

Study Guide #14: Introduction to Revelation, Part I

Introduction

The book of Revelation is the one New Testament apocalyptic document that focuses on prophecy in a way that highlights the end-time issues. In this Explorer III series, we would be remiss if we didn't offer an overview of this vitally important book. In this and the next Study Guide, we provide a brief introduction to Revelation, including discussions about the author, the date of its composition, general principles on how to interpret prophetic symbols, and an outline of the book and its significance.

Question #1: Who is the human author of Revelation?

Answer: We know that his name is John and that he calls himself a “**servant**” (Revelation 1:1) and “**your brother and companion in the tribulation**” (1:9, NKJV). Moreover, an angel referred to John as a prophet when he told him, “**For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets**” (22:9, NKJV). The large majority of scholars believe that the only John who could have written it without further identifying himself would be the *apostle* John, who also wrote the gospel of John, and the letters of I, II, and III John. Indeed, the earliest Christian tradition so identified this John. Not until the 3rd century did anyone question that the apostle John wrote Revelation. Moreover, despite the book's poor grammar—which can be explained by John's lack of an educated scribe to assist him while on the Isle of Patmos (the location of his writing the book)—numerous key words and phrases found only in the gospel of John and Revelation add concretely to the evidence that the apostle John is the author.

Question #2: Approximately when was Revelation written?

Answer: Two primary dates have been suggested: (1) around the time of Emperor Nero's reign (54-68), or (2) during Emperor Domitian's reign (81-96). *First*, there was no general or widespread persecution of



Emperor Domitian

Christians under Nero, except in and close to the city of Rome itself, whom Nero scapegoated for much of the city of Rome being burned—a fire that Nero himself may have set. History does record a brief but general persecution of Christians in 95, when Domitian demanded worship of him as a god. *Second*, the messages to the 7 churches in Revelation 2:1-3:22 offer clues pointing to a general imminent persecution that fits the context of Domitian's era much better than that of Nero's time. *Third*, the churches in Asia Minor (the 7 churches the book was written to were in Asia Minor) had not been established until at least 60. So they didn't have sufficient time to have had their spiritual condition deteriorate so quickly by Nero's local persecution of Christians in the mid-60s.

Finally, nearly all the Early Church Fathers taught that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign. Therefore, we agree that the evidence convincingly points to the time of Emperor Domitian's persecution, sometime about 95 or 96.

Question #3: What does the word “apocalyptic” mean?

Answer: The word “apocalyptic” is derived from the Greek word “apokalupsis,” which means an “uncovering, unveiling, or a revealing.” The religious literature that bears this name puts an emphasis on revealing the consummation of the end of evil and the arrival of God’s kingdom on earth, and thus on the end-time events. In addition to 30 or more important apocalyptic writings outside the Scriptures, *parts* of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah are apocalyptic in nature. But the 2 Bible books that represent apocalyptic prophecy in particular are the books of Daniel and Revelation. Not surprisingly, scholars view them as companion books to each other, with many echoes of Daniel in Revelation.

Question #4: What are the major characteristics of apocalyptic prophecies?

Answer: We here identify 6 major characteristics of apocalyptic prophecies:

- **Striking Contrasts**—There are numerous striking contrasts between dual opposites in Revelation. A representative sample includes (a) the pure woman (12:1-2) versus the harlot (17:3-6), (b) the seal of God (7:3-4; 14:1) versus the mark of the beast (13:16-17), (c) Jesus and His armies (19:14-16) versus the beast and its human armies (19:19), (d) the wrath of God (14:10; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19) versus the wrath of Satan (12:12, 15-17), (e) the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7-9) versus the supper of the fowls feasting on God’s enemies (19:17-18, 21), and (f) the New Jerusalem (21:2) versus Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 18:2, 10, 21).
- **Cosmic Sweep**—Apocalyptic prophecies are concerned with the really major issues in the cosmic conflict since Lucifer’s 1st sin in heaven until the final destruction of evil. Thus, it provides a cosmic sweep of history and how God *has* acted and *will* act to save mankind.
- **End-Time Emphasis**—Despite highlighting the cosmic sweep of history, the primary focus is on the end-times. That is, history is seen as irreversibly moving toward the final climax, when all evil, moral and natural, is destroyed and replaced by God’s kingdom of perfection. General prophecy places its focus on the history in its setting, and then often takes us to its end-time implications. By contrast, apocalyptic prophecy looks at history from God’s perspective of the end-time, and views history as moving toward the end-time conclusion.
- **Content Given in Visions and Dreams**—Apocalyptic prophecy uses visions and dreams as the primary vehicle to reveal its content.
- **Extensive Use of Symbols**—Symbols are sometimes used in general prophecy, but they are specialized in apocalyptic prophecy. Also, many such prophecies use composite symbols much more than general prophecies. Examples include non-existent creatures, such as a lion with eagle’s wings (Daniel 7:4), a 4-headed and 4-winged leopard (Daniel 7:6), a non-descript beast with iron teeth, brass nails, and 10 horns



(Daniel 7:7, 19-20), a 7-headed and 10-horned beast (Revelation 12:3; 13:1), and a beast like a leopard that has a bear's feet and a lion's mouth (Revelation 13:2).

- **Prose Literary Style**—While general prophecies make frequent use of poetic literature (along with some prose also), apocalyptic prophecies usually take the form of prose (non-poetry).

Question #5: How can a person decide what a symbol means?

Answer: We suggest that there are 4 principal points to consider in interpreting apocalyptic symbols:

- *First*, be certain that what you're studying is a symbol and not literal. If its literal meaning makes sense in the immediate context, then it's probably *not* a symbol. If its literal meaning is nonsense in the immediate context, it probably is being used as a symbol. Of course, if its description is of something non-literal—such as a 7-headed beast—it's *certainly* a symbol!
- *Second*, use an exhaustive Bible concordance and look up the key word of the symbol you're studying in every text. Remember that names of persons, cities, nations, etc. are sometimes used as symbolic language; so check the immediate context to help you decide if it's literal or symbolic. Make a list of every text in which the same term is also used symbolically and use its own immediate context in those texts to determine what the symbol means *there*. [NOTE: It has been estimated that up to 70 percent of Revelation is an allusion to, a paraphrase of, or a quotation from the Old Testament. Thus, it's vital that you are or become familiar with the Old Testament, or else you probably won't even recognize an allusion to it when you read it in Revelation.]
- *Third*, if a symbol or key word is found in Hebrew poetry (most modern Bibles use a style that makes it clear if something is part of poetry or not), remember that poetry is used to paint broad pictures and isn't always intended to be interpreted literally.
- *Finally*, remember that the immediate context in Revelation (or any other apocalyptic prophecy) is the single most important element in understanding how to interpret a symbol. For example, some symbols may represent more than 1 thing in Scripture. So you must determine which meaning *best* fits the immediate context in the apocalyptic prophecy you are studying. [NOTE: Part of the immediate context includes remembering what section of a prophetic book that the symbolic language is located. For example, we learn in Explorer III, Study Guide #15 that Revelation's structure—the way it's laid out—is one of the keys to check in order to correctly interpret the prophecy.]

Question #6: How is Revelation 1:19 the key to understanding what things in Revelation apply to the end-time?

Answer: The most popular Christian paradigm for interpreting end-time prophecies today is called Dispensational Futurism. Among other things, this paradigm views everything from Revelation 4:1 onward as applying only after the Church has been (allegedly) raptured from earth to heaven. Revelation 1:19 is

their key text for unlocking this particular view. The text reads as follows: **“Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this”** (NKJV). Everyone agrees that **“the things which you have seen”** refers to the vision John saw of Jesus in verses 12-18. The **“things which are”** would be the spiritual condition of the churches (chapters 2-3). Therefore, the argument goes, when Revelation 4:1 begins with **“After these things...”**, that must be after the Church Age. In support of this view is the idea that the Church isn’t referred to after the end of chapter 3.

Question #7: Is this Futurist interpretation of Revelation 1:19 accurate?

Answer: *First*, we note that each message to the 7 churches in Revelation obviously must have appropriately fit the church to which it was specifically addressed in the late 1st century. Otherwise, it would have made no sense to each church. *Second*, there’s no language to indicate succession from one church era to another era, as there is succession language in the sections of the 7 Seals and the 7 Trumpets. *Third*, while we agree with the Futurists in viewing the 7 churches as representing the Church throughout Christian history, our view is based on *indirect* evidence and the observation that they do fit various periods of Christian history. In other words, they are prophetic only in the *typological* sense (with each church being a type, or a foreshadowing, of a particular era in Church history). This confirms our conclusion that the *primary* application of the messages to the 7 churches was to the specific late 1st-century churches; only in a *secondary* sense do they prophetically represent 7 different periods in Church history. Therefore, we should understand the clause **“the things which will take place after this”** (1:19) as simply meaning the things that will occur after the apostle John’s own day.

Question #8: Do you have any other evidence to support your position?

Answer: Yes. Notice the A-B-A-B pattern below of key language taken from the very early part of Revelation and the very last part of Revelation:

- A **Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near** (1:3, NKJV).
- B **...What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches...** (1:11, NKJV).
- A¹ **Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book** (22:7, NKJV).
- B¹ **I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches...** (22:16).

The language in these verses speaks for itself, and its meaning is clear: If Christians in all ages are to keep the book’s instructions, then the book must apply throughout the Christian Era, not just the 1st 3 chapters to the late 1st-century Church. [NOTE: If chapters 4-18—since chapters 19-22 cover the 2nd Coming onward—describe events which occur when the saints are in heaven, then Christians don’t need to *keep* them in any meaningful way. In that case, the instruction in the above diagram would be meaningless.]

Question #9: What then is the accurate structure of Revelation that helps us understand how to interpret the book?

Answer: The structural key to unlocking Revelation's interpretation to a large extent is the use of various sanctuary or sanctuary-like scenes based in heaven. When you examine them carefully, there are 7 such heavenly scenes that each introduces a major section in the book:

Scene #1—Revelation 1:9-20

Jesus is dressed in the garments of a high priest even though He's pictured in vision walking among 7 lampstands representing 7 churches. His dress reminds us of Jesus' high priestly ministry on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary—so it's a sanctuary-like scene.

Scene #2—Revelation chapters 4-5

This is the largest sanctuary scene in Revelation, with symbolic references to God the Father (4:2-3; 5:6), God the Holy Spirit (4:5; 5:6), God the Son (5:5-6, 8-9, 12-13), and several different creatures around God's throne (4:6-8, 10; 5:6, 8, 11, 14).

Scene #3—Revelation 8:2-6

This is a picture of the Altar of Incense, which stands in the Holy Place just before the veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.

Scene #4—Revelation 11:19

This is a picture of the Most Holy Place, with a focus on the Ark of the Covenant, along with obvious judgment language.

Scene #5—Revelation 15:5-8

This picture of the heavenly sanctuary features 7 angels each with a bowl filled with a plague. Meanwhile, no one was able to enter the sanctuary until after the 7 Last Plagues have ended.

Scene #6—Revelation 19:1-10

Beings in heaven praise God for His defeat of the great harlot who corrupted the earth. It also includes a call for the marriage supper of the Lamb. This scene introduces the 2nd Coming of Jesus and the executive judgment against the wicked at that time.

Scene #7—Revelation 21:2-4

This scene pictures the New Jerusalem after the end of all evil. There's no sanctuary scene here, but there is a sanctuary *theme* in verse 3: **“Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them...”** (NKJV).

Explorer III, Study Guide #15 explores in more detail why each of these heavenly scenes introduces a major section of Revelation and uncovers another exciting feature of the book that has exciting implications for its interpretation.