Introduction to The Revelation to John

**Author and Title**

Revelation 1:1 announces both the book's title (it is a “revelation”) and its divine author ("Jesus Christ"). The book is an "unveiling" of unseen spiritual forces operating behind the scenes in history and controlling its events and outcome. This disclosure is conveyed in a series of symbolic visions that exhibit the influence of OT prophecies, especially those received by Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. The book is also "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3; 22:7), not only as divine prediction of future events but also as divine diagnosis of the present state of affairs.

The divine author identified in the opening verse, Jesus the Messiah, has authority from God to describe coming events to his servant John (see also 1:4, 9; 22:8) for communication to the church. Without denying his own role in the composition of the book, John presents himself more as a recipient and recorder of visions than as the author of Revelation's message. Although John does not call himself an apostle and he numbers himself among the prophets (22:9), early church fathers—notably Justin Martyr (writing c. A.D. 135–150), Melito of Sardis (mid-2nd century), and Irenaeus of Lyons (writing c. 185)—consistently identified him as John the son of Zebedee, the beloved disciple who authored the Fourth Gospel and three NT epistles. Because Revelation's Greek style differs markedly from other Johannine literature and its theological emphases are distinctive, a number of contemporary scholars think it was written by another John, called “John the elder,” someone otherwise unknown (who also wrote 2 and 3 John). These scholars give weight to another early tradition (beginning with Dionysius of Alexandria in the 3rd century) that attributes Revelation to “John the elder.” Nevertheless, thematic links (e.g., Jesus as Lamb and Word of God [John 1:1, 14, 29; Rev. 5:6; 19:13]) and the earliest church tradition both favor the traditional attribution of Revelation to John, the “beloved disciple,” who with Peter and James belonged to Jesus' inner circle (John 21:20, 24).

**Date**

Irenaeus reports, on the basis of earlier sources, that "John received the Revelation almost in our own time, toward the end of the reign of Domitian” (Against Heresies 5.30.3). Since Domitian's reign ended in A.D. 96, most scholars date Revelation in the mid-90s. Some, however, have argued for a date during Nero's reign (A.D. 54–68) and before the fall of Jerusalem in 70, basing their conclusion in part on the belief that Revelation 11:1–2 is a predictive prophecy of the Roman siege and destruction of the earthly Jerusalem during the Jewish War. However, the conditions in the churches of chs. 2–3 and their cities favor a date around A.D. 95–96, and in Revelation “the holy city” does not seem to refer to the earthly Jerusalem (see note on 11:1–2). Assuming this later date, events relating to Nero's reign and Jerusalem's destruction, both of which would now have been in the past, are woven into John's visions as portents and prototypes of present pressures and coming traumas in the world's assault on Christ's church.

**Genre**

The book of Revelation identifies itself both as “apocalypse” (or “revelation,” 1:1) and as prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19; see also 10:11; 22:9).

"Apocalypse" is derived from the Greek noun apokalypsis, meaning “revelation, disclosure, unveiling”—that is, the disclosure of unseen heavenly or future realities. Jewish apocalyptic literature flourished in the
centuries following the completion of the OT canon, perhaps in part to help the oppressed people of God find purpose in their sufferings and hope for their future in the absence of genuine prophetic words from God. Apocalyptic literature inherited and magnified features appearing in such OT books as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. These features include visions that dramatize the prophet's admission to God's heavenly council and that convey meaning through symbolism, promising an end-time intervention of God to reverse present injustices.

Yet Jewish apocalyptic literature of the period between the OT and NT differs from OT prophecy in important respects. Apocalyptic authors remained anonymous and attributed their works to prominent figures of the distant past (e.g., Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Baruch, Ezra), using this literary device (“pseudepigraphy”) to invest their message with the weight of antiquity and to suggest that those ancients foretold events in the readers’ past and present. Whereas OT prophecy was primarily preached orally and only secondarily preserved in writing, apocalyptic works were crafted literary pieces from their inception. Old Testament prophecy not only comforted a righteous remnant but also called faithless Israel to repent and anticipated the gracious ingathering of Gentiles. Apocalyptic literature, on the other hand, divided humanity into two immutable camps: (1) the holy minority who await God's deliverance, and (2) their persecutors, destined for wrath and beyond the reach of redemption. Finally, although OT prophets pointed ahead to the Lord's future coming, they also emphasized his present involvement with his people in their sins and trials; but apocalyptic literature saw the present as so pervaded by corruption that no saving work of God could be expected before his cataclysmic intervention at the end.

Like Jewish apocalyptic literature and some OT prophecy, the Revelation to John is imparted in symbolic visions and conveyed not in oral preaching but in literary form. Unlike extrabiblical apocalyptic authors, however, John writes in his own name, not that of an ancient saint, and he brings a balanced message of comfort, warning, and rebuke. Because Christ's death has already won the decisive victory over evil, Revelation does not share the pessimism of Jewish apocalyptic literature regarding the present age (transient and sin-infected though it is). Rather, Revelation sees believers as conquerors even now through endurance under suffering and fidelity to the testimony of Jesus, through which even their persecutors are called to salvation through repentance and faith.

Revelation therefore stands in the apocalyptic “wing” of authentic, divinely inspired prophecy (emphasizing visionary experience, symbolism, and literary art), along with such NT texts as Jesus' Olivet Discourse (Mark 13) and Paul's discussion of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2).

**Theme**

Revelation unveils the unseen spiritual war in which the church is engaged: the cosmic conflict between God and his Christ on the one hand, and Satan and his evil allies (both demonic and human) on the other. In this conflict, Jesus the Lamb has already won the decisive victory through his sacrificial death, but his church continues to be assaulted by the dragon, in its death-throes, through persecution, false teaching, and the allure of material affluence and cultural approval. By revealing the spiritual realities lying behind the church's trials and temptations during the time between Christ's first and second comings, and by dramatically affirming the certainty of Christ's triumph in the new heaven and earth, the visions granted to John both warn the church and fortify it to endure suffering and to stay pure from the defiling enticements of the present world order.

**Purpose, Occasion, and Background**

Revelation is addressed to first-century churches in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey, see map, p. ****) (1:4, 11) as representative of all Christ's churches (cf. “all the churches,” 2:23; and “to the churches,” 2:7, etc.). These churches were threatened by false teaching (such as that of the Nicolaitans, 2:6, 15), by persecution (2:10, 13), by compromise with surrounding paganism through idolatry and immorality (2:14, 20–21), and by spiritual complacency (3:1–3, 15–17). Jesus sent his revelation to John to fortify his churches to resist the wiles of the devil, whether in the form of intimidating violence (the beast), deceptive heresy (the false prophet), or beguiling affluence (the prostitute).

**History of Salvation Summary**

Christians are called to be faithful to Christ amid spiritual war against Satan and sin (see note on Matt. 12:28) as they await Christ's second coming. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible, pp. ****–****.)
**INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION**

**Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>A.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John becomes disciple of Jesus</td>
<td>28/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death, resurrection of Jesus</td>
<td>(33 [or 30])†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nero’s reign</td>
<td>54–68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of Jerusalem temple</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domitian’s reign</td>
<td>81–96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John, in exile on Patmos, writes</td>
<td>95–96*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see The Date of Jesus’ Crucifixion, pp. 66-67

**Key Themes**

1. Through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ has conquered Satan, the accuser, and has ransomed people from every nation to become a kingdom of priests, gladly serving in God’s presence.

2. Jesus Christ is present among his churches on earth through his Holy Spirit, and he knows their trials, triumphs, and failures.

3. World history, including its woes and disasters, is firmly in the control of Jesus, the victorious Lamb.

4. God is presently restraining his own wrath and his enemies’ efforts to destroy the church as he patiently gathers his redeemed people through the testimony that his suffering people proclaim about Jesus.

5. Present disasters (war, drought, famine, epidemic disease), though limited in scope by God’s restraint, are foreshadows and warnings of escalating judgments to come.

6. By maintaining their faithful testimony to the death, believers in Jesus will conquer both the dragon and the beast. The martyrs’ victory, now hidden, will be manifest in their vindication at Christ’s return.

7. Satan attacks the church’s perseverance and purity through violent persecution, through deceptive teaching, and through affluence and sensual pleasure.

8. At the end of the age, the church’s opponents will intensify persecution, but Jesus, the triumphant Word of God, will defeat and destroy all his enemies; the old heaven and earth, stained by sin and suffering, will be replaced by the new heaven and earth; and the church will be presented as a bride in luminous purity to her husband, the Lamb.

**Literary Features**

Numerous literary genres converge in the book of Revelation, one of the most complex books in the Bible. The overall genre is prophecy (22:19). Like biblical prophecy generally, the actual medium is visionary writing; the book unfolds as a pageant of visions, much like modern cinematic effects. Furthermore, the way in which real persons and events are actually portrayed is the way of imagination, with unlikelike details. The title of the book indicates further that it belongs to the genre of apocalyptic writing. Additionally, at every turn the author uses the resources of poetry—imagery, metaphor, simile, and allusion. The book begins and ends with the standard features of NT epistles. The overall shape of the book, following the introductory letters from Christ to the churches, is narrative or story, with the usual ingredients of setting, characters, and plot (including plot conflict, progression, and resolution). Greek drama was also an influence, seen in the attention John gives to the staging of events, positioning of characters in settings, crowd scenes, and costuming of characters.

The most important thing to know about the literary form of the book of Revelation is that it uses the technique of symbolism from start to finish. Instead of portraying characters and events directly, much of the time the author portrays them indirectly by means of symbols. For example, Jesus is portrayed as a lamb, churches are portrayed as lamps on lampstands, and Satan is portrayed as a dragon with seven heads and 10 horns. The symbols are sometimes familiar, and sometimes original and strange. Whenever a work of literature presents a preponderance of symbols instead of realistic details, readers should recognize the technique of symbolic reality, meaning that as they enter the work in their imaginations, information is
INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

presented primarily through symbols. The book of Revelation is one of the most sustained examples of symbolic reality in existence.

The chief interpretive question is what the symbols refer to. In many cases historical background studies can help in understanding the way in which the symbols they were understandable to John’s contemporaries, but in any case one cannot go wrong by simply relating the strange symbolic details to familiar NT images of the end times (with Jesus’ Olivet discourse as a good frame of reference), including the following: moral degeneration; cataclysmic natural and military disasters; tribulation (including persecution of believers); the parousia (the “arrival” or second coming of Christ); the millennium; intermediate and final judgment; final dissolution of earthly reality; and glorification of believers in heaven. With an awareness of these eschatological realities, it is usually easy to see that the symbols of Revelation are referring to one or another of them.

Schools of Interpretation

Four approaches for interpreting Revelation have been distinguished by their understanding of the relationship of the visions to one another and the relationship of the visions to the events of history:

1. **Historicism** understands the literary order of the visions, especially in 4:1–20:6, to symbolize the chronological order of successive historical events that span the entire era from the apostolic church to the return of Christ and the new heaven and earth.

   **Historicist School**

   **Revelation’s Visions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st-century churches</td>
<td>Patristic, medieval, Reformation, modern church ages</td>
<td>second coming, general resurrection, last judgment, new heaven and earth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   **Historical References and Events**

2. **Futurism** likewise treats the order of the visions as reflecting the order of particular historical events (with some exceptions). Futurists, however, typically view the visions of chs. 4–22 as representing events still future to twenty-first-century readers, thus in a distant future from the standpoint of John and the churches of Asia. For many futurists, these coming events include a discrete seven-year period of intense tribulation (chs. 6–19), followed by a millennium (20:1–6) in which Christ will rule on earth before the general resurrection and the inauguration of the new heaven and earth (20:7–22:5).

   **Futurist (Historical Premillennialism)**

   **Revelation’s Visions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st-century churches</td>
<td>Patristic, medieval, Reformation, modern church ages</td>
<td>second coming, believers raised, Armageddon</td>
<td>Christ reigns 1,000 years on earth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   **Historical References and Events**
### 3. Preterism
(from Latin *praeteritum*, “the thing that is past”) thinks that the fulfillment of most of Revelation’s visions already occurred in the distant past, during the early years of the Christian church. Preterists think these events—either the destruction of Jerusalem or the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, or both—would “soon take place” only from the standpoint of John and the churches of Asia. Some preterists interpret the order of the visions as reflecting the chronological succession of the events they signify, but others recognize the presence of recapitulation (that is, that distinct, successive visions sometimes symbolize the same historical events or forces from complementary perspectives; see Structure and Outline). Full preterism—which insists that every prophecy and promise in the NT was fulfilled by A.D. 70—is not a legitimate evangelical option, for it denies Jesus’ future bodily return, denies the physical resurrection of believers at the end of history, and denies the physical renewal/re-creation of the present heavens and earth (or their replacement by a “new heaven and earth”). However, preterists who (rightly) insist that these events are still future are called “partial preterists.”

**Partial Preterist School(s)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revelation’s Visions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chs. 1–3: Letters to 7 churches</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Historical References and Events**

- Partial preterists differ on what would (from the original recipients’ viewpoint) precipitate the millennium. This chart represents the view that sees ancient Rome as the church’s main enemy. Others would understand Second Temple Judaism as the church’s main enemy.

### 4. Idealism
agrees with historicism that Revelation’s visions symbolize the conflict between Christ and his church on the one hand, and Satan and his evil conspirators on the other, from the apostolic age to Christ’s second coming. Yet idealist interpreters believe that the presence of recapitulation (see Structure and Outline) means that the visions’ literary order need not reflect the temporal order of particular historical events. The forces and conflicts symbolized in Revelation’s vision cycles manifest themselves in events that were to occur “soon” from the perspective of the first-century churches (as preterists maintain), but they also find expression in the church’s ongoing struggle of persevering faith in the present and foretell a still-future escalation of persecution and divine wrath leading to the return of Christ and the new heaven and earth.

### Revelation’s Visions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Futurist (Dispensational Premillennialism)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chs. 1–3: Letters to 7 churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chs. 4–18: seals, bowls, witnesses, woman and dragon, beasts, bowls, harlot, Armageddon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20:1–6: Millennium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20:7–22:5: dragon destroyed, all in graves rise, white throne judgment, all things new</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical References and Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patristic, medieval, Reformation, modern church ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapture, believers raised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second coming, Armageddon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ reigns 1,000 years on earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General resurrection, last judgment, new heaven and earth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical References and Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem’s fall: A.D. 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome’s fall: 4th century*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Patristic, medieval, Reformation, modern church ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second coming, general resurrection, last judgment, new heaven and earth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some dispensational interpreters think the churches addressed in chs. 2–3 predict different periods in church history.
5. Finally, some interpreters hold a mixed view, combining features of these various positions, such as saying that many events have both present and future fulfillments, or saying that many events have past fulfillments but that there may still be a future personal Antichrist.
2. Postmillennialism, often associated today with preterism but also compatible with historicism (see Schools of Interpretation), teaches that Christ will return after (post-) the “thousand years” in which the dragon is bound. Classical postmillennialism holds that the “thousand years” is still a future time, a wonderful coming age in which the gospel will triumph so greatly as to thoroughly transform the world’s societies and cultures. However, a few postmillennialists think the “thousand years” symbolically portray the historical epoch that began with Christ’s ascension and that conditions in this long period will continually improve until they conclude with his glorious second coming. In the postmillennial view, during the millennium Christ is in heaven, not on earth; but he exercises his reign through his Spirit and the church’s preaching of the gospel. The “first resurrection” is believers’ spiritual transition from death to life through union with the risen Christ (Eph. 2:4–6). Because Satan cannot “deceive the nations any longer” (Rev. 20:3), the church’s mission will result in the conversion of all nations and peoples, until the earth is “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). This fruit of Jesus’ victory will be plain for all to see, as political and legal systems are conformed to God’s righteousness, cultural pursuits such as labor and the arts are redeemed, and increasing quality and length of life are displayed as God’s blessing.

After this “millennium,” however, for a brief interval before Jesus’ return, God will release his restraint on Satan and wicked humanity will converge in a defiant assault on Christ’s church. But Jesus will return bodily from heaven in power and glory to defeat and destroy his enemies, to administer the last judgment, and to introduce the new heaven and earth, untainted by sin and its toxic byproducts, in the eternal state.
3. **Amillennialism**, typically advocated by *idealists* but consistent with some expressions of *preterism* or *historicism* (see Schools of Interpretation), concurs with postmillennialism that Christ will return after the epoch symbolized as “a thousand years” (20:1–6) and that OT prophecies and Revelation’s visions are ordinarily to be understood as symbolizing the blessings and trials of the NT church, composed of believers in Christ from every nation. However, amillennialists believe that the biblical evidence indicates that there is and will be no (a-) millennium in the sense anticipated by premillennialism or postmillennialism before the consummation of history, when sin and curse are utterly banished in the “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). Through Christ’s death and resurrection Satan was bound, and therefore he is unable to hold the Gentiles in ignorance or gather a worldwide coalition against the church. Therefore the gospel now advances by the Spirit’s power through the church’s witness, but always amid opposition and suffering. Just as Jesus the Lamb conquered by being slain, so the victory of his church consists in faithfulness “even unto death” (Rev. 5:9; 12:11). The “first resurrection” is, paradoxically, the martyrs’ death, which brings them to heavenly thrones from which they now reign with Christ (20:4–5). The “thousand years” vision prepares the church for a long era of witness and suffering between Christ’s first coming to bind Satan (Mark 3:26–27) and his return to destroy Satan. It does not promise relief from persecution, nor a general improvement of living conditions on the sin-infected “first earth,” prior to the pristine new heaven and earth. Rather, the vision promises that the dragon, already a defeated foe, cannot thwart God’s plan to gather people from all nations into the Lamb’s redeemed army.

Invoking recapitulation, amillennialists view Revelation 19:17–21 and 20:9–10 as complementary perspectives on the same last battle at the end of the “thousand years,” when Christ will come bodily and gloriously to rescue his suffering church and destroy its enemies: beasts, dragon, their deceived and defiant followers, and—in the general resurrection of the just and the unjust—death itself (20:14; see 1 Cor. 15:26, 54–55). The “appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” is the “blessed hope” for which believers wait (Titus 2:13).

Each of these three primary millennial views falls within the framework of historic Christian orthodoxy. Though they differ in significant ways with regard to the interpretation of the book of Revelation and other passages related to eschatology, each view is well represented among Bible-believing, orthodox Christians.
Revelation is composed of a prologue (1:1–8), a body (1:9–22:5), and an epilogue (22:6–21). The prologue and epilogue are linked by repeated themes: an angel sent to show God’s servants what must soon take place (1:1; 22:6, 16), blessings on those who keep the prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 9), John’s self-identification (1:1, 4; 22:8), and the designation of God as Alpha and Omega (1:8; 22:13). The body contains four enumerated series of seven messages or visions: letters to churches (chs. 2–3), seals on a scroll (4:1–8:1), trumpets (8:2–11:19), and bowls of wrath (chs. 15–16). See chart, p. ****.

The general movement of the book is from “the things that are”—the first-century churches’ present situation (chs. 2–3)—to “the things that are to take place after this,” climaxing with the destruction of the enemies of God and his church and the presentation of the church as the Lamb’s bride in a new heaven and earth (1:19; 4:1). Within this general temporal movement, however, visions “double back” to present distinct, complementary perspectives on the same event or phase of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. For instance, 12:1–6 portrays the defeat of the dragon in its desire to destroy the child of the heavenly woman (vv. 1–5), followed by her flight for safety into the wilderness (v. 6); then 12:7–17 again portrays the defeat of the dragon, now in its desire to accuse believers (vv. 7–12), followed by the heavenly woman’s flight for safety into the wilderness (vv. 13–17). Earlier visions sometimes portray later events, and later visions portray earlier conditions. For example, 6:12–17 shows the shaking of earth and sky, so that the stars are cast to earth as by a great wind; then 7:1–8 shows angels restraining the winds of woe until God’s people are sealed; and still later, John sees sun, moon, and stars still in the sky and only partially darkened (8:12). This principle of repetition or recapitulation to elaborate God’s purposes and confirm their certainty is seen in earlier Scripture (see Gen. 1:1–2:25; 37:5–11; 41:1–32; Dan. 2:1–45 [with Dan. 7:1–28]; Acts 10:10–16). In Revelation, recapitulation means that the order in which John received visions does not necessarily indicate the order of the events they symbolize. These observations regarding the structure intrinsic to Revelation are reflected in this outline:
INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

I. Prologue (1:1–8)
   A. Title, transmission, promise of blessing (1:1–3)
   B. Epistolary opening (1:4–6)
   C. Announcement of the coming King (1:7–8)

II. Body (1:9–22:5)
   A. “Things that are”: Christ’s presence with and knowledge of his churches (1:9–3:22)
      1. The Son of Man among his churches (1:9–20)
      2. Christ’s edict-letters to his seven churches (2:1–3:22)
         a. To Ephesus (2:1–7)
         b. To Smyrna (2:8–11)
         c. To Pergamum (2:12–17)
         d. To Thyatira (2:18–29)
         e. To Sardis (3:1–6)
         f. To Philadelphia (3:7–13)
         g. To Laodicea (3:14–22)
   B. “Things that shall take place after this”: Christ’s defense of his church and destruction of its enemies (4:1–22:5)
      1. The Lamb and the scroll: current and coming woes, precursors of the end (4:1–8:1)
         a. Heaven opened: the Lamb receives the scroll (4:1–5:14)
         b. The Lamb opens the scroll’s seven seals (6:1–8:1)
            (Interlude: the sealing of God’s international Israel, 7:1–17)
      2. The angels and the trumpets: warnings of coming wrath (8:2–11:18)
         a. Heaven’s incense altar: the saints’ prayers, and fire flung to earth (8:2–5)
         b. Angels sound seven trumpets (8:6–11:18)
            (Interlude: the safety and suffering of God’s city-sanctuary, his witnessing church, 10:1–11:14)
      3. The woman, her son, the dragon, and the beasts: the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan (11:19–14:20)
         a. Heaven’s temple opened (11:19)
         b. The woman’s son defeats the dragon (12:1–6)
         c. Michael and heaven’s armies defeat the dragon (12:7–17)
         d. The beast from the sea (13:1–10)
         e. The false prophet from the land (13:11–18)
         f. The Lamb and his sealed victors (14:1–5)
         g. Angelic announcements of judgment (14:6–13)
         h. Harvests of earth and vine (14:14–20)
      4. The bowls of God’s final wrath (15:1–16:21)
         a. Heaven’s sanctuary filled with glory (15:1–8)
         b. Angels pour out seven bowls (16:1–21)
      5. Babylon the prostitute (17:1–19:10)
         a. Babylon’s power and luxury (17:1–15)
         b. Babylon’s fall lamented and celebrated (17:16–19:10)
      6. The defeat and destruction of the beasts, the dragon, and death (19:11–20:15)
         a. Christ defeats and destroys the beast, the false prophet, and their gathered armies (19:11–21)
            (Interlude: the thousand years of the dragon’s binding and the martyrs’ reign (20:1–6)
         b. God defeats and destroys the dragon and its gathered armies (20:7–10)
         c. The last judgment and the destruction of death, the last enemy (20:11–15)
         a. The new heaven and earth, home of the Lamb’s bride (21:1–8)
         b. The new Jerusalem, the Lamb’s pure bride (21:9–22:5)

III. Epilogue (22:6–21)
   A. Transmission and trustworthiness of the Revelation, promise that Jesus is coming soon, promise of blessing (22:6–9)
   B. Prohibition of sealing the book, promise that Jesus is coming soon, promise of blessing (22:10–15)
   C. Transmission of the Revelation (22:16–17)
   D. Prohibition of altering the book, promise that Jesus is coming soon, and final pronouncement of blessing (22:18–21)
Prologue

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

Greeting to the Seven Churches

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

7 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and is to come, the Almighty.”


1:1–3 Title, Transmission, Promise of Blessing. The opening paragraph identifies this book’s genre (“revelation” or apocalypse, a disclosure of unseen realities), its divine author (“Jesus Christ”), and the process by which he is conveying it through the human author (“his servant John”) to believers (“his servants”). It then pronounces the first of seven benedictions on those who rightly receive the book’s message.

1 revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is both the One revealed (referred to variously as Son of Man, Lion of Judah, Lamb, Word of God) and the Revealer. God transmits the unveiled truth to Jesus (5:7), and his angel conveys it to John (10:9) for God’s bondservants in the churches. The prophecy must take place because it is secured by God’s sovereign purpose and power. It will take place soon, because “the time is near” (1:3). In the epilogue, John, unlike Daniel, is told not to seal his prophecy (22:10; cf. Dan. 12:4). John’s visions are important for his first-century readers as well as for later generations of believers.

1:3 Blessed. The first of seven blessings is given to those who hear and keep God’s Word. Later blessings (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14) commend purity and perseverance, even to the death. In the early church one would read aloud while others listened. Revelation’s message and its blessing can be received even by hearing it read, but only if that hearing is accompanied by obeying as well. The time is near. See notes on 1 Thess. 5:2–3; 5:4.

1:4–6 Epistolary Opening. This greeting identifies author and recipients, then pronounces blessing upon the recipients, the seven churches that are in Asia. Since churches existed in other cities of Roman Asia (e.g., Colossae, Troas), Christ’s selection of “seven,” symbolizing completeness, implies that he addresses the whole church through them. Him who is and who was and who is to come. God is eternal, and in Christ he will come at the end of history to judge and save. The seven spirits. Revelation presents the Holy Spirit as one person (3:6, 13; cf. Eph. 4:4), but he also appears as “seven spirits” (cf. Rev. 3:1; 4:5; etc.), representing perfection, and as “seven torches of fire” (4:5) and “seven eyes” (5:6) to express his omnipresence and omniscience from him who is . . . from the seven spirits . . . and from Jesus Christ. John’s greeting comes “from” all three persons of the Trinity, the faithful witness. Witness (cf. “testimony,” 1:2) is central to the church’s calling amid suffering. As Jesus was the faithful witness even to death (1 Tim. 6:13), so must his followers be (Rev. 2:13; 12:11; 20:4). Christians are called to be faithful witnesses, but Jesus is the faithful witness par excellence. John comforts his persecuted readers with the truth that Jesus has triumphed over death (the firstborn of the dead) and that he is sovereign over all earthly powers, even Caesar, since he is the ruler of kings on earth (cf. 19:16), made us a kingdom, priests. Israel’s roles now belong to those of all nations who are freed from sins by Jesus’ blood (5:10; Ex. 19:6). From the outset, Jesus’ death is central to the message of Revelation.

1:7–8 Announcement of the Coming King. coming with the clouds. See note on 1 Thess. 4:16–17. Jesus will come as the Son of Man with universal dominion (cf. Dan. 7:13–14), though his subjects pierced him (Zech. 12:10), wail. Most scholars think the wailing is a reaction to judgment instead of the kind of grief that leads to salvation. The coming one is the Lord God, Alpha and Omega (first and last letters of the Gk. alphabet) (see Rev. 1:17; 22:13). Jesus is the beginning of all history (the Creator) and also the goal for whom all things are made (all history is moving toward glorifying him).
Jesus Christ appears in ... through facades. He can say to each church...
with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have; you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says of the church’s condition, both positive (except for Sardis and Laodicea) and negative (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia). (3) Comfort and commands flow from the diagnosis. (4) All of the churches are commanded to hear and heed all of the letters (“what the Spirit says to the churches,” 2:7, etc.). (5) A blessing is promised to “the one who conquers,” foreshadowing the final visions in chs. 21–22.

### Christ’s Edict-letters to His Seven Churches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Description of Christ</th>
<th>Commendation</th>
<th>Rebuke</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Consequence of Disobedience</th>
<th>Promise for Conquerors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ephesus</td>
<td>2:1–7</td>
<td>holds the seven stars in his right hand; walks among the seven golden lampstands</td>
<td>doctrinal vigilance and endurance</td>
<td>loss of first love</td>
<td>remember, repent, and do the works done at first</td>
<td>removal of their lampstand</td>
<td>will be given the tree of life in paradise to eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyrna</td>
<td>2:8–11</td>
<td>the first and the last, who died and came to life</td>
<td>spiritually rich, enduring persecution</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>be faithful unto death</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>will be given the crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pergamum</td>
<td>2:12–17</td>
<td>has the sharp two-edged sword</td>
<td>holding fast Christ’s name, not denying their faith</td>
<td>false teaching</td>
<td>repent</td>
<td>war against them with the sword of Christ’s mouth</td>
<td>will be given hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thyatira</td>
<td>2:18–29</td>
<td>has eyes like a flame of fire, feet like burnished bronze</td>
<td>growing love, evidenced in deeds of service</td>
<td>lack of discernment; toleration of heresy</td>
<td>hold fast and keep Christ’s works till the end</td>
<td>each given as their works deserve</td>
<td>will be given the morning star and authority over the nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardis</td>
<td>3:1–6</td>
<td>has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>dead works</td>
<td>keep the Word and repent</td>
<td>Christ will come like a thief</td>
<td>will be clothed in white garments; name never blotted out of the book of life; name confessed before God and angels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>3:7–13</td>
<td>the holy one, the true one, who has the keys of David</td>
<td>patiently enduring, keeping God’s word and not denying his name</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>hold fast what you have</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>will be made a pillar in the temple of God, inscribed with the names of God, the new Jerusalem, and Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laodicea</td>
<td>3:14–22</td>
<td>the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>spiritually blind, bankrupt, naked, lukewarm</td>
<td>buy gold, white garments, and salve from Christ; be zealous and repent</td>
<td>will be spit out of Christ’s mouth</td>
<td>will dine with Christ; will be granted to sit with Christ on his throne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>