

## *Revelation - When and Who*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,<sup>2</sup> who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.<sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.<sup>4</sup> John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,<sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,<sup>6</sup> and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

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Today Dr. Ramsey and I will take a brief look at the Book of Revelation. I say brief, because any look at 404 verses of scripture, which is done during one worship service, has got to be brief, compared to the size of the topic. He and I will both look at the text, but we'll each see it through our own eyes as the Spirit has led us. Dr. Ramsey must read the text through eyes that have more education than mine. I can't help but read the text through eyes that have more years than his.

What is this text? We call it a book, but if you went to the book store and bought a book that was less than thirty pages long, you'd think it was awfully short to be called a book. Revelation is a letter. In the style of ancient letters, it begins by (1) giving the name of the sender, (2) specifies the recipient, and (3) follows that with a greeting or salutation. Hear the beginning of the second letter to Corinth. <sup>NRS</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:1 "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia (uh-KAY-yuh):<sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now hear <sup>NRS</sup> Revelation 1:4 "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come." It also ends like a letter. <sup>NRS</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:28 "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you." <sup>NRS</sup> Revelation 22:21 "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." So, this is a letter. We're reading somebody's mail.

Who wrote the letter? He says that his name is John. John is a common name today and it was a common name back then, too. We know about John the Baptist, John the son of Zebedee, and John Mark. But notice this. The Gospel of John never says that it was written by someone named John. First, Second, and Third John never say that they were written by someone named John. But John is the name that has been traditionally assigned to those texts. Revelation is the only text in the New Testament that says that someone named John wrote it. Who was this John who wrote Revelation? We don't know. It is very unlikely that it was the same person who wrote the gospel or the three short letters. While there are some similarities between the writing style of the gospel and the three short letters, the writing style of Revelation is very different. So we might call him John the Prophet, because that's what he does.

If we ran across a letter in an old box in the attic, we'd want to know not only who wrote it, but also where they were when they wrote it, when, and who it was that they wrote to. John says that he was on the island of Patmos when he had several visions. Patmos is an island in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece, about 30 miles off the coast of Turkey. It's very irregular in shape, ten miles long and six miles wide. One kind of punishment commonly used by the Romans was banishment and the island of Patmos was used for that purpose.

Who is the letter addressed to? It was written to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicia. If one traveled to these seven cities in this order, the route would be a rough semi-circle. John says that he heard a voice telling him to write down what he saw and send it to these seven churches. (1:10-11) Then John turned and saw a man holding seven stars and standing in the middle of seven lamp stands. The man said that the stars represent the angels of the seven churches and the lamp stands represent the seven churches. (1:20) The text is pretty emphatic that this letter is written to those seven churches. In fact, that's also repeated at the end of the letter.

We don't know for sure when it was written, but the most likely time was around 93-96 AD. The Romans had given the Jews special permission to worship their God and keep some of their religious traditions. Everyone else in the Roman Empire had to conform to some of the Roman traditions and pagan worship. In the early days of Christianity, most Christians were Jews. The Roman authorities considered Christianity to be a variety of Judaism, and they tended to leave the Christians alone. But as time went on, things changed. More and more Christians were converted gentiles, and there was increasing tension between Christians and non-Christians in the synagogues. And so, over time, Christianity looked less and less Jewish to an outsider. At the same time, the Roman emperors often declared their divinity - and became more insistent that people worship them. As the Christians lost their protection under the status of Jews, and the emperors became more determined to be worshipped, Christians came under more and more persecution. The persecution would come in waves and one of the early waves was during the later part of the reign of the emperor Domitian during the early 90's. In fact, Domitian was the first emperor who tried to force Christians to participate in Caesar worship.

It was a time of turmoil and instability. Roman troops were defeated by the Parthians (62), there were rebellions in Gaul (68), Germania (69), and Judea (66-70). After the death of the tyrant Nero (68) there were three emperors in the next two years. Earthquakes shook modern Turkey (60s), Vesuvius erupted (79) burying Pompeii and creating a widespread cloud of darkness, and there was famine in the early nineties.<sup>1</sup> During the rebellion in Judea, the city of Jerusalem was laid waste and the temple was destroyed. The apostles were all dead. The church in Jerusalem was scattered, perhaps completely gone.

The letter of Revelation was written during a period of turmoil, chaos, and confusion, written to seven specific churches that were also experiencing pressure to worship the emperor Domitian. John is highly focused on the situation. Revelation is a message for those churches, a message of encouragement and hope. It's a message "focused on the powerful presence of the risen Jesus [right then], in the community and in the world. The central message of Revelation is this: if Christ arose, the time of resurrection and the reign of God has begun."<sup>2</sup>

This is a strange document to our modern ears. The apocalyptic style is unfamiliar to us, but it was common for a few hundred years. We see some of that same form of writing in the book of Daniel. John is told to write "what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. (1:19) Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the "what is" and "what is to take place," especially since John sometimes jumps around helter-skelter between past, present, and future tenses in the same sentence. The Greek is really weird, disjointed, with complete disregard for grammar and syntax. Chapter 8, verse 13 literally reads, "And I saw, and I heard one eagle flying in midheaven saying in a loud voice, 'Alas, alas, alas for the inhabitants upon the earth from the remaining voices of the trumpet of the three angels about to sound the trumpet!'"<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it's helpful to think of much of Revelation as picturesque, as surrealistic, as word paintings in the imagination, as poetic images. It's also written very much in the language of the Old Testament. There are 404 verses in Revelation and 278 verses, almost seventy percent,

contain over 500 allusions to Old Testament passages. John was told to write what he saw - and he expressed himself using phrases borrowed from thirty-six books of the Old Testament.

The letter begins in verse one by saying that it is about what will take place soon and in verse three it says that the time is near. People have always wanted to understand Revelation as being all about them and the times they lived in, rather than about the seven churches and what they were going through. In the second century Montanus taught that the end was near and that the new Jerusalem would descend on the town of Pepuza in what is now Turkey. The beast of chapter thirteen has been identified with various popes, Martin Luther, Napoleon, Hitler, Sadam Hussein, and just about every evil or oppressive ruler in history. In the 1930s, some declared that the Blue Eagle displayed by merchants as part of the National Recovery Act was “the mark of the beast.” “No other part of the Bible has provided such a happy hunting ground for all sorts of bizarre and dangerous interpretations.”<sup>4</sup>

“If Revelation were ‘really’ a book of predictions of later events, such as the oil crisis in the Middle East, [or the cold war between Russia and the U.S.] it would have been meaningless to its first readers - and it wouldn’t have been a letter to them at all.”<sup>5</sup> Revelation is a pastoral letter and we must realize that “John had a message to the churches to which he was writing which concerned their own situation, that they understood the message, and that the modern interpreter cannot accept any interpretation of the book which its first readers would not have understood.”<sup>6</sup>

Revelation is not a secret code message containing the story of history from the time of “John to the end of the world. It is not a news report of the future nor is it science fiction.”<sup>7</sup> As a letter, Revelation was not written to the public at large. It was written to specific Christians in a specific place, time, and situation. And it was not written to us.<sup>8</sup> But just as letters written to the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and other cities contain lessons that we also need to hear today, so does this letter written to the seven churches in what is now Turkey. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” John writes that seven times. (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6, 13, 22) It’s still good advice today. Amen.

“The angel seemed to be the corporate personality of the church, its ethos or spirit or essence.”<sup>9</sup>

J. B. Phillips says that, in his visions, John is carried, not into some never-never land of fancy, but into the ever-ever land of God’s eternal Values and Judgments.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1989) p 10

<sup>2</sup> Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2003) p 3

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Phillips, *The Book of Revelation* (New York, Macmillan, 1958) p xi

<sup>4</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1989) p 4

<sup>5</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1989) p 24

<sup>6</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1989) p 50-51

<sup>7</sup> Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2003) p 5

<sup>8</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1989) p 7

<sup>9</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York, Doubleday, 1998) p 5; see Daniel chapter 10

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Phillips, *The Book of Revelation* (New York, Macmillan, 1958) p ix