

Introduction

Revelation



An Invitation to a Wedding

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

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Revelation Introductory Material

Apocalyptic Literature: Removing the Veil

The Greek word for “revelation” is *apokalypsis*, and it’s the root from which the English word “apocalypse” derives. Not surprisingly, many scholars interpret The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) as falling within the literary genre of apocalyptic literature, a style of writing common from roughly 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. Canonical examples can be seen in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Zechariah, as well as in portions of Ezekiel and Isaiah. This form of prophetic writing concerns future events filled with cataclysmic and cosmic imagery. Apocalyptic literature isn’t merely interested in the struggles of God’s people on earth. Rather, it relates earthly situations to heavenly strife involving angels, powers, and principalities. Because it emphasizes the inevitable end of history, apocalyptic literature deals almost entirely with catastrophic events. Old Testament symbols, or types, are used by New Testament writers to describe the action of Jesus Christ in the world—for instance, the Passover lamb is a type of Jesus, the Lamb of God. This typological way of looking at human events characterizes prophecy in the Bible.

Although the book of Revelation is related to the Jewish tradition of apocalyptic literature, it differs from it in one key way. Most Jewish apocalyptic literature was written to whip up religious-nationalist frenzy against a political oppressor, usually Rome. In stark contrast to this, the book of Revelation was written to help early Christians understand the spiritual dimensions of events of their time so that in the Spirit of Jesus Christ they might overcome the persecutions that they were undergoing. This final book of the New Testament also clearly appears to have been written with a deep interest in the relationship between the Old Covenant that God made with his people during Old Testament times and the New Covenant instituted by Jesus Christ.

One fascinating and little-known detail about the word *apokalypsis* is that it may have been used in everyday speech in connection with weddings. During the 1st century, when the book of Revelation was written, a typical Jewish wedding could take as long as a week. On the seventh day, the festivities culminated in the actual wedding ceremony. Bride and bridegroom would be dressed as king and queen, and groomsmen would carry them aloft on their shoulders in a procession. At the conclusion of this, the couple would be lowered before the bridal canopy, a

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large tent under which the wedding ceremony was performed. Then, bride and bridegroom would enter into the inner room of the tent where the bridegroom would perform the *apokalypsis*, or removal of the veil, from the bride's face. This "removal of the veil" refers by extension to the removal of more than just the bride's facial covering. It is, if readers will pardon the pun, a "veiled" reference to that moment when the newlyweds enter into the most intimate and fulfilling relationship in the natural order—the nuptial union when husband and wife become one flesh.

The definition of *apokalypsis* is "an uncovering or a revelation." The author's choice of the word *apokalypsis* as the Greek title for the book of Revelation indicates Jesus Christ's unveiling—not to his slaves, nor to his business partners, nor to his students—but to his bride. In this final book of the New Testament, *apokalypsis* (or revelation) is, at its most fundamental level, not about acquiring information, facts, or data about God. It's rather about entering into an ecstatic and eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. Everything written in the book of Revelation is built upon this bedrock fact of intimate, nuptial relationship between Jesus Christ and his bride. This mystical understanding of Jesus Christ as the bridegroom and of the Church as his bride burns with hidden fire at the heart of the book of Revelation. It's a biblical work that's not primarily intended as a political tract, codebook, puzzle, or conglomeration of theological concepts, but as a wedding invitation.

Authorship, Location, and Audience

The book of Revelation provides some sketchy details about its author. His name is John (*Rev* 1:1-9 and *Rev* 22:8), and he counts himself among the prophets (*Rev* 22:9). Although biblical works rarely include information about where they're written, the author of the book of Revelation explicitly states its place of composition—the island of Patmos, to which he's been banned by unknown authorities for his Christian testimony (*Rev* 1:9). The letters he sends to the seven churches (*Rev* 2:1-3:22) presuppose his pre-eminent position among Christians in Asia. It's primarily to these Christians that John addresses his book of Revelation.

Many early Church Fathers—including Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Gregory of Nyssa—regard the apostle John as the author of the book of Revelation. Some in the early Church, however, claimed the work wasn't apostolic—most frequently because its text was misused and abused to support various heresies. Others, noticing differences between the literary style of the book of Revelation and John's Gospel and Letters, concluded that the same person couldn't have written all five works. One theory dating back to Dionysius of Alexandria, who lived during the middle of the 3rd century, holds that only the Gospel and the First Letter of John are the work of the apostle John, and that the book of Revelation was written by a figure known as "John the Presbyter." While debate over the authorship of the book of Revelation never has been completely resolved, the Church included the work when the canon of Scripture was established in the late 4th century. Although scholars encounter some problems attributing the book of Revelation to the apostle John, there are as many or more problems connected with assigning the work to another author.

The Catholic Scripture scholar Andre Feuillet, in his book *The Apocalypse*, sets out a persuasive summary of the arguments supporting authorship by the apostle John. Among the most

compelling reasons are the many close similarities between the way theological language is used in the book of Revelation and in the Gospel of John. For example, those are the only two books of the New Testament that use the phrase “living water.” In the Gospel of John, this “living water” flows from the hearts of those who believe in Jesus (*Jn* 7:39), while in Revelation it flows from the throne of God located in the new Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ—(*Rev* 7:17 and *Rev* 22:1). The same mystical train of thought appears to be at the center of both books. And there are other similarities found nowhere else in the New Testament. Jesus Christ is presented as “the Lamb” twice in the Gospel of John, and 28 times in Revelation. Jesus is the “Word of God” (*Jn* 1:1, *Jn* 1:14, and *Rev* 19:13), and the Church is “the bride” (*Jn* 3:29, *Rev* 21:2, *Rev* 21:9, and *Rev* 22:17). The absence of any Temple in the new Jerusalem (*Rev* 21:22) seems to be in line with Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman at the well: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (*Jn* 4:21).

A number of historical facts also point to the idea that The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) actually was the work of the apostle John. Many of the early Fathers offer written evidence to corroborate authorship by the apostle John. St. Justin Martyr, for instance, specifically refers to the author of the book of Revelation as “one of the apostles of Christ.” St. Justin Martyr was converted to Christianity around 135 A.D. in Ephesus, the same city where it’s known that the apostle John served as bishop. Ephesus also is the first of the seven cities addressed by Jesus Christ at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Both St. Melito of Sardis, another of the cities whose churches are addressed in the seven letters, and St. Irenaeus attest that the apostle John is the author of this final book of the New Testament. St. Irenaeus learned the Gospel from St. Polycarp, who is said to have heard it directly from the apostle John.

Theology: Four Views of the Book of Revelation

Christian theology generally has taken four different approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation. The most common is the futurist view, which is held by Evangelical Protestants and Fundamentalist Christians. Proponents of the futurist view argue that the prophetic vision recorded in the book of Revelation won’t make sense until the end of time. Writers such as Hal Lindsey have popularized futurist theories that match up various contemporary images with corresponding images from the book of Revelation—the U.S.S.R. pairs up with Gog and Magog, the European Common Market is seen as the 10-headed beast, and Soviet helicopters are represented by the armies of locusts. Many futurists believe that Jesus soon will return to slaughter the political threat du jour, and that he’ll establish an earthly kingdom lasting 1,000 years. This particular futurist view specifically has been condemned as a heresy by the Catholic Church.

A second way of looking at the book of Revelation is the historicist view, which holds that the final book of the New Testament predicts all the various stages of Church history from the beginning to the end of time. Because the triumph of Jesus Christ over the whole world is a fact throughout history, the historicist view provides a fruitful way of studying the book of Revelation.

A third view, and the one probably held by more Church Fathers than any other, is the idealist view. Proponents hold that the book of Revelation describes the ongoing spiritual struggle that every believer faces in his or her life and that the Church faces in every generation. This struggle takes place on earth, and it’s taking place at this very moment even in heavenly places. It’s a struggle involving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and it will intensify

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throughout history until Jesus Christ brings it to a decisive conclusion. The idealist view explains the prophetic vision recorded in the book of Revelation as a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The idealist view can be particularly valuable because it recognizes that Jesus Christ is the Lord of history, he's enthroned in heaven, and he sends his angels to fight the battle between good and evil going on here on earth.

The preterist view looks at the fulfillment of the prophecies of the book of Revelation as already having occurred, at least in a literal sense. Preterists believe that the book was written for 1st-century Christians prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This isn't to deny the second coming of Christ at the end of time. In fact, Catholic Tradition long has regarded the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. as a type of the coming judgment of the world. The preterist view holds that the book of Revelation primarily was written to address the immediate historical circumstances of the apostle John and his Christian community. That's why the apocalyptic vision opens with the proclamation that it's given by God "to show to his servants what must soon take place . . . for the time is near" (*Rev* 1:1-3). This strong note of imminence echoes throughout the book.

Date and Basic Theme

The question of the date when the book of Revelation was written intertwines with the basic theme of the book, especially for those who hold the preterist view when interpreting the work's meaning. For the preterist, the coming of Jesus Christ that's envisioned by the apostle John concerns not so much the end of *the* world as the end of *a* world in which Old Covenant thinking predominated.

The majority of scholars believe that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John toward the end of his life around 96 A.D. during the reign of Emperor Domitian. A growing number of scholars, however, argue that the book of Revelation may have been written shortly before 70 A.D. Contradictory evidence makes it difficult to establish a firm date. But underlying the argument that the book of Revelation was written prior to 70 A.D. (an argument advanced by Kenneth L. Gentry in his book, *Before Jerusalem Fell*) is the fact that throughout the rest of the New Testament the persecution of Jesus and his apostles isn't precipitated by the Romans but instead is instigated by the Jews in Jerusalem. This persecution of the early Church by the Jews culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., just exactly as Jesus had prophesied (*Mt* 24:1-2). Theologically, this can be seen as signifying the passing away of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

The great challenge faced by any modern reader of the book of Revelation is to try to view the book the way its intended audience would have. That audience was composed of 1st-century Christians coming out of Jewish background, and they would have read it in its covenantal context. The authors of the New Testament are, with the exception of Luke, all Jews. They've all been formed under Mosaic Law and their minds are steeped in Old Covenant thinking. The one idea that lies at the center of the world view of the New Testament authors is their unshakeable belief that through Jesus Christ, the God of the Old Covenant has entered into a New Covenant with his people.

Christian Perspective

The relationship of this New Covenant to the Old, therefore, should be the controlling principle that governs the interpretation of the apostle John's prophetic vision in the book of Revelation. For what, after all, is the climax of the book of Revelation? The nineteenth chapter is explicit—a city described as a “harlot” is destroyed by fire. Though many scholars argue that this city refers to Rome, that interpretation doesn't explain the fact that Rome never is described as a harlot anywhere else in Scripture, while such prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel frequently describe Jerusalem that way and in other similar terms. In the latter chapters of the book of Revelation, it's not a new Rome but a new Jerusalem that descends from heaven as the mystical bride of the Lamb of God after the destruction of the city called “harlot.” The parallelism isn't hard to see—the “harlot” isn't Rome but Jerusalem. The book of Revelation then can be understood to be saying that the virginal bride of Christ—the new Jerusalem, the Church of the New Covenant—won't be revealed in its fullness until the old Jerusalem—a prototype of the new—passes away.

The writers of the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all see apocalyptic significance in the destruction of the Temple. Indeed, the Olivet discourse, recorded in all three synoptic Gospels, sometimes is called the “little Apocalypse.” In it, Jesus speaks of wars, rumors of wars, famine, earthquake, pestilence, persecution, and various cosmic signs, and he declares that “this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (*Mt* 24:34). In Jewish reckoning, a “generation” was 40 years, and Jesus spoke just fewer than 40 years before the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Also, significantly, only one Gospel doesn't record the Olivet discourse, or “little Apocalypse.” Instead of writing a “little discourse” of a chapter or two, the apostle John writes an entire book—The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse). The underlying theme of both little and big Apocalypses is the same, however—the relationship of the New Covenant to the Old.

The apostle John's entire prophetic vision in the book of Revelation is about this relationship, and his work is consummated by nothing less than the marriage supper of Lamb of God. That nuptial term significantly was used in the early Church to describe the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and it's used the same way today to describe the Catholic Mass. Both marriage and the Eucharist have at their heart the vision of lover and beloved united in intimate embrace, and both Matrimony and the Eucharist are sacraments of the Church. According to the saints, the only experience in the natural realm of human relations to even approach the ecstasy of heavenly union with God is the sexual bond of the marital union—and even then the experience provides little more than a faint understanding of union with the Blessed Trinity. That's why it's difficult to understand the book of Revelation apart from this vision of sacramental love. The message of the book of Revelation is that all Christians are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. There the faithful will feast forever on the life and love of God, who even now offers himself to and for his bride the Church in the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass.

Outline of The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse)

I. Liturgy of the Word (1:1—11:19)

- A. Letters to the Seven Churches (1:1—3:22)
- B. Heavenly Liturgy (4:1—5:14)
- C. The Seven Seals and the 144,000 (6:1—7:17)
- D. Trumpets and Plagues (8:1—11:19)
 - a. Trumpets in Zion (8:1-13)
 - b. The Bottomless Pit (9:1-21)
 - c. The Scroll and the Two Witnesses (10:1—11:19)

II. The Incarnation—The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-17)

III. Liturgy of the Eucharist (13:1—22:5)

- A. Beasts from Sea and Land (13:1-18)
- B. Heavenly Zion and Fallen Babylon (14:1-20)
- C. The Seven Bowls of the Wrath of God (15:1—16:21)
- D. The Punishment of Babylon (17:1-20:15)
 - a. The Harlot, the Beast, and the Lamb (17:1-18)
 - b. Fallen Is Babylon the Great (18:1-24)
 - c. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:1-21)
 - d. The Thousand Years (20:1-15)
- E. The New Creation (21:1—22:5)

IV. Epilogue—Behold, I Am Coming Soon! (22:6-21)

Catechism Connections

- The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* defines revelation as “God’s communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan, a gift of self-communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ.”
- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see *CCC* 112 through *CCC* 114.
- *CCC* 1404 explains more about the veiled nature of the presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Rome to Home

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are—knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that “all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights”; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—address, 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

Summary

1. Apocalyptic literature is a style of prophetic writing that attempts to understand events in light of their spiritual significance.
2. Because The Revelation to John (the Apocalypse) was written to explain the spiritual dimensions of persecutions that early Christians were undergoing, it's useful to all Christians in all times who are seeking to overcome persecutions in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.
3. The book of Revelation is written with a deep interest in the relationship between the Old Covenant of the Jewish people and the New Covenant instituted by Jesus Christ.
4. One use of the word *apokalypsis* in everyday 1st-century speech may have been in connection with weddings, especially the ceremony surrounding the unveiling the bride.
5. For the author of the book of Revelation, his work isn't about acquiring facts or data about God but rather is about entering into an ecstatic and eternal relationship with Jesus Christ.
6. The book of Revelation is, first and foremost, a wedding invitation—not a political tract, codebook, puzzle, or conglomeration of theological concepts.
7. The “marriage supper of Lamb” is a term used to describe the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
8. In the Eucharist, the Church as the bride of Christ is invited to the eternal heavenly banquet—a divine feast celebrated on earth in the Liturgy of the Catholic Mass.

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