

Guide to the Book of Revelation

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Title

The title of the book of Revelation is derived from the first word of the book (Gk. *apokalupsis*) which means “unveiling” (i.e., “revelation”). The title is fitting in that the book is the unveiling of the “things that must soon take place” (1:1). Jesus is the one who does the revealing and John is mediator the revelation to the “seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). The revelation itself is symbolized in a scroll that is given to John to eat and the prophesy (ch. 10) that has been opened by Jesus (ch. 5) who is depicted as lamb that has been slain who alone is worthy to open the scroll (ch. 5).

Author

The book itself states that John is the author (1:1, 4, 9). Both Justin Martyr (c. AD 100-165) and Irenaeus (c. AD 130-200) claim that the apostle John is the author of the book. However, because the language in Revelation is quite different from the apostles other NT writings, some doubt that John the apostle wrote Revelation. The theological themes and imagery shared between John’s other works and Revelation (e.g., high Christology, Jesus as the lamb of God, Jesus as the word of God, the exodus motif, etc.), however, suggest that the apostle is, in fact, the author of Revelation.

Date

Most scholars believe that Revelation was written in the mid 90s AD. Irenaeus wrote that John received the revelation and wrote it down while exiled on the island of Patmos before the death of the Roman emperor Domitian in 96 AD. The reference to the temple in 11:1-3 makes some suggest that Revelation must have been written before the destruction of the temple in 70 ad. It is very possible, however, that the temple in 11:1-3 is not the literal temple but a symbol of the church. Furthermore, many have suggested that the reference to 666 as the mark of the beast that is the number of a man is a reference to emperor Nero, who reigned from 54 ad to 68 ad. It is possible, then, that John wrote while Nero was still in power. However, reference to Nero could cause readers to look back to an emperor that was particularly hostile to Christians. It’s also important to keep in mind that 666 is a number symbolizing multiplied imperfection in addition to being the number of an individual.

Genre

Revelation is unique in that it falls into three different genre categories: (1) apocalyptic (1:1), (2) prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and (3) epistolary (1:4-3:22). Apocalyptic literature can generally be described as:

- **Eschatological.** It looks to the distant future and particularly the end of all things.
- **Generally pessimistic.** The writers of apocalyptic literature are writing to encourage and inspire hope among their audience because they are concerned that their audience is having trouble coping the current realities.
- **Dualistic.** The dualism of apocalyptic literature is temporal. That is, apocalyptic literature draws a hard dividing line between the current “evil” age and the future age of righteousness. Apocalyptic literature is *not* dualistic in distinguishing between the physical and metaphysical.

- **Rigidly deterministic.** Prophetic literature is usually not rigidly deterministic in that it calls the audience to adjust behavior *now* so as to avoid an unfavorable future. Apocalyptic literature, while it looks to the future like prophecy, what it sees in the future is fixed. Changing one's behavior now does not and will not change the final outcome.
- **Symbolistic.** Apocalyptic literature is normally imaginative and employs symbols for dramatic effect, which is fitting for events occurring around the end of all things.
- **Generally pseudonymous.** Normally, authors of apocalyptic literature employ a name from antiquity to authenticate their visions. Revelation, however, is not pseudonymous because John's authority needs not come from antiquity as it comes from Jesus himself.

Summary of the Book

The book of Revelation (Gk. *apocalupsis*) is a letter from John to the seven churches in Asia minor which comprises the vision given to John by Jesus through an angel. This vision uncovers the “things that must soon take place” (1:1) related to the end of all things under the divine control of God and as a result of Jesus's redemptive work in the world. The vision reveals the cosmic battle that is behind the persecution of Christians in a fallen world. It also reveals that while Christ has not yet returned, that he has, in fact, won the victory and that Christians who follow in his likeness (i.e., “conquer”) in their faithful witness to Jesus (even a witness unto death) will be vindicated as Christ was vindicated through bodily resurrection and authority to reign with him in the New Heavens and New Earth while those that rebel against Jesus in the likeness of Satan (i.e., the dragon) and under the tyrannical oppression of human governmental systems under the control of Satan (i.e., the beast) will be cast into a lake of fire. The aim of the letter is to inspire hope and faithfulness among Christians being persecuted. Hope is located in the fact that Christ is victorious and that his followers who remain faithful in spite of persecution will be victorious with him in the end.

Book Outline¹

Revelation can be structured around six cycles of visions as follows:

1. Greetings and Inaugural Vision (1:1-20)
 - a. Prologue (1:1-3)
 - b. Greetings (1:4-8)
 - c. Inaugural Vision (1:9-20)
2. The First Cycle: The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
 - a. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
 - b. Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)
 - c. Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)
 - d. Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)
 - e. Letter to Thyatira (2:18-29)
 - f. Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)
 - g. Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)
 - h. Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)
3. The Second Cycle: Heavenly Throne Vision and the Seven Seals (4:1-8:5)
 - a. The Heavenly Throne Vision (4:1-11)

¹ This outline is an adaptation of Koester's outline of the book in *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. John J. Collins, vol. 38A of *Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2014).

- b. The Scroll with the Seven Seals and the Lamb (5:1-14)
- c. The Opening of the First Six Seals (6:1-17)
 - i. Seal 1: White Horse (6:1-2)
 - ii. Seal 2: Red Horse (6:3-4)
 - iii. Seal 3: Black Horse (6:5-6)
 - iv. Seal 4: Pale-Green Horse (6:7-8)
 - v. Seal 5: Prayers of the Martyrs (6:9-11)
 - vi. Seal 6: The Great Earthquake (6:12-17)
- d. The Sealing of the 144,000 and the Great Multitude
 - i. The Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1-8)
 - ii. The Great Multitude (7:9-17)
- e. The Seventh Seal: Prayer in Heaven (8:1-5)
 - i. Silence for Prayer (8:1-2)
 - ii. Prayers Offered and Fire Hurling Down (8:3-5)
- 4. The Third Cycle: The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:18)
 - a. Trumpets 1-4 Affect Land, Sea, and Sky (8:6-13)
 - i. Trumpet 1: Hail, Fire, and Blood Harm the Land (8:6-7)
 - ii. Trumpet 2: Burning Mountain Thrown Into the Sea (8:8-9)
 - iii. Trumpet 3: Falling Star Falls Into Fresh Waters (8:10-11)
 - iv. Trumpet 4: Darkening of the Luminaries in the Sky (8:12)
 - v. An Eagle Announces Three Woes (8:13)
 - b. Trumpet 5: Demonic Locusts (9:1-12)
 - i. Opening the Abyss (9:1-6)
 - ii. Armies of the Destroyer (9:7-12)
 - c. Trumpet 6: Demonic Cavalry (9:13-21)
 - i. Demonic Hordes at the Euphrates (9:13-19)
 - ii. Wrath Does Not Bring Repentance (9:20-21)
 - d. Interlude: The Open Scroll (10:1-11:2)
 - i. The Angel with the Open Scroll (10:1-7)
 - ii. John Receives the Scroll (10:8-10)
 - iii. Measuring the Temple (11:1-2)
 - e. Interlude Continues: Two Witnesses (11:3-14)
 - f. The Seventh Trumpet: The Kingdom Comes (11:15-18)
- 5. The Fourth Cycle: The Dragon, the Beasts, and the Faithful (11:19-15:4)
 - a. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (11:19-15:4)
 - b. The Beast from the Sea (12:18-13:10)
 - c. The Beast from the Land (13:11-18)
 - d. Followers of the Lamb and the Beast (14:1-13)
 - e. Harvest for Salvation and Reading for Judgment (14:14-20)
 - f. All Nations Will Worship the Lord (15:1-4)
- 6. The Fifth Cycle: The Seven Bowls and the Fall of Babylon (15:5-19:10)
 - a. Five Bowls Poured on Earth and the Beast's Throne (15:5-16:11)
 - b. Bowls Six and Seven: Armageddon and Earthquake (16:12-21)
 - c. Interlude: Babylon the Whore (17:1-18)
 - d. Interlude Continued: Fallen is Babylon (18:1-24)
 - e. Hallelujah! God Almighty Reigns (19:1-10)

7. The Sixth Cycle: From the Beast's Demise to the New Jerusalem (19:11-22:5)
 - a. The Beast and False Prophet are Conquered (19:11-21)
 - b. Millennial Kingdom, Defeat of Satan, Last Judgment (20:1-15)
 - c. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1-8)
 - d. Conclusion (22:6-21)

Important Symbols in Revelation²

Symbol	Meaning	References
Seven	Perfection	1:12, 16, 20; 4:5; 13:1; 17:7-10
Lampstands	Specific churches or individuals belonging to God	1:12, 20; 11:4
Flames	Clarity and purity	1:14; 2:18; 19:12
Ten	Completeness	2:10; 12:3
Twenty-four elders	Unity of all God's people throughout time	4:4, 10; 5:8, 14; 19:4
Sea	Separation	4:6; 15:2; 21:1
Seal on the scroll	Identifies the individuals authorized to open the scroll	5:1-9; 6:1; 7:2; 9:4-5
Horns	Power and victory	5:6; 9:13; 12:3
Eyes	Knowledge and awareness	5:6; 19:12
144,000	Multiplied perfection and the complete people of God	7:4; 14:1, 3
Trumpets	Declaring judgments and God's arrival	8:7-11:19
Beasts	Twisted human character and kingdoms	11:7; 13:1-12; 15:2; 17:3
Bowls	Wrath	16:2-21
Woman	Israel	12:1-6, 13
Great Red Dragon	Satan	12:3-13:11
Babylon	A wicked, earthly kingdom	14:8; 17:5; 18:2-24
666	Multiplied imperfection and Nero	13:18
Bride	Christ's church	18:23; 19:7; 21:9

The Seven Seals

Seal 1	White horse with a mounted archer.
Seal 2	Red horse with a rider who takes peace from the earth
Seal 3	Black horse with a rider holding scales announcing inflation
Seal 4	Pale green horse whose rider was named "death"
Seal 5	Martyrs cry out from under the altar requesting vindication
Seal 6	Earthquake causing the luminaries to fall/darken
Interlude	Sealing of the 144,000
Seal 7	Seven Trumpets and Golden Sensor of Prayers Cast to the Earth

The Seven Trumpets (8:7-11:19)

The seven trumpets are *restrained* judgments from heaven and are sent in response to the prayers of the saints in heaven.

Trumpet	Reference	Result
Trumpet 1	8:7	Hail, fire, and blood—one-third burned

² This table is an adaption from the ESV Study Bible.

Trumpet 2	8:8-9	Burning mountain cast into the sea—one-third burned
Trumpet 3	8:10-11	A burning star falls into fresh water—one-third embittered
Trumpet 4	8:12	Sun, moon, and stars darkened—one-third darkened
Trumpet 5 (1 st woe)	9:1-11	Demonic locusts from the abyss—pain inflicted
Trumpet 6 (2 nd woe)	9:13-21	Demonic cavalry—one-third killed
Trumpet 7 (3 rd woe)	11:15-19	God's Kingdom comes

Satan's Replacement of God's Truth

God's Truth		Satan's Replacement	
The real Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	1:4-5	A false trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet	16:13; 20:10
Lamb standing as though it had been slain	5:6	Many-headed beast with mortal wound healed	13:3
Sealing of the saints	7:2-3	Mark of the beast	13:16-18
Bride in white	19:7-8	Prostitute in purple and scarlet	17:1-6

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 — Greetings and Inaugural Vision of Jesus

Chapter 1 comprises John's greeting to the seven churches and the inaugural vision. While John's greeting checks all the boxes of a conventional greeting in an ancient letter, his greeting is also unique in that it also identifies the letter as apocalyptic (1:1) and prophetic (1:3). John's greeting also includes a declaration about Jesus's saving work (1:5-7).

Following the greeting John recounts his initial vision of Jesus himself, adorned like the Son of Man. The characteristics of Jesus in the vision affirm his divinity as well as his identity as the Messiah. The glorious vision of Jesus in chapter 1 sets the tone for Jesus as the one who is later revealed as the lamb who was slain, the faithful witness who fulfills God's redemptive purposes for human history and ultimately all of the creation.

Trait	Meaning
Like the "son of man"	Human-like; Messiah (Daniel 7:13-14)
Long robe with golden sash	Priestly; intermediary
White hair	Wisdom and dignity
Eyes like fire	Wisdom, knowledge, perception
Feet like burnished bronze	Strength and endurance of his kingdom
Voice like many waters	Power
Seven stars in his right hand	Sovereignty over churches and the course of history
Face shining like the sun	Divinity

Chapter 2

Chapter two begins the letters to the seven churches. It comprises the letters to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. Each of the letters to the seven churches follows the following standard formula which includes an address to the angel of the church, a trait of Jesus from the inaugural vision, a reminder that Jesus is aware of their circumstances, a commendation and encouragement (except for Sardis and Laodicea who receive no commendation), a rebuke (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia, which receive only commendation and encouragement), and promise of eternal life for the faithful.

Church	Trait from the inaugural vision	Commendation	Rebuke	Promise of eternal life
Ephesus	The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.	Endured patiently in not tolerating the teaching of false apostles and they hate the work of the Nicolaitans	Abandoned the love they had at first	To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'
Smyrna	The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.	Patiently enduring the persecution of those from the "synagogue of Satan"	None	Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.
Pergamum	The words of him who has a sharp, two-edged sword	Enduring the persecution from dwelling where Satan's throne is.	Tolerance of the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans	To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'
Thyatira	The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.	Patient endurance and growth in works	Tolerance for the woman Jezebel who promotes a sexual promiscuity	The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'
Sardis	The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.	None	Reputation of being alive but is dead.	The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angel.
Philadelphia	The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.	They have little power but have remained faithful under the persecution of Jews.	None	The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.
Laodicea	The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.	None.	They are neither hot nor cold (i.e., neither bring healing nor nourishment to the world around them). They think they are rich but are poor.	The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Chapter 3 — Letters to Laodicea, Philadelphia, and Sardis

Chapter 3 continues the letters to the seven churches and includes letters to the churches at Laodicea, Philadelphia, and Sardis.

Chapter 4 — *Vision of Worship in the Heavenly Throne-Room*

Chapter 4 begins a new section with the next cycle of visions. It comprises a vision of the throne room and heavenly worship. Those present in God's throne room are the four beasts before the throne (i.e., throne guardians representing all of the creation in worship), the twenty-four elders (i.e., symbolic of the entire church in their future glory), and God the Father. Surrounding the throne are elements that are consistent with Old Testament revelations of God's throne room (i.e., something like a sea of crystal under the one on the throne, a prism of colors reflecting the divine light of God, lightning, thunder, and an array of bright colors).

This vision sets up for the next chapter which introduces the lamb before the throne who alone is worthy to open the sealed scroll that contains God's redemptive plans for the creation and the content of Revelation 12–22. This vision would serve as encouragement to the original audience by way of a reminder that while there are earthly kings, dominions, thrones, and rulers that are corrupt and hostile to Christians, God's reign is eternal, real, and ultimate, even though it is unseen. His power is above all, and his purposes will be carried out, which means that the persecution of the church is entirely under God's control and therefore limited.

Chapter 5 — *The Lamb Is Worthy*

Chapter five narrows the throne-room vision to the scroll that is in the right hand of God the Father who sits on the throne, and to Jesus as the slain lamb who alone is worthy to open the scroll. Because the slain lamb alone is worthy to open the scroll, heavenly worship extends to the Lamb along with the one seated on the throne. The symbolism here communicates that Jesus is in a unique category of being. He is worthy of worship (divine) and what he accomplished in his death (appearing like a lamb that was slain) means that he alone fulfills the redemptive purposes of God in the creation (i.e., saves)

It is assumed here among readers (along with John), that the content of the scroll details the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes in the world as it approaches its end. In other words, the scroll contains "the things that must soon take place" (1:1). As Jesus will open the scroll, the "things that must soon take place" will unfold and God's redemptive purposes fulfilled.

Chapter 6 — *Seals 1-6*

Chapter six details the opening of the six seals. The events that occur from the opening of the six seals are as follows:

Seal	Event	Meaning
Seal 1	White horse with a mounted archer.	Foreign invasion
Seal 2	Red horse with a rider who takes peace from the earth	Internal uprising
Seal 3	Black horse with a rider holding scales announcing inflation	Famine
Seal 4	Pale green horse whose rider was named "death"	Death
Seal 5	Martyrs cry out from under the altar requesting vindication	Anticipation of judgment
Seal 6	Earthquake causing the luminaries to fall/darken	Complete catastrophe

Chapter 7 — *The 144,000 (an interlude between seals 1-6 and seal 7)*

Chapter seven is an interlude between seals 1-6 and the final, seventh seal. That interlude builds toward the suspense of the seventh seal as it announces the sealing/marketing of the people of God symbolized in the figure 144,000. This figure is the sum total of 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.³ After hearing the 12,000 numbered from the tribes of Israel, John turns to see—to his surprise—that those standing before the throne in

³ Not all the tribes are mentioned, and the list of tribes is not the traditional list (Dan is omitted and Joseph and Manasseh (and not Ephraim) are included). Some interpreters believe that the 144,000 are ethnic Jews who will be saved in the end. Most interpreters, however, believe that the 144,000 is symbolic for *all* God's people.

worship are not merely ethnic Jews, but people from every nation, tribe, peoples, and languages (7:9) who worship both God on the throne and the Lamb. These are sealed so that the wrath from the seven trumpets will not harm God's people.

Chapter 8 — Silence in Heaven and Trumpets 1-4

The lamb opens the seventh seal in chapter eight. Immediately upon opening the last seal there is silence in heaven for thirty minutes (probably a silence for the context of prayer). After the silence, seven angels appear with seven trumpets and a golden sensor carrying the prayers of the saints is cast down to the earth and thereby starts the cycle of the seven trumpets.

The remainder of the chapter (8:6-13) details the events associated with the first four trumpets.

Trumpet	Event
Trumpet 1	Hail, fire, and blood—one-third burned
Trumpet 2	Burning mountain cast into the sea—one-third burned
Trumpet 3	A burning star falls into fresh water—one-third embittered
Trumpet 4	Sun, moon, and stars darkened—one-third darkened

Chapter eight ends with an eagle flying overhead announcing that three woes are to come. This increases the anticipation of a climactic ending with the last three trumpets.

Chapter 9 — Trumpets 5 and 6

Trumpets five and six sound in chapter nine. As for trumpet five, a fallen angel is given the keys to the abyss, which he opens to release smoke which darkens the sky and releases a hoard of demonic locusts. The locusts have power to inflict pain, but not to kill. Trumpet six, which summons a demonic cavalry, kills a third of the earth. Chapter nine ends with the declaration that the pain and earth inflicted by the six trumpets did not inspire those in rebellion against God to repent (9:21). This declaration increases anticipation for the seventh and final trumpet.

Trumpet	Event
Trumpet 5 (first woe)	Demonic locusts from the abyss—pain inflicted
Trumpet 6 (second woe)	Demonic cavalry—one-third killed

Chapter 10 — The Mighty Angel and Eating the Scroll (Interlude, Part 1)

As it was with the seven seals, there is an interlude before the sounding of the final trumpet. The chapter ten details the first of the two-part interlude which describes a giant/mighty angel holding an open scroll in his hand.⁴ John then hears seven thunders but is instructed to seal up what the thunders say. He is then instructed to take the scroll from the hand of the angel and to eat the scroll, which will be sweet in his mouth but bitter to his stomach. After eating the scroll, he is told again that he must prophecy to “many peoples and nations and languages and kings” (10:11). This instruction indicates that the content of the scroll is the remainder of the book of Revelation and the “things that must soon take place” (1:1).

Chapter 11 — Measuring the Temple and The Two Witnesses (Interlude, Part 2)

Chapter eleven is the second part of the two-part interlude prior to the finale of the seventh trumpet. At the beginning of the chapter John is instructed to measure the temple, which, like the sealing of the 144,000 in chapter seven (which was also an interlude), marks off the people of God in preparation for the final trumpet. After the measuring of the temple, it is declared that God will give authority to two witnesses in the

⁴ Some interpreters take this scroll to be different than the scroll that was opened by the Lamb in the previous chapters. Most interpreters, however, understand this to be the same scroll.

likeness of Moses (turning water to blood) and Elijah (shutting off the rain) who would prophesy for 1,260 days (3.5 years). The witnesses will proclaim truth (speak fire) and it will devour those who rebel against God should they attempt to harm the witnesses.

After prophesying for 3.5 years, the two witnesses will be killed by the beast that arises from the bottomless pit. This is the first mention of the beast, which is later defined as the city of Babylon (represented corrupt human empires) who serves and is controlled by the dragon, who is Satan. After shaming the witnesses by leaving their corpses in the street, they will be raised to life by God for all to see and then ascend into heaven in the same manner as Jesus.

Some interpreters take these two witnesses to be two literal individuals, and in some cases the return of Moses and Elijah. Other interpreters take the two witnesses as symbols for the collective people of God who are all “witnesses” and who will experience bodily resurrection and glorification in the end.

After the ascension of the witnesses, the final trumpet sounds, and ushers onto earth the Kingdom of God. The response to the Kingdom come is that the twenty-four elders worship God. Many interpreters take this chapter to be a summary of the fate of the world and the church.

At the end of chapter eleven John sees another vision, namely, “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail” (11:19). This opening of the heavenly temple likely marks the start of a new series of visions that details the content of the scroll and the remainder of the book of Revelation. As Koester notes, “Accordingly, the sight of the heavenly ark introduces visions in which God will do battle against the forces of evil. These will culminate in the destruction of those who destroy the earth (Rev 11:18).”⁵

Chapter 12 — *The Woman and the Dragon*

Chapter twelve begins the fourth cycle of visions with a vision of the great red dragon’s (i.e., Satan’s) attack on a resplendent woman who gives birth to the Messiah. The identity of the woman has been debated by interpreters through the centuries. The most likely interpretation is that the woman symbolizes the people of God (inducing ancient Israel and the followers of Jesus)—in the likeness of Mary—who bring the reign of Christ into the world through their faithfulness and suffering. Satan, of course, is extremely hostile to Christians in their faithfulness that advances the kingdom of Christ because Christ is the one who will crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 1:15). War breaks out in heaven as a divine response to the dragon’s attempt to overpower God’s Messiah (12:7). This cosmic battle that ensues in the heavenlies between good and evil are ultimately what’s behind the visible persecution of the church for John’s readers. *The collection vision reveals that while the dragon claims authority and power (seven diadems and striking down the stars), that it is the child of the woman (who is resplendent from heaven) who has legitimate authority. The dragon lashes out at the child and the woman because they are the ultimate threat to the legitimacy of his claim.* Furthermore, while God has given authority to Jesus, the dragon has given authority to the beast, who dominates the nation (and is the focus of subsequent sections).

Meaning of Symbols in Revelation 12	
Symbol	Meaning
The woman	The people of God
The child	Jesus
The child being swept up to heaven	Jesus’s victory over death and exaltation

⁵ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, ed. John J. Collins, vol. 38A of *Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2014), 560.

Clothed with sun, the moon underfoot, and crowned with stars	Belonging to God
Woman groaning in childbirth	The agony of witnessing to Jesus in a hostile world
Great red dragon	Satan, cruelty, and chaos
Seven heads and ten horns of the red dragon	Threat of tremendous magnitude
Seven diadems of the dragon	Counterpart to the woman's crown of stars. Claim to sweeping power and authority.
The dragon's sweeping down a third of the stars	Hostile arrogance; aspiration for dominion.
Nourishment of the woman in the wilderness for 1,260 days	God's provision for the church in times of tribulation and the limit of persecution.
Three-and-a-half years	The entire time between the Messiah's exaltation and final return.
The river from the mouth of the dragon	False accusations against the church and teachings that encourage Christians to accommodate secular worship practices.
The earth swallowing up the river	God protecting the church against the false witness of Satan
Leaving Babylon to go to the desert	Disengaging from social, economic, and religious practices that are deemed incompatible with faith.
Children of the woman	Christians

Chapter 13 — The First and Second Beasts

Chapter 13 envisions the rising up of two beasts, one rising out of the sea and the other out of the earth. Both beasts are authorized and empowered by the dragon and therefore enemies of God and his people. Their adversarial role is highlighted through the claim to power (ten horns, seven heads, and ten diadems), and blasphemy. For John's readers, they would have thought of the blasphemy of calling Roman emperors "sons of god," or "god," or even "savior." The first beast—who bears a striking resemblance to the dragon—is revealed to have a mortal wound that was healed. It is possible that this account links to the rumor that Nero had faked his own death to later return. This mimics Jesus as the lamb that was slain yet came back to life. Mimicking Jesus *via* surviving a lethal wound is the basis for the beast's claim to having authority and dominion. While having authority, its authority is limited to 3.5 years. Christians are called to remain faithful during the time of persecution from the beast (13:10).

The second beast, which rises out of the earth and is the third member of the demonic trinity (the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast on the land), has horns like a lamb and speaks like a dragon, symbolizing that it masquerades as one having authority like Jesus, but is the servant of Satan. He looks like Jesus until he speaks. It also encourages the worship of the first beast. God shares his glory with the Lamb, and the Lamb share his reign with his followers. As the demonic counterpart, the beast shares the power and authority of Satan. The beast from the sea derives its authority from healing from a mortal wound, the second beast—like the two witnesses—is honored/respected due to its signs and miracles. The signs and miracles of the beast, however, deceive the nations rather than leading to worship of God and the Lamb. It is this second beast who causes followers to be marked with the number 666 on the right hand or forehead. Only those with the mark can buy or sell, which probably relates to the images of deified roman emperors on ancient Roman currency. John reveals that 666 is the number of a man (13:18). Most interpreters take this as the numeric equivalent of the name "Nero Caesar," "the supreme embodiment of hostility to Christians."⁶ It ultimately indicates the height of human arrogance in that it symbolizes humanity's attempt to reach God's perfection, which fails.

⁶ Ibid.

Chapter 14 — The Lamb and the 144,000

Chapter 14 begins with the vision of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with his 144,000 who are marked as God's people. The mountain location holds the high-ground over the land and the sea thereby highlighting the supremacy of Christ's power and authority over that of the beast of the sea and the beast of the land (and by extension, the dragon).

After seeing this vision, John hears the sound of (true) worship. This true worship is in contrast to those who worship to demonic trinity (i.e., dragon, beast, and false prophet). The true worshippers of the one true God have been redeemed, are blameless, and tell no lies (14:4-5). John is also making very obvious what may have eluded his audience: one cannot be neutral in the cosmic battle. One is either sealed for God and the Lamb, or in service to the beast. There is no neutral middle.

Immediately following this vision of worship three angels appear in rapid succession. John sees the first angel flying overhead announcing the gospel to all people and exhorting listeners to "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth and the springs of water" (14:7). This declaration is both a corrective to the worship of imposter deities and an invitation to join the 144,000 prior to the judgment of the creation.

John then sees a second angel announcing that Babylon, the one who deceived the world into hedonism, is fallen. Babylon here is a symbol of human arrogance and secular government systems as is consistent with the first government to destroy the Jerusalem temple (and Rome destroyed the second). John then sees a third angel who announces the worshippers of the beast and those with the mark of the beast will receive judgment from God (literally, "drink from God's wrath"). That wrath is eternal punishment. Another voice calls out from heaven declaring eternal rest of those who are in Jesus.

Following all of this John sees "one like a son of man" who comes on a cloud with a sharp sickle in his hand, a symbol of judgment. This one is either Jesus or an angel, although it's likely an angel because "another angel" is mentioned in v. 18. He then goes on to "reap the harvest" in response to an angel who suggests it. Another angel—who too has a sickle in-hand—then comes out from the altar and harvest the grapes of the vineyard that is then trodden in the winepress that is the wrath of God.

Chapter 15 — Conquerors Worship and Seven Angels with Seven Plagues

In chapter 15 has two parts. The first is a vision of the redeemed (15:1-7) and the second an introduction to the final round of wrath in the seven bowls (15:5-8). John first sees the redeemed ("those who conquered the beast") standing beside a sea of glass. This calls back to the vision of the heavenly worship in chapter 4. This is a promise of the destiny of future glory for those who are faithful. They will worship in his presence. They also sing the song of Moses while standing next to the sea of glass. This compares their deliverance to the Israelite deliverance from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 15). The difference is that here their song is focused on the conversion of the world, rather than the defeat of their enemies. Then John sees seven angels exit the "tent of witness" with seven plagues. It is one of the four living creatures (throne guardians) who gives the angels the bowls of wrath (bowls continue the wine reference in the previous chapter (i.e., "drinking the wrath of God"). The chapter closes with the declaration that no one can enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues are executed.

Chapter 16 — The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath

Chapter 16 details the seven bowls of God's wrath, which do not inspire the nations to repent. Each of the bowls of wrath are poured out in different locations with different results, yet in the likeness of the plagues of Egypt in Exodus. The great city Babylon is ultimately humbled, but not repentant, as a result of the wrath. Whether these seven bows of wrath are chronologically subsequent to early cycles of judgment (seals and trumpets) is debated. It could be that they are a retelling of previous cycles but with different emphases.

Bowl	Location of outpouring	Result
Bowl 1	The earth	Harmful sores
Bowl 2	The sea	Sea turned to blood and everything thing in the sea died
Bowl 3	Rivers and springs	Turned to blood and the announcement of justice for the slaughtered witnesses
Bowl 4	The sun	People scorched with fire
Bowl 5	The throne of the beast	Darkness over the kingdom of the beast
Bowl 6	Euphrates	Water dried up to prepare for the arrival of the kings of the east and for battle
Bowl 7	The air	Earthquake

Chapter 17 — The Great Prostitute and the Beast

Chapter 17 presents another perspective of Babylon/Rome/Beast. As a sharp contrast to the woman in Revelation 12 and the bride of Christ in 18-22, Babylon is depicted as a prostitute who is adorned in expensive clothes and jewelry. John is carried away to the wilderness so that he can get perspective on the prostitute (i.e., see from a different angle) which reveals her hidden ugliness. Because the woman is described as sitting on the beast, some argue that the prostitute is the antichrist and the Beast the human government. On the one hand, the beast forces loyalty and participation in its systems. On the other hand, the prostitute lures and seduces individuals into participation by appealing to carnal desires.

The villainy of the prostitute is highlighted by the fact that she has a blasphemous name, associated with immorality, and is drunk on the blood of the martyrs.

Imagery of the Prostitute	Meaning
The prostitute	Babylon
Expensive clothing and jewelry	Prosperity
Her name “mother of prostitutes and the earth’s abominations”	The lust of non-Christian societies for sensual pleasure and rejection of restraint for carnal desires.
Seated on many waters	The expanse of the Beast’s empire (v. 15, 18)
Seven heads	The seven mountains of Rome/seats of government (v. 9); seven kings (v. 10)
Ten horns	Possibly represent all of the earth’s kings who are deceived by the beast and gathered for a short-lived, final, futile insurrection against the Lamb
Holding a cup of abominations and sexual immorality	Sinister seduction
Five kings who have fallen, one who is, and one who is yet to come	Unsure the meaning, but it is clear that their reign is short.

Chapter 18 — Babylon is Judged

Chapter 18 begins with the declaration of judgment from a mighty angel against Babylon/Rome/the Beast which symbolizes the city of man (vv. 1-3). A second voice then encourages God’s people to depart from the fallen city in order to escape God’s punishment of the city. The chapter then moves onto a poetic description of the inhabitants mourning the fall of the city (e.g., kings, merchants, and shipmasters). The chapter ends with a mighty angel throwing a great millstone into the sea as a symbol of what will happen to Babylon. The imagery (being swallowed up) communicates complete annihilation.

Chapter 19 — Praise for Judgment and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb

Chapter 19 moves into a heavenly celebration of God’s judgement (vv. 1-5). All of heaven praise God for ending the corruption and immorality of Babylon. Following the celebration is a description of the famous marriage

supper of the Lamb (vv. 6-12). God's victory over evil culminates in a wedding meal between the Bride (i.e., the church) and the Lamb (i.e., Christ). The church is pure, "clothed in fine linen, bright and pure" (v. 8). This is a celebration of God's redemption of his people, but also the celebration of having escaped final judgment on the basis of the righteousness of the Lamb. This imagery of the Bride of Christ and the Lamb is, once again, a sharp contrast to the beast and the prostitute.

Chapter 19 closes with the image of a Christ as a rider on a white horse (vv. 11–21). Here Christ is depicted as a faithful, true, and righteous divine warrior who wages war against evil with the help of heavens armies. The beast and human kings respond by gathering to make war against Christ, but they are not victorious. The beast is captured along with the false prophet and the two are thrown into the lake of fire. The "rest" (assuming this means those with the mark of the beast) are "slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh."

Chapter 20 — The Millennial Reign and the White Throne of Judgement

Chapter 20 comprises the telling of the famous millennial reign of Christ. It begins with a great angel seizing the dragon (i.e., Satan) and binding him with a chain and throwing him into a sealed pit for 1,000 years, "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

In this image, John also sees faithful Christians reigning with Christ for the thousand-year period. After the thousand years, the "rest of the dead" came to life in the "first resurrection". After the thousand years, Satan is released from the pit, calls on Gog and Magog for a final battle against the powers of good. In their attempt to destroy the saints, they are destroyed by fire from heaven and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur to join the beast and the false prophet (vv. 7-10).

John also sees the great white throne of judgment where all peoples are judged, and Death and Hades are also thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death. Everyone's name who is not written in the book of life is thrown into the lake of fire.

There is more debate over the interpretation of this chapter than any other chapter in the book of Revelation. The debate and various views that come into play in the debate are much too complex to treat here. See **Appendix B** for resources that cover the various views of the debate.

Chapter 21 — The New Heaven and New Earth

In Chapter 21 John sees the first earth passed away and the new heaven and new earth come. Together with the new heavens and earth John sees "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as bride adorned for her husband" (v. 2). This is the redeemed creation and restored dwelling place to be shared by God and his people.

The second half of the chapter provides a more detailed description of the New Jerusalem. It has a high wall with twelve gates that are guarded by angels along with twelve foundations marked by the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. An angel measures the city, which is 12,000 stadia (1,380 miles) long, wide, and height (i.e., a 12,000³ cube). The city is also adorned with precious jewels and metals. John notes that there is no temple there because the city is the temple (i.e., the place of God's presence with his people). This city is a contrast with the city of man marked by immorality, rebellion, corruption, violence, and wickedness. It is those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life who are citizens in the city.

Chapter 22 — The River of Life and the Return of Christ

Chapter 22 describes a river flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb in the middle of the street of the city and the tree of life yielding fruit. The leaves of the tree are for healing the nations. This is an image of God's

reign restored and God's intentions for the creation redeemed. God's name is on the foreheads of the redeemed (i.e., the seal of the saints in contrast to the mark of the beast).

The book ends with John's epilogue where he identifies himself once against and encourages his readers to obey the words of the prophecy in order to remain righteous and faithful until the return of Christ.

Appendix A — Glossary

Amillennialism - The belief that the period of one thousand years described in Revelation 20:1-10 does not refer to an end-time period and is instead a metaphor for all or a substantial part of the period between Christ's incarnation and second coming. This appears to be the reading of Revelation 20:1-10 assumed in the major reformation of faith.⁷

Antichrist – The church's theological enemies are described as “antichrist” in several New Testament passages (1 John 2:18, 22; 1 John 4:3; 2 John 7). In popular discourse, however, “the Antichrist” is a single figure who tends to combine elements of the various eschatological enemies described in Daniel and Revelation. The older Protestant identification of the Antichrist as the Pope has given way to a range of other opinions under the influence of *futurist premillennialism* and *preterism*.

Apocalyptic – A biblical genre, with disputed characteristics, that has given its name to a wider approach to the understanding of world affairs. Apocalyptic literature emphasizes the sudden (and often immanent) end of all things. In contrast to the millennium, the apocalyptic mode can seem dualistic (evil is in constant struggle with goodness), pessimistic (world conditions are not likely to improve), deterministic (the future has been planned by God), ethically passive (if conditions are not like to improve, there is little that can be done to make the world a better place), and final.

Beast, the – Babylon/Rome/the city of man

Christian Reconstruction – The belief, developed in the 1960s, that the *postmillennial* coming of Christ will be preceded by the establishment of “godly rule” on earth. This “godly rule” will be marked by an unprecedented revival of Christianity and the international adoption of the Mosaic judicial and penal codes.

Dispensationalism - A variety of *premillennialism* which emerged in the 1830s to argue for a radical disjunction between Israel and the church and which teaches that the “secret rapture” will precede the *tribulation*.

Dispensationalists commonly mark seven distinct stages in the development of the history of redemption, which may or may not have different conditions of salvation. Dispensationalism has developed through three major stages: classical dispensationalism, which is best represented by the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; second edition 1917) and the writings of L.S. Chafer and J. Dwight Pentecost; revised dispensationalism, which is best represented by the *New Scofield Bible* (1967); and progressive dispensationalism, which is best represented by the writings of Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock.

Red Dragon, the – Satan/the Devil/the ancient serpent (Rev. 12:7-9).

Eschatology – Classically, the study of the “four last things”—death, judgment, heaven, and hell—but the terms has been expanded in use to refer to the other aspects of end of the world belief. Evangelical eschatology can be either pessimistic, in its expectation of *apocalyptic* events, or optimistic, in its expectation of a millennium.

Futurism – This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method (taking a spiritual approach to the book) after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years. The first to develop once more a literal view of the book was Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit who wrote in the late sixteenth century to counter the Reformation antipapal interpretation. While he

⁷ Crawford Gribben, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

was not truly a futurist, he turned the attention back to the early fathers, and after him that view returned to prominence and stands alongside the others as equally viable.

Futurism believes that chapters 4–22 refer primarily to events that will take place at the end of history and usher in the eschaton. There are two forms of this approach, dispensationalism and what has been called “classical premillennialism.” Dispensationalists believe that God has brought about his plan of salvation in a series of dispensations or stages centering on his election of Israel to be his covenant people. Therefore, the church age is a parenthesis in this plan, as God turned to the Gentiles until the Jewish people find national revival (Rom. 11:25–32). At the end of that period, the church will be raptured, inaugurating a seven-year tribulation period in the middle of which the Antichrist will make himself known (Rev. 13) and instigate the “great tribulation” or great persecution of the 144,000 and others among Israel who have become Christians. At the end of that period will come the parousia as Christ returns in judgment, followed by a literal millennium (20:1–10), great white throne judgment (20:11–15), and the beginning of eternity in heavenly bliss (21:1–22:5). Classical premillennialism is similar but does not hold to dispensations. Thus there is only one return of Christ, after the tribulation period (Matt. 24:29–31; cf. Rev. 19:11–21), and it is the whole church, not just the nation of Israel, that passes through the tribulation period. Also, dispensationalists view themselves as literalists on the symbols, while the second school would take many of them to be symbolic (see above). There are some weaknesses of this school as well: it can develop a perspective that would remove its applicability to first-century Christians (see above on the “prophecy” movement), and it can often deteriorate to mere speculation cut off from first-century backgrounds. If all we have are events without symbolic/theological significance, much of the power of the book can be lost.⁸

Historicism – A system of hermeneutics that understands the New Testament prophecies to detail all or part of the course of history in the period before the second coming. The identification of the Pope as the Antichrist is common in Protestant historicist interpretation; but the identification of the establishment of Israel in 1948 as a fulfillment of prophecy also represents a historicist interpretive approach. “Historicist” *premillennialism*, one variant of which is represented in the writings of Hal Lindsey, should be distinguished from “historic” (i.e., non-dispensational) *premillennialism*, as advanced by G.E. Ladd, which may or may not be historicist, and which Lindsey would certainly oppose.

Idealism – This popular approach argues that the symbols do not relate to historical events but rather to timeless spiritual truths (so Hendriksen, Hoekema, P. Hughes). As such it relates primarily to the church between the advents, that is, between Christ’s first and second comings. Thus it concerns the battle between God and evil and between the church and the world at all times in church history. The seals, trumpets, and bowls depict God’s judgments on sinners at all times, and the beast refers to all the anti-Christian empires and rulers in history. Thus the book describes the victory of Christ and his people down through history. The millennium in this approach is not a future event but the final cycle of the book (so Hendriksen) describing the church age. There are certain strengths in this view: the centrality of theology for the book, the relevance for the church at all times, the symbolic nature of the book. But it has certain weaknesses as well: the absence of historical connections, the failure to see the future nature of many of the prophecies or to connect them in any way with history (as it seems the text does in several instances).⁹

⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 20–22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Millennium - A utopian period whose general characteristics are based on the description of the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1-10 and the prophecies of the renewal of the natural world in the Hebrew prophets. Its specific characteristics vary according to the interpreter, and the millennium can be used as a trope for a wide and sometimes contradictory range of political, cultural, and religious suppositions.

Postmillennialism - The belief that Christ will return after the millennium has substantially reformed life on earth. Postmillennialists can be either apocalyptic or gradualist and vary in the extent to which they believe the millennium can be expedited by their own effort. Postmillennialism has been revived among some conservative Presbyterians, particularly those with interests in *Christian Reconstruction*, but, among evangelicals more generally, remains much less popular than premillennialism.

Premillennialism - The belief that the second coming of Christ will take place before the millennium. Historic premillennialism teaches that Christ will return after the tribulation (and is consequently designated “post-tribulation”); this was the view of, for example, C.H. Spurgeon and G.E. Ladd. *Dispensational* premillennialism, developed from the works of J.N. Darby, argues that Christ will return for the “secret rapture” before the tribulation (and is consequently designated “pre-tribulation”). This rapture will “catch up” believers in order to take them into heaven while the *Antichrist* rages on earth. The second coming proper will take place at the end of the tribulation, and Christ will then use the millennium and reign over the world for one thousand years. Premillennialists debate whether believers will live on earth during the millennium and debate the specific roles of Israel and range of other powers in the end-times scenario.

Preterism – A system of hermeneutics that understands New Testament prophecies to be chiefly concerned with the Roman assault on Jerusalem and the end of Temple worship in ad 70.

Seven Golden Lampstands, the – the seven churches (Rev. 1:20)

Seven Stars, the – the seven angels to the seven churches (Rev. 1:20)

Tribulation - The belief (shared by many premillennialists) that the Bible predicts a final seven-year period of terrible suffering during which the Antichrist persecutes believers and God pours judgment on the world.

Whore, the – Babylon/Rome/the human city. The whore is a sharp contrast to the woman who gives birth to the Messiah in Revelation 12 as well as to the Bride of Christ in Revelation 19.

Appendix B — Resources on the Millennial Views

Videos

- [What is the Millennial Reign of Christ in Revelation 20? Amil, Premil or Postmil? - Dr. Thomas Schreiner](#)
- [The Millennium – Dr. Wayne Grudem](#)
- [The Return of Christ: When and How — Dr. Wayne Grudem](#)
- [Christ's Return and the Millennium — Dr. Gregg Allison](#)
- [Where Did Rapture Theology Come From? – Dr. Ben Witherington, III](#)
- [Is the Rapture Doctrine Biblical? – Dr. Ben Witherington, III](#)

Books

- Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).
- Darrel Bock and Stan Gundry, eds. *Three View on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1999).
- Craig Blaising and Doug Moo, eds. *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010).
- Crawford Gribben, *Evangelical Millennialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)
- —, *Survival and Resistance in Evangelical America: Christian Reconstruction in the Pacific Northwest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
- Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998)
- *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert Clouse (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977).