



Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture

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Revelation

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Abbreviations

2 Sam	2 Samuel	Ps	Psalms/Psalms	Joel	Joel
1 Kings	1 Kings	Prov	Proverbs	Amos	Amos
2 Kings	2 Kings	Eccles	Ecclesiastes	Obad	Obadiah
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Song	Song of Songs	Jon	Jonah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Wis	Wisdom	Mic	Micah
Ezra	Ezra	Sir	Sirach	Nah	Nahum
Neh	Nehemiah	Isa	Isaiah	Hab	Habakkuk
Tob	Tobit	Jer	Jeremiah	Zeph	Zephaniah
Jdt	Judith	Lam	Lamentations	Hag	Haggai
Esther	Esther	Bar	Baruch	Zech	Zechariah
1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Ezek	Ezekiel	Mal	Malachi
2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Dan	Daniel		
Job	Job	Hosea	Hosea		

Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew	1 Tim	1 Timothy
Mark	Mark	2 Tim	2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb	Hebrews
Rom	Romans	James	James
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Gal	Galatians	1 John	1 John
Eph	Ephesians	2 John	2 John
Phil	Philippians	3 John	3 John
Col	Colossians	Jude	Jude
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	Rev	Revelation
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians		

Introduction

No book of the Bible stands more in need of commentary than Revelation. Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse, is manifestly different from the other, more familiar books of the New Testament. Its arcane symbolism can strike readers as strange and its wild imagery as frightening. Further, few Christians today have the biblical knowledge to catch even half of the author's several hundred allusions to the Old Testament.¹ The historical circumstances in which the book was written are unfamiliar to many. The structure of the book is difficult to discern, and its literary characteristics differ greatly from modern ways of communicating. Finally, the fact that one of its principal topics is the last judgment and the end of history raises the stakes. The sensationalist interpretations that circulate both among believers and in the secular media make informed interpretation of this book all the more necessary.

My aim is to help contemporary readers meet these challenges by seeking to offer an interpretation of Revelation that is faithful to the text, enlightened by both contemporary scholarship and traditional interpretation, in harmony with the whole of Scripture and Christian doctrine, and relevant for the Church today.

This introduction provides a brief overview of Revelation's genre, author, historical setting, structure and literary features, interpretation and message, and its relevance to Christian life today. Readers interested in more background information can consult the Suggested Resources at the back of this book or additional articles provided online in the Revelation Resources at www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

1. Estimates range from slightly more than two hundred to one thousand allusions, depending on the criteria that are used.

Genre

How does the author of Revelation present his work, and how would first-century Christian readers have classified it? Ancient books were rare and copied by hand, and the original audience of this book, the members of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia named in 1:11, would have first laid eyes on the scroll that contained Revelation at the liturgy. I say “audience,” since most would never have the opportunity to read the book themselves but would hear it read to them by a church leader or by a messenger who brought the scroll to the Christian community in their city. The mere size of the scroll would have indicated to those present that they were about to hear a book-length text, in contrast, for example, to some of the brief letters included in the New Testament canon.

The first couple of sentences indicate the book’s content, presenting it as “the revelation of Jesus Christ” made known to “his servant John,” who is “reporting what he saw” (1:1–2). Although the Greek word for revelation is *apokalypsis*, that word did not yet have the associations with end-times catastrophes that “apocalypse” has for people today. Paul’s Letters, which were probably familiar to the churches of Asia (present-day southwestern Turkey), use this word to refer to prophetic words or visions (e.g., 1 Cor 14:6, 26; 2 Cor 12:1, 7). The next verse pronounces a blessing on those who read and listen to “this prophetic message.” Those listening would thus have classified what they were hearing as a book of Christian prophecy comparable to Old Testament prophetic books such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

At the same time, Revelation’s earliest audience would have recognized it as a circular letter. After its unusual prologue (1:1–3), Revelation resembles other early Christian letters for a few verses. The sender identifies himself as “John,” and his recipients as “the seven churches” in Asia, then extends a greeting of “grace . . . and peace.” He proceeds to offer a prayer of praise and thanks to God (1:5b–6).

As the original audience listened to the scroll being read, they would have noticed both similarities to and differences from the Old Testament prophetic books with which they were familiar. One difference is that the primary revealer in this book of prophecy is the risen Lord Jesus, although he relays a message he has received from God the Father, just as he did during his earthly ministry (1:2; John 8:26; 12:49–50). He conveys this message to the prophet John through an angel and through “the Spirit” (2:7, 11, etc.), whom the early Christians recognized as the source of prophecy.

John’s original audience would not have found Revelation as strange as it seems to us today because it belongs to a type of religious literature that was

popular at the time. This literary genre, which originated about 200 BC and remained widespread among Jews and Christians until a century or two after Christ, was later called “apocalypse,” due in part to the use of that word at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Scholars debate how best to define apocalypse.² An apocalypse typically explains unseen spiritual realities behind human events or looks forward to history’s end. It is characterized by dreams, visions, and other highly symbolic ways of communicating. Several noncanonical “apocalypses” prior to or contemporary with Revelation (*1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*)³ illustrate the genre, and it is likely that John and some of his readers would have been familiar with these or similar works.

Author

Four times the author of Revelation refers to himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), implying that he expects his readers to know who he is. Important early Christian authorities, including Justin Martyr (AD 165), Tertullian (220), Irenaeus (180), Clement of Alexandria (200), Hippolytus (235), Origen (254), and Athanasius (350), identify this John as the apostle John, whom they also consider to be the author of the Gospel and the Epistles that bear his name. Western Church tradition has generally followed their lead.

Revelation has some similarities to the other Johannine writings. Like the Gospel, and unlike other New Testament writings, it refers to Jesus as the Word of God (Rev 19:13; John 1:1, 14) and as the Lamb (John 1:29, 36, although Revelation uses a different Greek word for “Lamb”). Like the Fourth Gospel, Revelation speaks of “life-giving water”⁴ and alludes to Jesus being “pierced” (Rev 1:7; John 19:37; see Zech 12:10). In addition, Revelation shares vocabulary with the Gospel and the Letters of John that is not common elsewhere in Scripture: to “conquer” or “be victorious,” to “keep” the word or the commandments, “dwell,” “sign,” “testimony,” and “true.”

However, there are some difficulties in identifying the author of Revelation with John the apostle or with the author of the Gospel and Letters that bear his name. First, the author of Revelation never refers to himself as an apostle

2. See John C. Collins, “The Apocalyptic Genre,” in *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–42.

3. For more on the relation of Revelation to other apocalypses, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5–12; and Wilfred J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 1–5.

4. See Rev 7:17; 22:1; John 4:10–11; and 7:38; the precise wording differs slightly among them.

but indicates he is a prophet (1:3) and a brother among the prophets (22:9), a group he distinguishes from the apostles (18:20). When Revelation speaks of the twelve apostles of the Lamb as the foundation stones of the wall of the new Jerusalem (21:14), there is no suggestion that the author includes himself in their number.

Second, from ancient times, learned readers have found weighty stylistic reasons to question whether the author of the Gospel of John and 1 John was the same person who wrote Revelation.⁵ Writing in the mid-third century, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, identified significant differences in the Greek writing style, phraseology, and patterns of thought between the works. In contrast to the elegant Greek of the Gospel of John, the Greek of Revelation is heavily influenced by Hebrew or Aramaic. Dionysius also pointed out that the author of the other biblical books attributed to the apostle John does not name himself, while the author of Revelation identifies himself four times, and never in the ways the Gospel or 1 John refer to their author (“the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the “Elder,” the “one who testifies”). Dionysius points to the commonness of the name John and concludes that the author was another John who resided in Ephesus, noting the existence in his day of two tombs bearing the name of John and venerated by the church of Ephesus.

Other prominent Church Fathers in the East—including Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Eusebius, and Theodoret—did not consider the apostle John the author of Revelation or even regard it as part of the canon of Scripture. Some of their uneasiness was due to problematic interpretations of the book and to the use made of it by the Montanists, members of a heretical early Christian sect.

The striking style differences noted by Dionysius continue to persuade most scholars that the author of Revelation was not the same person who wrote the Gospel and Epistles of John. However, some scholars maintain that the apostle John did write Revelation and explain the stylistic differences as due to the book’s apocalyptic genre, or to the apostle John’s use of a secretary (an amanuensis) in the composition of his other books, not available to him on Patmos.⁶

Unless new information is uncovered, we cannot know for sure who wrote Revelation. There is no reason to doubt what the author says about himself—

5. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.

6. Gordon Fee takes the second position in *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), Kindle edition, 384. Other scholars suggest that Revelation is pseudonymous, like many apocalyptic writings, and that in calling himself John, the author is (falsely) claiming to be the famous apostle. However, the absence of any claim to apostleship or acquaintance with Jesus during his earthly life makes this unlikely.

namely, that he is a Christian prophet and his name is John. His Greek style shows his native language to be Hebrew or Aramaic; his extraordinary familiarity with the Old Testament supports the impression that he is a Jewish Christian. On the basis of the similarities to the Fourth Gospel and the Letters mentioned above, we may conclude that he has at least read those works. Regardless of whether he is the apostle John, the Church receives the book of Revelation as divinely inspired and canonical Scripture.

Historical Setting and Purpose

Date

There are two leading hypotheses as to when Revelation was written. Some scholars think it was written in the mid- to late 60s of the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (AD 54–68).

For Christians, Nero was undoubtedly a symbol of the worst possibilities of Roman imperial power, since in 64 he initiated the first large-scale government persecution of Christians, resulting in the martyrdom of many, including Peter and Paul (see sidebar, “The First Martyrs of the Church of Rome,” p. 216).

However, the majority of interpreters, ancient and modern, hold that Revelation was written in the mid-90s, during the reign of the emperor Domitian (81–96).⁷ Irenaeus, writing in *Against Heresies* (5.30.3) around the year 180, states that John “beheld the apocalyptic vision . . . not a very long time ago, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.” Other ancient writers, including Victorinus, Eusebius, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, support his view.

A key question is which period better fits the circumstances depicted in the book. Some passages in Revelation depict persecution, and there seems to have been persecution of Christians by Roman

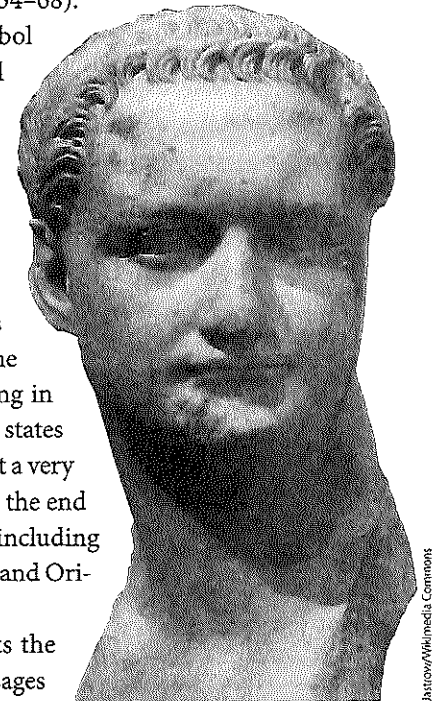


Fig. 1. A bust of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), regarded by some as a second Nero.

7. David Aune, a leading Revelation scholar, takes a middle position, proposing that some of the visions were written down beginning in the 60s but that the book reached its present form in the 90s. See Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52a (Dallas: Word, 1997), lviii.

authorities during Domitian's reign. Although the extent of Domitian's persecution of Christians is debated, some evidence for such a persecution exists. In AD 96, toward the end of Domitian's reign, Clement of Rome writes guardedly of "sudden and unexpected happenings and experiences that have befallen us" (1 *Clement* 1.1),⁸ and some second-century Christian authors allude to persecutions by Domitian.⁹ The fact that some of Domitian's pagan contemporaries regarded him as another Nero is consistent with this possibility.¹⁰ Other details in Revelation better fit the 90s than the 60s—for instance, the prosperity of Laodicea (3:17), which suffered a major earthquake in AD 60, and the line "do not damage the olive oil or the wine" (6:6), which might allude to an edict of Domitian about vineyards in Asia in 92.¹¹

This commentary will presuppose the majority view, that Revelation was written in the 90s, but will occasionally consider the possible implications of an earlier date for interpreting the book.

John's Audience

John writes to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, a region that today comprises the southwestern part of Turkey. Ephesus was the chief city of the province, and its church was the leading church, due to both the city's prominence and its very successful evangelization by the apostle Paul and his coworkers in the mid-50s (see Acts 19, especially 19:10, 26; 20:17–38). The churches of Asia included Jewish believers but consisted primarily of Gentile converts from paganism. Although it has been common to assume that John's readers were all suffering persecution, a careful reading of the messages to the churches (chaps. 2–3) finds mention of persecution only in the [†]oracles to Smyrna (2:10), Pergamum (2:13, a reference to the past), and Philadelphia (3:8–10). These references suggest that at the time the book of Revelation was written, its addressees were experiencing periodic and localized persecution—not the worldwide pressure to worship the beast and persecution that the book foretells (11:7; 12:17; 13:7).

8. After recalling the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (chap. 5) and of the Roman martyrs (chap. 6), Clement writes, "We are in the same arena, and the same contest lies before us" (7.1).

9. Eusebius reports a persecution and martyrdom of Christians in Domitian's final year (96). Melito of Sardis petitions the emperor (ca. 170–80), claiming that only Nero and Domitian persecuted Christians (*Ecclesiastical History* 4.25). Tertullian says the same. See Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 805–9.

10. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 410.

11. These are selected from details supplied by Osborne, *Revelation*, 9.

Christians and Jews of the first century distinguished themselves from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture by their refusal to worship anything other than the Creator God of Israel. Worship of the pagan gods was so woven into daily rituals and civic life that the refusal of many Jews and Christians to participate in these rites seemed narrow-minded and antisocial, if not downright unpatriotic. Jewish abstinence from pagan rituals enjoyed legal protection because Judaism was a recognized ancient religion, but Christians did not enjoy the same privilege. Prior to the Jewish revolt and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Roman authorities considered Christians a sect within Judaism, but afterward they gradually began to treat Christians as a distinct religious group lacking legal recognition and therefore obliged to participate like everyone else in the [†]imperial cult.

Theological Presuppositions

If Revelation was written in the 90s, John and his readers would have been familiar with the Synoptic traditions about Jesus, probably by possessing one or more of the [†]Synoptic Gospels. I have already mentioned why it is likely that John was at least familiar with the Gospel and Letters of John. It is also likely that he and his readers were familiar with some or all of the Pauline literature, since Ephesus was a major Pauline center and Paul's Letters were in circulation from quite early on (Col 4:16; 2 Pet 3:15–16). Recognizing the likelihood that John and his readers were familiar with the Old Testament and many of the New Testament writings is a tremendous key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation.

Revelation manifests faith in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus and in his divine status. It likewise presupposes hope in Jesus' future glorious return and, despite its vivid symbolic presentation, reflects an [†]eschatological outlook similar to that of other New Testament writings. Like them, Revelation anticipates times of trial and persecution for Christians during the time of their testimony to the gospel. While Revelation's depiction of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet adds details not found in other sources, it builds on Jewish eschatology and lines up with early Christian understanding regarding Satan and eschatological opposition attested elsewhere (Dan 7; 2 Thess 2; 1 John 2:18).

Structure and Plot

The elaborate structure of Revelation is both fascinating and bewildering at the same time. Unlike some Old Testament prophetic books that offer a loosely organized collection of oracles, Revelation provides a narrative that progresses