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | Introduction and Inaugural Vision |
| 2 | Letters to the Seven Churches |
| 3 | Creation and Redemption |
| 4 | Opening the Seals |
| 5 | Seventh Seal; Seven Trumpets |
| 6 | The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly |
| 7 | Praising the Lamb |
| 8 | Seven Bowls of Judgment and the Fall of Babylon |
| 9 | The Marriage Supper and the Great Judgment |
| 10 | A New Heaven and a New Earth |

The
Seven
Churches
of
Revelation

Maps and Charts



Scripture Covered

Revelation 1

Revelation 2-3

Revelation 4-5

Revelation 6-7

Revelation 8-11

Revelation 12-13

Revelation 14-15

Revelation 16-18

Revelation 19-20

Revelation 21-22

Key to Understanding the Significance of Numbers, Colors, and Animals in Revelation

The book of Revelation is full of fantastical images and a rich symbolism unfamiliar to most readers today. As you read, use this key to help unlock the meaning and find its relevance.

Numbers

One (Revelation 1:17, 2:8, 22:13)	Primacy, greatness, God himself
Two (Revelation 11:3; 2 Corinthians 13:1)	Two witnesses needed to judge a crime
Half; three-and-a-half (Revelation 8:7, 9:15, 12:4)	Limited or restricted time frame
Four (Revelation 4:6, 7:1, 9:14, 20:8)	Cosmos, creation, creatures: four animals, four winds, four corners
Six (Revelation 13:18)	Imperfection
Seven (Revelation 1:4, 1:12, 2:1, 3:1, 4:5; 5:1; 8:2; etc.)	Completeness, covenant
Ten (Revelation 2:10; 9:16; 12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 7, 12, 16)	Shortness, incompleteness, limitation
1,000 (Revelation 5:11; 9:16; 11:13; 20:2-3)	As the product of 10x10x10, 1,000 represents a long time, but still a finite time
Twelve (Revelation 7:5-8; 12:1; New Israel) 21:12,14,16; 21:21; 22:2)	Continuity with the twelve tribes of Israel (for example, the twelve apostles in the New Israel)
144,000 (Revelation 7:4, 11:2, 13:5, 14:1, 21:17)	As the product of 12x12x1,000, the number 144,000 represents all of God's people in union with him

Colors (Chromatic Symbolism)

White (Revelation 1:14, 2:17, 3:4-5, 6:11, 7:9, 7:13, 14:14, 19:14)	Victory, purity, dignity
Black (Revelation 6:5, 12)	Death, disaster, distress

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Red (Revelation 6:4, 9:17, 12:3)	Bloodshed, violence
Green (lit. "pale") (Revelation 6:8)	Impending death
Purple/scarlet (Revelation 17:4, 18:16, 18:12)	Immorality
Other symbols	
Babylon (Revelation 14:8)	Place of exile; the greatest threat to Israel and her freedom to worship
Beasts (Revelation 11:7, 11:13, 14:9; 14:11)	Foreign nations opposed to God's people
Crowns (Revelation 4:4, 4:10, 6:2, 9:7)	Authority
Dragon, Serpent (Revelation 12, 13)	Satan
Eyes, full of (Revelation 4)	All-seeing, all-knowing power
Egypt (Revelation 11)	Oppressor of God's people
Eagle, Ox, Lion, Man (Revelation 4:7, 8:13, 9:17)	The four mightiest creatures
Horns (Revelation 5:6; 12:3; 13:1,11)	Power
Jewels (Revelation 4, 21)	Unique, rare, and precious
Key of David (Revelation 3:7)	Power to open or shut God's kingdom
Palm branches (Revelation 7:9)	Joy, victory
Right hand (Revelation 1:16-20, 5:1, 5:7)	Power, authority
Seals, trumpets, bowls (Revelation 1:10; 4:1; 5-6; 8; 16)	Liturgical images used in Revelation to call for repentance, to announce and dispense judgment
Sodom (Revelation 11:8)	Immorality
Spirits (Revelation 1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6)	Angels
Thunder (Revelation 4:5, 6:1, 8:5, 10:3-4, 14:2)	God's voice

Shared Elements in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the Book of Revelation

(From *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* by Scott Hahn, pp. 119-120)

Sunday Worship	1:1
High Priest	0
An altar	1:1
Priests	3
Vestments	8:3-4, 11:1, 14:18
Consecrated celibacy	4:4, 11:15, 14:3, 19:4
Lampstands (<i>Menorah</i>)	1:13,4:4,6:11, 7:9, 15:6, 19:13-14
Penitence	14:4
Incense	1:12, 2:5
The Book, or Scroll	chapters 2-3
The Eucharistic Host	5:8,8:3-5
Chalices	5:1
The Sign of the Cross (<i>The Tau</i>)	2:17
The Gloria	15:7, ch.16, 21:9
The Alleluia	7:3, 14:1,22:4
Lift up your hearts	15:3-4
The "Holy, Holy, Holy"	19:1, 19:3, 19:4, 19:6
The Amen	11:12
The Lamb of God .	4:8
	19:4,22:21
The Prominence of the Virgin Mary	5: 6 and throughout
Intercession of angels and saints	12:1-6, 12:13-17
Devotion to St. Michael the Archangel	5:8,6:9-10,8:3-4
Antiphonal chant	12:7
Reading from Scripture	4:8-11,5:9-14, 7:10-12, 18:1-8
The priesthood of the faithful	chapters 2-3, 5, 8:2-11
Catholicity (or universality)	1:6,20:6
Silent contemplation	7:9
The Marriage Supper of the Lamb	8:1
	19:9, 19:17