

# Chapter Summary: Revelation

The book of Revelation has been interpreted in many ways through the centuries. But the starting point for reading Revelation (or any book of the Bible) well is to appreciate the meaning and impact it had on its first readers.

The book of Revelation is addressed to "the seven churches in the province of Asia." John wrote down the vision he received in order to describe for his readers "events that must soon take place." The seven brief letters at the beginning of the book shed much light on the situation facing these believers toward the end of the first century.

John himself has already been exiled to the island of Patmos for his testimony about Jesus. The followers of Jesus are experiencing pressure to participate in immoral feasts honoring the Roman gods in pagan temples, and local Jewish leaders seem to be denouncing believers as participating in a subversive sect serving a false Messiah. The seven letters to the seven churches largely warn of suffering and imprisonment, urging believers to "remain faithful even when facing death."

Adding to this pressure on believers, the Roman Empire was promoting a cult of emperor worship that had its origins a century earlier. A Roman inscription from 4 BC describes Caesar Augustus as "the god made manifest, the universal savior of human life. Land and sea have peace, the cities flourish in harmony and with an abundance of food, there is an abundance of all good things, people are filled with happy hopes for the future and with delight in the present."

This cult was especially strong in Asia Minor (that is, modern day Turkey), where the churches of Revelation were located. And now Emperor Domitian was demanding to be addressed as "Lord and God." Anyone who refused to participate in the cult faced the wrath of the vast majority of citizens, who were eager to curry favor with the emperor. Revelation was written to give strength and courage to Jesus' followers in this difficult situation. It urges them to persevere in their worship of the one true God and the one Lord over all other lords.

John wrote down the vision that Jesus presented to him, intending for it to be read by the seven churches in Asia Minor that it addresses. The vision is shared in the form of an apocalypse (meaning "unveiling"), a kind of writing that uses striking imagery in a highly symbolic way. For example, the driving force behind the persecution of believers in these visions is a dragon, which is later identified as "that old serpent, who is the devil, Satan."

The dragon summons a beast whose "seven heads" represent "seven hills" (a reference to the city of Rome) and who is "allowed to speak great blasphemies against God." For the original readers, this beast would have been identified as Emperor Domitian, who claimed to be "Lord and God." The meaning of many of Revelation's symbols can be discerned in this way, with an awareness both of the book's late first-century setting and of similar symbols used by Old Testament prophets.

After a greeting to the churches, John organizes the vision into four key parts, each introduced by the phrase "in the Spirit." John was "in the Spirit":

- On Patmos: the vision of the Son of Man and letters to the churches (Rev 1—3).
- In heaven: visions of God's reign in heaven and conflict on earth (Rev 4—16; 19:11—21:8).
- In the wilderness: the judgment of "Babylon" (the Roman Empire) (Rev 17 – 19:10).
- On a high mountain: the glorious new Jerusalem (Rev 21:9—22).

The book of Revelation brings a clear call to first-century believers to remain steadfast and to patiently endure the suffering that comes from being a part of God's Kingdom on earth. But it also brings a fitting close to the story of the entire Bible, presenting all God's people with reasons for a firm hope. God's first intentions for His people and His creation will be realized: God will defeat evil and reveal a new heaven and a new earth, the place where He will come and make His home with us.