

## New Testament Survey:

### The Apocalypse of St. John (the Revelation)

The Revelation fittingly closes the canon of Scripture. This book uses vivid imagery, glorious hymns and heavenly descriptions to describe the final defeat of evil and the triumph of God over the rebellion that infested creation in the Fall. No one can read the Revelation without understanding that the Jewish and Christian God maintains complete sovereignty over the physical and spiritual universe.

It is fitting to say that almost no book has been so alternately ignored or made the object of obsession. Many fear the book, believing the imagery is far too complicated to understand. Others believe the book can be safely ignored. Calling themselves “pan-millennialists,” as in “it’ll all pan out anyway,” these people believe the book has no redeeming value in their lives.

### **Authorship**

Many modern scholars believe that the Revelation was written by someone other than St. John the Apostle. However, Church tradition states overwhelmingly that the book was penned by John the Apostle while he was exiled from Ephesus during the persecution of the emperor Domitian (c. A.D. 96). Few of the Church Fathers, namely Dionysius of Alexandria and Eusebius, disagreed with the timing or the date. St. Irenaeus, who was only a generation removed from St. John (Irenaeus heard St. Polycarp speak of his time with the Apostle) stated St. John was the author.

### **Themes**

1. The sovereignty of God over creation. Regardless of the extent of Satan’s rebellion and humans’ complicity in the rebellion, the Christian God will triumph over all and establish His righteous reign over the universe.
2. The praise of the Christian God. There is a direct connection between the Revelation and the hymnbook of the Old Testament, the Psalms. At least 15 psalms are quoted in the 22 chapters of Revelation. We find 5 hymns in chapters 4 and 5 alone.
3. The final defeat of evil. This is not a repeat of number 1. Instead, this is a reassurance that the evil present in the world will face final judgment and justice. No wrong deed will go unpunished.
4. The mercy of the Christian God. Some of the most intense scenes in the book occur in contexts where humans are called to repentance. Time and again, St. John records the chances given the rebellious to repent.
5. The hope offered to Christians in persecution. All Christians are given an eternal hope that, regardless of the severity of persecution, an eternity in a heavenly city awaits all who persevere in faith.

### **Viewpoints of the Book**

There are 3 major viewpoints from which the Revelation is interpreted. Each deals with the 1,000-year reign depicted in chapter 20 and the return of Jesus to the earth.

1. The Amillennial (no millennium) viewpoint. This perspective, popularized by St. Augustine, teaches that the 1,000 year period is merely symbolic of the time the Church spends in this world. Everything in

the book was considered fulfilled in a previous era, usually the time of the Western Roman Empire. Jesus will return to close history. His return will come at any point since all the signs in the Revelation have already been fulfilled.

2. The Postmillennial viewpoint. Jesus will return to earth after the Church has completed its mission, which is to convert the world to Christianity. The 1,000 years depicts the time of the missionary work of the Church. This view sees humanity as progressing toward the ideal belief and behavior. This view was extremely popular in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but fell out of favor with the horrors of World War I. After the “Great War,” no one could be deluded into thinking humanity would somehow improve itself.
3. The Premillennial viewpoint. There are 2 views that fall into the premillennial perspective.
  - A. The historical premillennial viewpoint teaches that Jesus will return after the period of Great Tribulation, which the Church will experience.
  - B. The dispensational viewpoint teaches that the churches in chapters 2 and 3 depict various ages in which the Church will exist prior to the return of Jesus. Jesus will “rapture” the true believers prior to the Great Tribulation, leaving the rest of the world to experience the horrors of the Great Tribulation. After the Tribulation, Jesus will return to earth to initiate the 1,000 year reign.

Both the historical premillennial and dispensational viewpoints hold that after the 1,000 year reign, Satan will be loosed for a final rebellion. Satan will be joined by humans who resent the just reign of Jesus on earth, but their armies will be destroyed prior to the final judgment.

Students — especially American students — must remember the following facts regarding this book.

First, the Revelation was written to first century Christians. Please repeat this in your head: *the Revelation was written to first-century Christians*. Proper exegesis demands that we first understand how this book would have applied to first-century Christians. Proper interpretation of Scripture allows for different applications depending on circumstances, but proper interpretation will never allow for opposing differences in applications (e.g. what was sin in the first century A.D. still qualifies as sin today).

Secondly, know that most of Christendom is not enamored with this book as is the American Church. In fact, most Christians in the world would find it puzzling (if not amusing) that believers in the wealthiest nation of the world, with the most religious freedom in the world, seem obsessed with a book describing intense religious and economic persecution of the saints. Most Christians would also seem shocked that most American Christians feel they’ll never have to suffer for their faith because Jesus will “rapture” them before they’re required to suffer as most Christians regularly do around the world.

Thirdly, most of Christendom interprets the Revelation from an amillennial perspective, not from a premillennial perspective. The amillennial interpretation has dominated throughout most of the history of the Church, including such influential theologians as St. Augustine and John Calvin.

## Outline of The Revelation

Source: Walter Elwell & Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998, 2005).

- I. Introductory Vision (1:1-20)
  - A. Thematic introduction and greeting (1:1-8)
  - B. Vision of Jesus as divine (1:9-16)
  - C. Abbreviated explanation of the vision (1:17-20)
- II. Letters to the 7 Asian Churches (2:1-3:22)
  - A. Letter to the church at Ephesus (2:1-7)
  - B. Letter to the church at Smyrna (2:8-11)
  - C. Letter to the church at Pergamum (2:12-17)
  - D. Letter to the church at Thyatira (2:18-29)
  - E. Letter to the church at Sardis (3:1-6)
  - F. Letter to the church at Philadelphia (3:7-13)
  - G. Letter to the church at Laodicea (3:14-22)
- III. Vision of God on His Throne (4:1-5:14)
  - A. Vision of God (4:1-6a)
  - B. Four living creatures (4:6b-11)
  - C. Scroll of destiny (5:1-5)
  - D. Christ as triumphant Lamb (5:6-10)
  - E. Universal adoration of God (5:11-14)
- IV. Opening of the Seals on Destiny's Scroll (6:1-17)
  - A. First seal opened (6:1-2)
  - B. Second seal opened (6:3-4)
  - C. Third seal opened (6:5-6)
  - D. Fourth seal opened (6:7-8)
  - E. Fifth seal opened (6:9-11)
  - F. Sixth seal opened (6:12-17)
- V. Interlude before the Seventh Seal (7:1-17)
  - A. Sealing of the 144,000 of Israel (7:1-8)
  - B. Vision of the redeemed multitude of the Earth (7:9-11)
  - C. Explanation of the multitude (7:12-17)
- VI. The Seventh Seal and the Seven Trumpets (8:1-9:21)
  - A. Opening the seventh seal and the vision of the censer (8:1-5)
  - B. Blowing of the first 4 trumpets (8:6-13)
  - C. Blowing of the fifth trumpet (9:1-12)
  - D. Blowing of the sixth trumpet (9:13-21)
- VII. Interlude and the Seventh Trumpet (10:1-11:19)
  - A. Vision of the mighty angel and the scroll (10:1-11)
  - B. Vision of the 2 witnesses (11:1-14)
  - C. Blowing of the seventh trumpet (11:15-19)
- VIII. The Cosmic Conflict of Good and Evil (12:1-13:1a)
  - A. The woman clothed with the sun (12:1-6)
  - B. War in heaven (12:7-12)

- C. Spiritual warfare on Earth (12:13-13:1a)
- IX. The Beasts, the Believers, and the Judgment of Earth (13:1b-14:20)
  - A. The beast from the sea (13:1b-10)
  - B. The beast from the earth (13:11-18)
  - C. The Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1-5)
  - D. The announcements of the 3 flying angels (14:6-13)
  - E. The reaping of the Earth in judgment (14:14-20)
- X. The Seven Last Bowls of the Wrath of God (15:1-16:21)
  - A. The song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1-4)
  - B. The 7 angels with the 7 last plagues (15:5-8)
  - C. Pouring out of the 7 bowls of the wrath of God (16:1-21)
- XI. The Fall of Babylon Predicted (17:1-18:24)
  - A. Destruction of the woman on the beast (17:1-18)
  - B. Fall of Babylon the Great (18:1-14)
- XII. The Return of Christ in Glory (19:1-21)
  - A. The multitude of heaven rejoices (19:1-10)
  - B. Destruction of evil by the Rider on the White Horse (19:11-21)
- XIII. The Millennial Reign of Christ (20:1-15)
  - A. The 1,000-year reign (20:1-6)
  - B. Satan's doom (20:7-10)
  - C. The judgment at the Great White Throne (20:11-15)
- XIV. The Eternal New Order (21:1-22:6)
  - A. The new Heaven and the new Earth (21:1-8)
  - B. The new Jerusalem, the wife of the Lamb (21:9-27)
  - C. The river and the tree of life (22:1-6)
- XV. The Promise of Jesus' Return (22:7-21)