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Lesson 1

Background of the Book of Revelation

The unique setting of the actual writing of Revelation foreshadows the action and color of the text. In this opening lesson we will be studying things about the book, such as where it originated and when. Such a study takes the book out of the “stranger to me” category, and gives us confidence, momentum, and interest as we proceed in our analysis of its text.

I. AUTHOR

Four times the author is identified by name as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Read the verses, and note how John relates himself to others. Both internal and external witness is strong in identifying this John as the beloved apostle, author of the gospel and the three epistles.¹ It is interesting to note that John does not name himself in the gospel or in his epistles, whereas he does so here. This may be because the very nature of prophecy calls for identification and credentials of the author.

II. DATE AND DESTINATION

John probably wrote this book around A.D. 96, at the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96). Domitian banished John to the isle of Patmos (see map) because of his Christian stand (Rev. 1:9). In such trying circumstances the apostle received visions from God, which he recorded on a scroll.

God directed John to send his inspired manuscript to seven churches in western Asia Minor (Turkey). Read the list of churches in 1:11, and observe on the map how the order of the

1. For more information about the biography and character of the apostle John, see *John* (Chicago: Moody, 1970) in this self-study series.

list was determined. There were other churches in Asia Minor at this time, such as the church at Colosse, to whom Paul wrote Colossians. But in the sovereign design of God the *designated* local recipients of this original manuscript were only the seven listed churches.² The larger intended audience of the book, however, was all people, everywhere, of all centuries (read 2:7, 11, 17, 19; 3:6, 13, 22).

III. HISTORICAL SETTING

Study chart A for an overview of the historical setting of the book of Revelation.³

Observe the following:

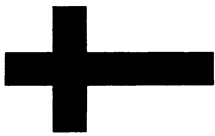
1. The change of area of John's ministry from Jerusalem to Asia Minor (particularly the city of Ephesus).
2. The age of the local churches of Asia Minor when Revelation was written.
3. An increasing intensity of imperial opposition to Christianity.⁴
4. John's writings, separated from the other New Testament books by a period of fifteen to twenty years, were given to the Christian church to complete the body of divine Scripture.

IV. JOHN'S EXPERIENCE OF INSPIRATION

The book of Revelation is the written record not of wild dreams, but of dramatic God-sent visions given to one of God's servants. John says he was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (1:10) when he heard and saw the things which he was commanded to write down. The man John appears from time to time as an active participant in the narrative of the book (e.g., 5:1-5), but for the most part he is only the recorder of the visions he beheld. In a sense the details of the visions, especially those concerning future events, were beyond John's ability to understand completely. The reality of Bible prophecy is not dependent on full comprehension by the prophet himself.⁵

2. More is said about this in the study of chapters 2 and 3.
3. For a very informative discussion of the status of Judaism and Christianity in the Roman Empire, where Revelation was written, consult Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, pp. 20-27.
4. The worst of persecution was yet to come for Christians, when John wrote Revelation. This made the ominous message of Revelation all the more relevant.
5. For example, the Old Testament prophets were not fully aware of all the details involved in the fulfillment of their prophecies about Christ's first coming.

HISTORICAL SETTING OF REVELATION



V. TITLE OF THE BOOK

Our English title *Revelation* is taken from the first word of the book (read 1:1). The Greek word is *apokalypsis*, which means the unveiling or uncovering of something previously hidden. A common illustration is that of a basket, with a lid on it, containing an unknown item. To “reveal” would be to take the lid off the basket, letting the item be seen at that time. Read the following verses where the words *reveal* and *revelation* or their equivalents appear with that meaning: Galatians 1:12; Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:7, 13; 4:13; 5:1; Daniel 2:19, 22, 28, 29, 30, 47; 10:1; 11:35.

VI. THEME

The opening verses of Revelation (read 1:1-13) identify this basic twofold theme of the book: (1) revelation of the Person, Jesus Christ; (2) revelation of instruction for Christians.⁶ As the book unfolds, these specifics appear over and over again.

CHRIST IN THE BIBLE

Chart B

OLD TESTAMENT	GOSPELS AND ACTS	EPISTLES	REVELATION
HIS MINISTRY PROPHESIED	HIS MINISTRY INITIATED	HIS MINISTRY INTERPRETED AND APPLIED	HIS MINISTRY CONSUMMATED AND HIS CLAIMS VINDICATED
(MESSIAH)	DEATH AND RESURRECTION		GLORY (KING)

A. Revelation of the Person Jesus Christ

1. *About Him.* Christ is the Judge, Redeemer, and triumphant King. Revelation is the climax of the Christolcentric theme of the Bible, shown in Chart B.

6. The genitive “of Jesus Christ” in 1:1 grammatically is either an objective genitive (i.e., Jesus is the one revealed), or subject genitive (i.e., Jesus is the one revealing). The intention of the passage is probably both, that is, revelation *about* Christ and revelation *from* Christ.

2. *From and by Him.* This in word (e.g., 1:2; 2:1-3:22) and in deed (e.g., 5:5).

B. Revelation of Instruction for Christians

1. *Prophecy.* Most of the book predicts events future to John's day, especially those of the end of time. And most of that predictive section describes divine judgments of sin; the last few chapters describe the glorious triumphs of Christ culminating in a thousand-year reign (20:1-6) and in an eternal heaven (chaps. 21-22).

2. *Historical perspective.* Revelation shows world history of the end times as God views it, and describes His application of justice to both individuals and nations. World history is sovereignly controlled by God, and will culminate in the Person of Jesus Christ (read 11:15).

3. *Doctrinal instruction.* If Revelation were the only book of the Bible, we would still have much light on the vital areas of truth, such as man, sin, angels, Satan, judgment, salvation, church, worship, heaven, hell, and God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

4. *Spiritual application.* Exhortation is another aspect of the theme of Revelation, made prominent in the book. As an example, read 1:3 and note the three words "readeth," "hear," and "keep."

VII. PURPOSES

Revelation is addressed to believers (God's "servants," 1:1), although its message is a loud and clear warning to unbelievers as well. It is a book "for a troubled age . . . in which the darkness deepens, fear spreads over all mankind, and monstrous powers, godless and evil, appear on the stage of history."⁷

The book encourages Christians to persevere under the stress of persecution, in hope of justice which must ultimately triumph at the enthronement of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords. As one has written, "Whenever the Church is threatened by destruction, and faith is dim and hearts are cold, then the Revelation will admonish and exhort, uplift and encourage all who heed its message."⁸ Christians living in John's day, under the growing threat of imprisonment and even death of emperor Domitian, found comforting refuge in the message of Revelation, even as have persecuted Christians of all the ages since then.

7. Wilbur M. Smith, "Revelation," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1492.

8. Martin Kiddle, the *Moffat New Testament Commentary, Revelation*, ed. James Moffatt (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1941), p. xlix.

The book of Revelation also warns Christians against the treacherous swamplands of apostasy with their tragic toll, and it appeals for faithful allegiance to Christ. The letters of chapters 2 and 3 especially emphasize this.

Revelation does not aim to give all the prophetic details of the end times. Nor is the full program of church history spelled out. Enough details are recorded to (1) describe the crucial events (such as the great white throne judgment, 20:11-15); (2) portray the large movements and trends of world history; and (3) teach spiritual principles underlying God's sovereign plan. These are the things that the student of the book of Revelation should inquire into.

VIII. APOCALYPTIC TYPE OF WRITING

Revelation is prophetic in character and apocalyptic in form.⁹ Here are some of its major features as apocalyptic literature:¹⁰

1. mainly eschatological (*eschatos*: last times)
2. written during times of persecution
3. visions abound
4. style generally figurative, with an abundance of symbols

IX. RELATION TO OTHER SCRIPTURES

The book of Revelation is the natural climax and conclusion to all the other Scriptures. Genesis is the book of beginnings ("In the beginning," Gen. 1:1); Revelation is the book of consummation ("for ever and ever," Rev. 22:5). And, as Revelation 22:13 boldly asserts, Jesus is the key to all of history, for He is "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."

A. Relation to the Old Testament

Allusions to Old Testament imagery and prophecy appear throughout Revelation, though there are no direct quotations as such. Of its 404 verses, it has been observed that 265 contain lines

9. Other apocalyptic books of the Bible are Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. The apocalyptic form of Revelation, because it was so different from the other New Testament books, had much to do with the delay in this book's being accepted as canonical by the Eastern church. The Western church, however, early recognized its divine inspiration.
10. In many ways Revelation differs from noncanonical apocalyptic writings, such as in its overall optimism, moral urgency, and identification of authorship.

that embrace approximately 550 Old Testament references. As one writer has said, “This book is the work of a Jew saturated with Old Testament prophecy, under the guidance of a word of Jesus and the inspiration of God.”¹¹ A few examples of allusions to the Old Testament are listed below. Read the passages involved.

OT	Revelation	OT	Revelation
Jer. 51	chap. 18 (Babylon)	Dan. 7:13; Zech. 12:10, 12	1:7
Dan. 7, 8	chap. 13 (2 beasts)	Dan. 7:9, 13; 10:5	1:14
Zech. 4	chap. 11 (olive trees and candlesticks)	Dan. 10:6; Ezek. 1:24	1:15
Dan. 12:7	12:14 (time periods)	Isa. 11:4; 49:2	1:16
Ex. 19:6	1:6	Isa. 44:6; 48:12	1:17
		Isa. 38:10	1:18

B. Relation to the New Testament as a Whole

Review Chart B, which shows some of this relationship. Spend more time thinking about how Revelation is a vital complement to the other New Testament books.

C. Relation to the Olivet Discourse

(Matt. 24:1-25:46; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36)

This would be a good time for you to read this prophetic discourse of Jesus concerning the end times and His second coming. Keep its prophecies in mind as you study Revelation. Some expositors consider the Olivet Discourse to be the key to an understanding of the prophetic calendar of Revelation.¹²

D. Relation to John's Other Writings

John was given the happy privilege of writing about the gospel of LIFE in three different kinds of Scripture. These may be compared thus:

11. See Smith, p. 1495.

12. See Wilbur M. Smith, *A Treasury of Books for Bible Study* (Natick, Mass.: Wilde, 1960), pp. 235-42, for an extensive comparative study of the two Scriptures.

The Fourth Gospel (biography):

Eternal LIFE for the Christian

Three Epistles (letters):

Divine LIFE in Christian living today

The Revelation (visions):

Victorious LIFE now and for eternity

It was not by coincidence that the last three inspired sentences penned by John were on such a victorious note:

Surely I [Jesus] come quickly.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all (Rev. 22:20-21).

REVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Recall what you have learned about this book's author, date of writing, and destination.

2. Describe the state of the Christian church in the Roman Empire when Revelation was written.

3. In your own words, identify the theme of Revelation. Make a list of its main subjects.

4. In what ways was Revelation relevant to the needs of Christians at the turn of the first century?

5. Do you think the original reader understood all the details of Revelation? Do you think John did? Is the book more understandable today in the light of history now past? Explain.

6. What are some of the main characteristics of Revelation as an apocalyptic writing?

7. What are the distinctive contributions of Revelation to the canon of Holy Scripture?

8. What do you anticipate learning in your study of the text of this last inspired book of God?
