

The Book of Revelation



Hieronymus Bosch. *St. John the Evangelist on Patmos* (oil on oak), c. 1489.
Gemäldegalerie: Berlin.

with
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Patmos and the 7 churches of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation

Traditional Author: St. John the Apostle

Traditional Date Written: A.D. 90-100

Period Covered: A.D. c. 100

All art—visual, musical or literary—mirrors the time and culture from which it emerges. And all art reflects the structural, rhetorical and stylistic modes of its era, whether in conformity to those modes or in opposition against them. The Christian Bible—arguably the greatest literary achievement of Western culture—presents unique challenges for a reader. A collection of 72 separate books (66 in the “common” canon) written by many different authors—each book passing through the hands of editors and redactors, and each book having its own more or less complex textual history—the Bible spans a period of 1,500 years, the 46 books (39 in the “common” canon) of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) reflecting a rather parochial near-eastern Semitic culture and the 27 books of the Greek Scriptures (New Testament) a much broader, western Greco-Roman one.

In addition, for the past 2,000 years the Christian Bible has not been read as an anthology of individual, static texts anchored at fixed points in time, but as a unified work, inspired by God—a linear narrative with a beginning (Genesis), a middle (the Gospels and Epistles) and an end (Revelation); a work in which the main character is God, the conflict is sin and the theme is redemption; a book that, as the great literary critic Northrop Frye rightly points out, has “a body of concrete images: city, mountain, river, garden, tree, oil, fountain, bread, wine, bride, sheep, and many others, which recur so often that they clearly indicate some kind of unifying principle.”¹

Furthermore, Christian readers have engaged the Bible not as an isolated text or collection of texts, but as a work in which each individual book achieves its fullest expression in light of the whole. Indeed, the narrative world of the Bible is self-glossing, commenting upon itself, introducing characters in one book who are fully developed across several others, inserting ambiguities that can only be resolved through internal reference and creating a fabric so intricately intertwined that books, chapters, verses and even individual words both echo and foreshadow those that lie on either side, often separated by hundreds of pages.

¹ *The Great Code, the Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1982), p. xiii.

The superb 20th-century Austrian pianist Artur Schnabel once said, “A masterpiece is a work of art that is better than any of its possible performances.” The Bible is such a masterpiece. Just as one performs a Beethoven piano sonata, so one performs a text, bringing to it knowledge, skill, insight, creativity and artistic sensitivity. Whether music or literature, no single interpretive approach can fully reveal a masterpiece’s richness, depth and beauty; choosing one approach necessarily eliminates a variety of others. As with other great master works, the Bible yields more with each rereading, each interpretative method reveals new depths and insights and each new perspective exposes colors, tones and textures not seen before. That is the beauty of world-class art; that is the beauty of the Bible.

As daunting as the Bible may be as a literary work, we can approach it in a way that moves us in a productive direction and that charts a path we can travel as we journey through the world of the narrative, a path that will lead us ever-deeper into the text itself, revealing its riches:

- First, we must understand the *historical and cultural context* from which a particular book of the Bible emerges.
- Second, we must understand the *literary genre* in which the book is written.
- Third, we must understand the *structural and stylistic devices* used to “build” the work.
- And fourth, we must understand the *message* the author intends for his audience to receive.

Our task at hand is the Book of Revelation, the final book in the Christian canon and the concluding narrative in the story of redemption. No other book in the Bible seems so cryptic as Revelation, no other book so extravagant in its symbolism and wild visions, and no other book so given to misreading and misinterpretation. From the 2nd century through the 4th, debate raged as to its inclusion in the canon, finally being accepted at the Council of Hippo in 393 and affirmed at the Council of Carthage in 397. As far back as the 2nd century, Syrian Christians rejected Revelation as heretical; in the 4th century Gregory of Nazianzus viewed it as difficult and dangerous; Martin Luther held it in contempt as being “neither apostolic nor prophetic”; and it is the only New Testament book for which John Calvin did not write a commentary. In modern times Thomas Jefferson omitted Revelation from his *Jefferson Bible*, considering it “the ravings of a maniac”; Friedrich Engels dismissed it as no more than “a political and anti-Roman” work; and George Bernard Shaw thought it “a peculiar record of the visions of a drug addict.”

Yet, Revelation was and is wildly popular. In 1970 Hal Lindsey published *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (ghost written for Lindsey by Carole C. Carson, whom he later credited as “co-author”), which sees the apocalyptic events of Revelation unfolding in the 1980s. It sold 28 million copies by 1990, spawned several sequels, including *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (1972), *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (1982) and a movie, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1979) narrated by

Orson Wells. Not to be outdone, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published the *Left Behind* series (1995-2007), 16 novels that roughly follow the Revelation narrative and feature adventures of the Tribulation Force as they battle the Global Community and its leader, Nicholae Carpathia—the Antichrist. The *Left Behind* series sold over 65 million copies, spawned four movies and three video games. Even the academic world has jumped on the bandwagon with the excellent Princeton scholar Elaine Pagels publishing *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation*. It debuted March 25, 2012 as #10 on the *NY Times Hardcover Nonfiction Bestsellers List*.

Although written nearly 2,000 years ago, Revelation still grips our imagination with its drama, nightmare visions, exotic imagery, stunning colors, full-tilt sound, and over-the-top, blood-soaked violence. Yet, most who read Revelation come away baffled and bewildered, scratching their heads. What are we to make of this puzzling work?

Historical and Cultural Context

Revelation emerges from the chaotic second half of the 1st century Roman Empire. The story begins with Julia Agrippina (A.D. 15-59), great granddaughter of Caesar Augustus; adoptive granddaughter of the Emperor Tiberius; sister of the Emperor Caligula; wife of the Emperor Claudius; and mother of the Emperor Nero. Through incestuous marriages, imperial intrigue and duplicitous assassinations, Agrippina engineered her son's rise to power. After poisoning Claudius (her uncle and 3rd husband), her seventeen year-old son Nero became Emperor in A.D. 54, with Agrippina controlling the reins of power. Quickly, however, Nero's relations with his mother deteriorated, ending by Nero having her murdered in A.D. 59. Although contemporary historians generally praise Nero during the early years of his reign, the latter years deteriorated through lavish state expenditures and vicious political infighting.

On 18 July 64 the Great Fire of Rome erupted, destroying a large portion of the city. According to the historian Tacitus, who was nine years old at the time, the fire raged for five days, destroying three of fourteen districts and severely damaging seven others. Both Suetonius and Cassius Dio point to Nero as the arsonist, who wanted to clear a large part of Rome so he could build a palace complex. To deflect blame, Tacitus writes that Nero blamed the fire on Rome's Christians:

Therefore, to put an end to the rumor Nero created a diversion and subjected to the most extra-ordinary tortures those hated for their abominations by the common people called Christians. The originator of this name [was] Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. Repressed for the time being, the deadly superstition broke out again not only in Judea, the original source of the evil, but also

in the city [Rome], where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become popular. So an arrest was made of all who confessed; then on the basis of their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race.

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open the gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in a chariot. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being punished.

(Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 44)

The years 64-68 witnessed the first state-sponsored persecution of Christians in Rome. Both Peter and Paul were martyred during this time, along with “an immense multitude” of others. The persecution ended with Nero’s death. The Roman Senate had declared him a public enemy of the Roman people and announced their intention to have him executed. With that Nero turned to suicide, but too cowardly to carry it out, he enlisted his private secretary, Epaphroditos, to do the deed. Nero died on 9 June 68, the 6th anniversary of his murdering his stepsister and first wife, Octavia.

Following Nero’s death civil war erupted and four emperors reigned in quick succession: Galba (7 months); Otho (3 months); Vitellius (7 months); and Vespasian (10 years). The first three emperors were dispatched through murder, suicide or execution within a year and a half.

Vespasian brought stability to the Empire. A skilled politician and soldier, the Emperor Claudius appointed Vespasian as *legate* of the 2nd Roman Legion in 41, where he participated in the invasion of Britannia in 43. His military successes earned him the title *consul* in 51, although he soon retired, having incurred the wrath of our now infamous Agrippina, Claudius’ wife. He came out of retirement in 63 to serve as governor in the Province of Africa, and in 66 Nero chose him to suppress the Jewish revolt in Judea. Commanding two Roman legions (the 5th and 10th), eight cavalry squadrons and ten auxiliary cohorts, Vespasian was joined by his son, Titus, who commanded the 15th Roman Legion.

Fielding more than 50,000 combat troops, Vespasian began operations in Galilee; by 68 he had crushed opposition in the north, moved his headquarters to Caesarea Maritima and methodically began clearing the coast. Meanwhile, the

defeated Jewish leaders in Galilee escaped to Jerusalem, where a bitter civil war erupted, pitting the fanatical Zealots and Sicarii against the more moderate Sadducees and Pharisees, who wisely advocated concessions or surrender to the Romans. By 68 the entire Jerusalem leadership and their followers were dead, having been killed by their fellow Jews, and the Zealots held the temple complex, using it as a staging area for their war against Rome.

With Nero's death in Rome and the quick succession of emperors that followed, chaos reigned and a power vacuum grew. In Jerusalem Vespasian's troops proclaimed him Emperor. Support spread quickly, and in 69 Vespasian left Jerusalem for Rome to claim the throne, leaving his son Titus to conclude the war in Jerusalem. By the summer of 70, Titus had breached the city walls and captured the temple. During the fierce fighting the temple complex caught fire, and on *Tisha B'Av* (29/30 July A.D. 70) the temple fell: 1,000 years of Jewish temple worship ended in a single day. The fire spread quickly to the city itself, destroying most of it. Tacitus writes that no fewer than 600,000 Jews fought the Romans in Jerusalem; those captured were crucified, up to 500 per day; and historians estimate that 1.2 million Jews died during the span of the Jewish Revolt, A.D. 66-73. It was the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history until the Nazi holocaust of 1939-1944.

Could things possible get any worse?

Israel—the land of the Bible—straddles east to west the African Rift, a great geological crack in the land that runs from the Jordan Valley, down to the Dead Sea (the deepest gouge in the earth's crust, plunging 1,388 feet below sea level), the Red Sea and deep into the heart of Africa. The shifting of adjacent continental plates formed it, and it is one of the planet's most geologically unstable areas. Indeed, the Bible reports several famous earthquakes in the region. At the time of Abraham (around 2,000 B.C.) geologists tell us that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah described in Genesis 19 may have been the result of a great earthquake that cracked the earth's crust at its deepest spot, releasing brimstone (sulfur) and volatile petroleum gases that created a horrific firestorm. The fall of Jericho recounted in Joshua 2-6 may be explained by a double earthquake, the first blocking the Jordan River 18 miles upstream from Jericho near Adam (Joshua 3: 16), allowing the Israelites to ford the Jordan at flood stage opposite Jericho; and the second, an aftershock that brought down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6: 20). Historically, earthquakes have dammed the Jordan River repeatedly, sometimes for several days. And in Amos 1: 1 we have reference to a great earthquake, dating Amos' prophetic vision: "The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel." Since Uzziah was king of Israel, c. 767-740 B.C. and Jeroboam was king of Judah, c. 782-753 B.C., the earthquake took place during the time their reigns overlapped, c. 767-753 B.C. Indeed, the earthquake was so severe that Zechariah still remembers it in 520 B.C., nearly 250 years later:

*Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee **as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah.** Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.*
(Zechariah 14: 3-5)

As we shall see, Revelation references five great earthquakes, the final one a real doozie:

The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed.

(Revelation 16: 17-19)

During the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 66-73 thousands of Jews fled Jerusalem to other parts of the Roman Empire, many to the far west. In Pompeii, Mt. Vesuvius was heating up. Located a little over five miles east of modern-day Naples, a short distance from the Mediterranean shore, Pompeii sits at the foot of a somma volcano, a 4,203 foot high, humpbacked mountain with a summit caldera surrounding a newer cone. It is one of the most dangerous volcanic mountains on earth, erupting countless times throughout history. In modern times Vesuvius has erupted six times in the 18th century, eight times in the 19th century and three times in the 20th century, the last in 1944. On several occasions post-eruption ash blanketed all of southern Europe, and twice— A.D. 472 and 1631—Vesuvian ash fell on Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), over 750 miles to the northeast.

But never has there been an eruption like that of A.D. 79. On 5 February 63 a devastating earthquake rocked Pompeii, a foreshadowing of things to come. Another series of smaller earthquakes began on 20 August 79 and four days later on the morning of 24 August a massive explosion occurred, blasting a column of ash and pumice 50,000 – 100,000 feet into the atmosphere at a rate of 1.5 million tons per second. Recent studies suggest that the energy supporting the column came from steam superheated by magma. The cloud collapsed as expanding gasses lost the ability to support their solid contents, creating a pyroclastic surge, a huge turbulent mass of fluid rock and gas traveling at near supersonic speed, releasing over 100,000 times the thermal energy of the atomic bombing at Hiroshima. Six such surges occurred over two days, dropping ash and debris at temperatures reaching 600 °F and reaching a depth up to 75 feet, burying both Pompeii and neighboring Herculaneum. 16,000 people died instantly in the surges and thousands more from poisonous gasses,

falling debris and collapsed buildings. Nothing like it had ever been seen. Pliny the Younger gives us the only eyewitness account of the Vesuvius eruption in his two letters to the historian, Tacitus. Here's a sample, written by Pliny at Misenum, about 20 miles across the Bay of Naples from Vesuvius:

Though it was now morning, the light was exceedingly faint and doubtful; the buildings all around us tottered . . . we therefore resolved to quit the town. A panic-stricken crowd followed us Being at a convenient distance from the houses, we stood still, in the midst of a most dangerous and dreadful scene. The chariots, which we had ordered to be drawn out, were so agitated backwards and forwards, though upon the most level ground, that we could not keep them steady, even by supporting them with large stones. The sea seemed to roll back upon itself, and to be driven from its banks by the convulsive motion of the earth; it is certain at least the shore was considerably enlarged, and several sea animals were left upon it. On the other side [of the bay], a black and dreadful cloud, broken with rapid zigzag flashes, behind it variously shaped masses of flame; these were like sheet-lightning, but much larger Soon afterwards, the cloud began to descend, and cover the sea . . . a dense dark mist seemed to be following us, spreading itself over the country like a cloud We had scarcely sat down when night came upon us, not such as we have when the sky is cloudy, or when there is no moon, but that of a room when it is shut up, and all the lights put out. You might hear the shrieks of women, the screams of children, and the shouts of men . . . some wishing to die, from the very fear of dying; some lifting their hands to the gods; but the greater part convinced that there were now no gods at all, and that the final endless night of which we have heard had come upon the world.

(Pliny the Younger, "Letter 66," to Cornelius Tacitus)

Vespasian dies on 23 June 79 and his son Titus succeeds him, the first Roman Emperor to follow his father to the throne. Sixty-two days later Vesuvius erupts. Titus immediately organized a massive relief effort, funded by large donations from the imperial treasury. In his *Roman History* Cassius Dio reports that Titus made two personal visits to the disaster area, one shortly after the eruption and the second a year later (LXVI, 24). During his second visit in the spring of A.D. 80, fire broke out again in Rome, raging for three days and three nights, consuming large parts of the city. Although not as disastrous as the Great Fire of A.D. 64, it nevertheless destroyed a significant number of temples, as well as numerous public buildings, including the Baths of Agrippa, the Pantheon, the Diribitorium, the theater of Balbus and Pompey's theater. In the wake of the fire, plague ravished Rome, prompting widespread belief that the fire and plague—not to mention the eruption of Vesuvius—were punishments visited on Rome by the gods.

Titus dies on 13 September 81, after a brief two-year reign. The cause of his death is uncertain. In his *Roman History* Cassius Dio reports that as Titus lay dying

he uttered his last words: “I have made but one mistake” (LXVI, 26), prompting great speculation, of course, as to what that mistake may have been. Both Cassius Dio and Suetonius suggest that his mistake was allowing his brother Domitian to live, after having discovered that his brother was plotting against him. In his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, Philostratus flatly accuses Domitian of murdering his brother by poisoning him with the flesh of a sea-hare, a culinary ingredient favored by Nero in dispatching his enemies (VI, 32).

Although universally judged a stellar emperor by the Roman world, Jewish writings excoriate Titus. He is, after all, the general who destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. The Babylonian Talmud (*Gittin* 56b) claims that Titus had sex with a whore on a Torah scroll inside the Temple while it burned, and that his death was caused by an insect flying up his nose and gnawing at his brain for seven years, growing to the size of a bird in the process!

Whatever the case may be Domitian succeeded his brother as Emperor on 14 September 81, as the third and last emperor of the Flavian Dynasty (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian). Quickly dispensing with the republican form of government favored by his father and brother, Domitian believed the Roman Empire should be governed as a divine monarchy, proclaiming himself *dominus et deus*, (“Lord and God”), moving the center of government to the imperial court, rendering the Roman Senate impotent and expelling those senators whom he deemed troublesome.

Domitian sought to revive Imperial Rome as it had been under its first emperor, Caesar Augustus (63 B.C. – A.D. 14). To do so he dramatically revalued Roman currency, increasing the silver purity of the *denarius* from 90% to 98% (2.87 grams to 3.26 grams); instituted a rigorous taxation scheme; and embarked on ambitious building projects and extensive military campaigns, including the subjugation of Gaul and the conquest of Britain.

As divine monarch Domitian was intimately involved in every aspect of Roman life, including religion. He reinstated the imperial cult, which had fallen out of favor under his father, and his first act as Emperor was to deify his brother, Titus. To further the imperial cult, Domitian deified his father, Vespasian; built a dynastic mausoleum on the site of his father’s former residence; and constructed the impressive Temple of Vespasian and Titus as a shrine to them. To emphasize the family’s intimacy with the divine, Domitian completed a massive restoration of the Temple of Jupiter on Capitoline Hill, honoring Rome’s principal deity and he cultivated a personal devotion to the goddess Minerva, minting coinage with his image on one side and hers on the other, founding a Legion under her name—*Legio I, Minerva*—and building a private chapel for her worship in his bedroom. Taking his divine responsibilities seriously, Domitian proclaimed himself *ensor*, the arbiter of public morals and conduct, making adultery punishable by exile; instituting strict laws against corruption by public officials; outlawing libelous writings (especially against himself or the imperial family), making them punishable by exile or death;

banning satirical theatrical productions; and condemning to death Vestal Virgins who had broken their vows of life-long chastity.

Although taking his deification seriously, Domitian tolerated foreign religions as long as they did not interfere with public order and could be assimilated into traditional Roman religion. For example, Egyptian religion flourished under Domitian, since the Egyptian gods Serapis and Isis were closely identified with the Roman gods Jupiter and Minerva. Conversely, Judaism and Christianity were not tolerated, as both rejected the Roman gods outright and Christianity proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth not only as divine, but as “King of kings” and “Lord of lords,” who would return to usher in a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God—a treasonous claim to Roman ears. Consequently, in his 4th-century *Church History*, Eusebius states that Domitian severely persecuted Christians in Rome and throughout the Empire:

Many were the victims of Domitian’s appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally, he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. He was, in fact, the second to organize persecution against us, though his father Vespasian had had no mischievous designs against us.

Domitian is murdered on 18 September 96 in a palace conspiracy. Suetonius tells the tale in his *Lives of the Caesars*:

Concerning the nature of the plot and the manner of his death, this is about all that became known. As the conspirators were deliberating when and how to attack him, whether at the bath or at dinner, Stephanus, Domitilla's steward, at the time under accusation for embezzlement, offered his aid and counsel. To avoid suspicion, he wrapped up his left arm in woolen bandages for some days, pretending that he had injured it, and concealed in them a dagger. Then pretending to betray a conspiracy and for that reason being given an audience, he stabbed the emperor in the groin as he was reading a paper which the assassin handed him, and stood in a state of amazement. As the wounded prince attempted to resist, he was slain with seven wounds by Clodianus, a subaltern, Maximus, a freedman of Parthenius, Satur, Decurion of the chamberlains, and a gladiator from the imperial school. A boy who was engaged in his usual duty of attending to the Lares in the bedroom, and so was a witness of the murder, gave this additional information. He was bidden by Domitian, immediately after he was dealt the first blow, to hand him the dagger hidden under his pillow and to call the servants; but he found nothing at the head of the bed save the hilt, and besides all the doors were closed. Meanwhile the emperor grappled with Stephanus and bore him to the ground, where they struggled for a long time, Domitian trying now to wrest the dagger from his assailant's hands and now to gouge out his eyes with his lacerated fingers.

He was slain on the fourteenth day before the Kalends of October in the forty-fifth year of his age and the fifteenth of his reign. His corpse was carried out on a common bier by those who bury the poor, and his nurse Phyllis cremated it at her suburban estate on the Via Latina; but his ashes she secretly carried to the temple of the Flavian family and mingled them with those of Julia, daughter of Titus, whom she had also reared.

(*De Vita Caesarum*, “Life of Domitian,” 21)

Immediately after Domitian’s murder the Roman Senate—who loathed him—proclaimed Marcus Cocceius Nerva emperor and passed *damnatio memoriae* on Domitian’s memory, the first of only two Roman Emperors in history to be so excoriated (the other is Publius Septimius Geta, A.D. 189 – 211), melting his coins and statues and erasing his name from all public records. Every major ancient source—Juvenal, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Suetonius—vilifies Domitian as a cruel tyrant; only Domitian’s court poets, Martial and Statius, have anything good to say about him.²

Clearly, the second half of the 1st century is a tumultuous time in the Roman Empire, politically, economically, culturally and religiously. Fifty years see eight emperors: Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus and Domitian—seven of whom meet violent deaths. A persecuted minority within the Roman Empire, the emerging Church becomes the target of two state-sponsored persecutions, one under Nero and the other under Domitian. Rome burns twice. Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed in A.D. 70, bringing 1,000 years of Temple worship to an abrupt end. Vesuvius erupts. And as the last eyewitnesses of Jesus’ public ministry die out, a generation of oral teaching and preaching coalesce in the written Gospels, in which one reads Jesus’ own words:

So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. Immediately after the distress of those days

² Although many modern historians mitigate such harsh assessment of Domitian and his rule, all concede that he was a despot. See for example, Barclay Newman, “The Fallacy of the Domitian Hypothesis,” *NTS*, 10 (1963). 133-139; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1972); and Brian W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (London: Routledge, Inc., 1992), the best and most convincing of such modern works.

*the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory.

(Matthew 24: 15-21; 29-30)

If we were Christians living in the 2nd half of the 1st century we might well imagine we hear the squeaking axels of the chariots of fire as the four horsemen of the apocalypse line up for Armageddon.

Literary Genre

Revelation mirrors the time and culture from which it emerges, and it does not emerge in isolation as a unique work. It is one of many in a long line of apocalyptic visions that stretch back as far as the canonical books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Zechariah; the visions develop in Matthew 24 (and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21), 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Jude; and they reach their climax in Revelation. Many non-canonical works reflect the genre, as well: the *Sibylline Oracles*, Books 4 & 5; *The Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Shepherd of Hermes*, just to name a few.

Revelation, of course, is written in Greek, as are all of the other New Testament books. The opening word is *apokalypsis*, translated into English as “revelation,” or literally “unveiling.” That is key to the genre. A “revelation” is the “unveiling” of a subject previously hidden, things that could not be known apart from the “unveiling.” Typically, such an unveiling reveals a vision of the “end times,” most often provided by a messenger or “angel” sent from God.

Judaism, unique among religions of the ancient world, offers a *linear* perspective of history. Unlike other religions that view history as cyclical in nature—birth in the springtime, growth in summer, harvest in autumn and death in winter, and round and round it goes—Judaism views history as linear in nature: it has a beginning (Genesis, “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”), a middle (the growth and development of Israel as a covenant community under God) and an end (the advent of the Kingdom). Christianity inherits this worldview and sees in it the beginning (Genesis through Malachi), the middle (the Gospels and Epistles) and the end (Revelation, the fullness of the Kingdom of God, ushered in by the return of Christ and the final judgment). In either case, a linear worldview creates an imperative to define meaning: if history is linear in nature, it is moving toward a goal. What is that goal? And what is our role in it? The genre of apocalyptic literature offers a vision of that goal, an unfolding of God’s plan and the final steps

toward history's fulfillment. In the deepest sense, *all* apocalyptic literature is prophetic, in that it articulates and manifests God's plan and his intention toward humanity.

A biblical prophet—by definition—stands between God and the people, and he speaks to the people on behalf of God. The message he speaks most often concerns events within his own historical time. Isaiah, for example, is called to be a prophet in Isaiah 6: 1- 9a—

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

He said, “Go and tell this people . . .”

Called to be a prophet, the opening verse establishes Isaiah's historical context: “The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isaiah 1: 1). Isaiah is called to be a prophet in “the year that king Uzziah died” (Isaiah 6: 1, c. 740 B.C.) and he continues speaking as a prophet through the reign of king Hezekiah (c. 686 B.C.). Thus, Isaiah is active as a spokesman for God from c. 740 – 686 B.C., during two crucial events: 1) the Assyrian invasion and conquest of the northern kingdom of Judah in 722 B.C., led by Tiglath-Pileser III and 2) the Assyrian attack of Jerusalem, led by Sennacherib in 701 B.C.

These two events form the immediate historical context for what Isaiah has to say in chapters 1 – 39, often referred to as 1st Isaiah. Chapters 40 – 55 comprise 2nd Isaiah and refer to events *after* the Babylonian exile (586 – 539 B.C.), events that take place during the time of Cyrus, King of Persia, who defeats the Babylonian empire and allows the Jews to return home to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. And chapters 56 – 66 comprise 3rd Isaiah, composed between 530 – 510 B.C., which speak of the moral and ethical imperatives demanded by a divinely restored kingdom. Although shaped over a period of 200 years by a variety of authors, editors and redactors, the Isaiah *persona* dominates the book, and—from a literary perspective—the book reflects an astonishingly complex structural and thematic unity.

Other prophets likewise reflect events within their own historical context:

Prophets and Their Historical Context

<u>Prophet</u>	<u>Context</u>
Major Prophets	
Isaiah	Period: 740 – 686 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Assyria defeats Israel, 722 B.C.; Assyria attacks Jerusalem, 701 B.C.
Jeremiah	Period: 626 – 586 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Babylon attacks Jerusalem: 605, 597, 586-588 B.C.; Jerusalem falls, August 14, 586 B.C.
Ezekiel	Period: 592 – 572 B.C. (set in Babylon) Events: Babylon subjects Judah and Jerusalem
Daniel	Period: 605 – 539 B.C. (set in Babylon) (Although <i>written</i> c. 165 B.C., the story is <i>set</i> during 605-539 B.C.) Events: Daniel in the court of the king of Babylon during the Babylonian captivity.
Minor Prophets	
Hosea	Period: 740 – 686 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Assyria defeats Israel, 722 B.C.; Assyria attacks Jerusalem, 701 B.C.
Joel	Period: Not dated (9 th century – post exilic) Events: Not explicit
Amos	Period: 767-753 B.C. (set in Israel) Events: Corrupt Israel, prior to its fall to Assyria in 722 B.C.
Obadiah	Period: After 586 B.C. (Set in Judah) Events: Edom collaborates with Babylon, 586 B.C.
Jonah	Period: Before 793 B.C. (set in Assyria) Jonah is prophet in the generation <i>before</i> Jereboam II, king of Israel, 793-752 B.C (2 Kings 14: 23-25) Events: Prophecy against Nineveh, capital of Assyria; Nineveh repents and is spared.
Micah	Period: 739 - 686 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Corrupt Israel, prior to its fall to Assyria in 722 B.C.
Nahum	Period: Before 612 B.C. (set in Israel) Events: Prophecy against Nineveh, capital of Assyria; Nineveh falls to Babylon in 612 B.C.
Habakkuk	Period: c. 626 – 586 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Prophecy against Judah and Jerusalem
Zephaniah	Period: 640 – 609 B.C. (set in Judah) Events: Prophecy against Judah and Jerusalem
Haggai	Period: 520 B.C. (set in Judah) Event: Post-exilic rebuilding of Jerusalem
Zechariah	Period: 520 B.C. (set in Judah)

Malachi	Event:	Post-exilic rebuilding of Jerusalem
	Period:	c. 430 B.C. (set in Judah)
	Events:	Prophecy against post-exilic Jerusalem

In post-exilic times, however, largely as a result of the Babylonian captivity (586 – 539 B.C.), prophecy begins to shift focus from current events to future events, from current catastrophe to a coming Kingdom, one in which God will fulfill the linear course of history, ushering in the “Kingdom of God.” The development of this apocalyptic refocusing spans roughly 200 B.C. through A.D. 200, with precursors as early as the 7th – 4th centuries B.C. We might view the genre’s development in three phases:

Phase 1 (7th to 4th centuries B.C.)

Isaiah (Isaiah 24-27; 56-66) [Canonical]

Ezekiel (chapters 37-48) [Canonical]

Joel [Canonical]

Zechariah [Canonical]

Phase 2 (late 3rd century B.C. to A.D. 70)

1 Enoch (c. 200 B.C.)

Daniel (c. 165 B.C.) [Canonical]

Jubilees (c. 150-100 B.C.)

Sibylline Oracles, Book 3 (c. 150 B.C.)

Testament of the Twelve (c. 150-100 B.C.)

Psalms of Solomon (c. 48 B.C.)

Testament of Moses (c. A.D. 6-36)

1 & 2 Thessalonians (c. A.D. 50-52) [Canonical]

Matthew 24, and parallels in Mark and Luke (c. A.D. 65-75) [Canonical]

2 Peter (c. A.D. 68) [Canonical]

Jude (c. A.D. 65-80) [Canonical]

Martyrdom of Isaiah (1st century A.D.)

Dead Sea Scrolls (c. 100 B.C. – A.D. 70)

Apocalypse of Moses (c. A.D. 70)

Testament of Abraham (1st century A.D.)

2 Enoch (1st century A.D.)

Phase 3 (A.D. 70 – 2nd century A.D.)

Sibylline Oracles, Book 4 (c. 80 A.D.)

4 Ezra (c. A.D. 80-90)

2 Baruch (c. A.D. 90 – 110)

Apocalypse of Abraham (c. A.D. 70 – 100)

Revelation (c. A.D. 90 – 95) [Canonical]

3 Baruch (2nd century A.D.)

Sibylline Oracles, Book 5 (2nd century A.D.)

Apocalypse of Peter (2nd century A.D.)

The Shepherd of Hermes (2nd century A.D.)

We see this refocusing first in Isaiah 24-27, the “Little Apocalypse,” incorporated into Isaiah during post-exilic times. Here, God sets wrongs to right and prepares to bring our story to a conclusion in clearly universal terms, redeeming not just Israel but all of humanity:

*See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it;
He will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants—
It will be the same
for priest as for people,
for master as for servant,
for mistress as for maid,
for seller as for buyer,
for borrower as for lender,
for debtor as for creditor.*

*The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered.
The Lord has spoken this word.*

(Isaiah 24: 1-3)

Within the literary construct of Isaiah this “flash forward” to the end of our linear narrative sets the stage for 2nd Isaiah (chapters 40–55) in which God redeems his people from captivity in Babylon and 3rd Isaiah (chapters 56-66), in which God defines the moral and ethical imperatives of his redeemed people.

This “end time” theme gains momentum as we move forward through Scripture. Ezekiel 37-48 pictures a dead people brought back to life in the “Valley of Dead Bones” episode of chapter 37; judgment on all the earth in 38-39; and the Kingdom of God, with a new Jerusalem at its center, a new temple and God living with his people in 40-48. Joel speaks of a great day of judgment, “the day of the Lord”—

*Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!
For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.
The sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars will no longer shine.
The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem;
the earth and the sky will tremble.*

(Joel 3: 14-16b)

And Zechariah pictures the final, climactic battle that precedes the return of the Lord and judgment day—

A day of the Lord is coming when your plunder will be divided among you. I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city.

Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

(Zechariah 14: 1-5)

As we move into Phase 2 of our apocalyptic genre, the events and imagery become more concrete, more specific and more immediate. Although Daniel is written c. 165 B.C. the story is *set* 605-539 B.C. As Joseph is taken captive to Egypt in Genesis, Daniel is taken captive to Babylon in 605 B.C., and like Joseph, Daniel rises to a position of power and esteem in the royal court, now controlled by Cyrus, king of Persia. In Daniel 10 we read:

In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia [539 B.C.], a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Beltshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war. The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.

At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

(Daniel 10: 1-9)

In utter terror, Daniel faints dead away! Once revived, the angelic messenger describes to Daniel in detail a universal, catastrophic battle, resulting in “a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then” (12: 1a). When the dust settles, “everyone whose name is found written in the book will be

delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt” (12: 1b-2). Having delivered the message, the angel concludes by saying: “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end” (12: 9). In Revelation 5 the scroll from Daniel 12 is brought out, and in Revelation 6: 1-8: 5 the seals are opened, revealing the vision given to Daniel that so horrified him.

Daniel was enormously popular in New Testament times, establishing the sequence and imagery of end time events well into the second century. Jesus himself draws heavily upon Daniel and the entire apocalyptic tradition, identifying himself as the “Son of Man,” referenced in Daniel 7: 13-14; drawing directly from Daniel 12: 1, regarding a “time of great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24: 21); and quoting word-for-word Daniel 12: 11 in reference to the “abomination that causes desolation” (Matthew 24: 15). In his own time, Jesus was first and foremost an apocalyptic prophet, living on the bleeding edge of the apocalyptic vision.

Seeing the world through such a lens, Jesus carefully defers from saying when these things will occur. When asked, he simply replies: “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24: 36). Nonetheless—

Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken” . . . At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory.”

(Matthew 24: 29-30)

Or as 2 Peter 3: 10 puts it: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief [when least expected]. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

Although “no one knows about that day or hour,” virtually everyone in the early Church expected to see Jesus return and the Kingdom of God established in his or her own lifetime. Jesus assures his disciples that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened” (Matthew 24: 34). And in John 14: 1-3 he tells them:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms: if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

(John 14: 1-3)

In both instances Jesus' listeners clearly expect to see him again in the near future, when he returns.

Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians Paul urges the believers to turn to God and “wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1: 10); to have hope “in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes” (2: 19); to “be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (3: 13); and to be “blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5: 23). Indeed, in 1 Thessalonians Paul encourages the persecuted believers by providing the exact sequence of events for the Lord's return:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep [die], or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

(1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18)

Clearly, Paul expects this to happen *very* soon.

As we move into the second half of the 1st century A.D. we begin losing the eyewitness generation, those who saw Jesus and those who heard the Apostles teach and preach. Through persecution or simple old age, the eyewitness generation draws to a close. Combine that with the tumultuous historical events of the times, and like a giant star suddenly collapsing in upon its self, history seems about to explode in a white-hot supernova.

Toward the end of the 1st century the time is ripe for an apocalyptic literary masterpiece to emerge—and it does.

Structural and Stylistic Devices

The Book of Revelation was written sometime between A.D. 60 – 100, most likely during the persecution under Nero (A.D. 64 – 68) or the persecution under Domitian (A.D. 88 – 96). Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 100-165) claims that “a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ” received the vision (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 81), and St. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130 – 202) claims it occurred “almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign” (*Against Heresies*, 5, 30, 3). Tradition builds on these two witnesses and consensus forms that the Apostle John was the author of Revelation and that he wrote his book around A.D. 95, as the persecution under Domitian reached its apex.

Other voices disagree. Revelation nowhere claims that the Apostle John is its author; indeed, we read simply: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1: 9). Based solely on the text, the best we can do is identify the author as “John of Patmos,” a rather ambiguous figure who appears nowhere else in Scripture. Eusebius quotes Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria (c. 233-265), who claims that “John of Patmos” could not be the Apostle John since John of Patmos mentions his own name in Revelation, but he never claims to be an apostle, and Dionysius notes that the rhetoric, language and style of Revelation differ markedly from John’s Gospel and the three epistles attributed to him (*History*, 7, 24.1 – 25.27). Many modern critics follow this line of thinking, arguing that the stylistic differences between the other writings attributed to John and Revelation are so radically different that the Apostle John and John of Patmos could not possibly be the same person. The differences are undeniable, but few consider the possibility that the author deliberately employs such rhetorical and stylistic differences to address his apocalyptic content and audience. Paul does this frequently in his epistles: witness, for example, the dramatic rhetorical and stylistic variations between 1 & 2 Corinthians and Romans.

Whoever the author of Revelation may be, he crafts an intricately structured, tightly woven apocalyptic vision, with the death throes of “the old order of things” (Revelation 21: 4); the triumphant return of Christ; the climatic battle between good and evil; the Last Judgment; and the birth of “a new heaven and new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3: 13):

Then I saw a “new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

(Revelation 21: 1-5)

In the architecture of the Christian Bible, the linear narrative that begins in Genesis 1 & 2 comes full circle in Revelation 21 & 22: we are back in the Garden of Eden once again, redeemed—brought back to where we belong.

John builds his narrative on a framework of 3s and 7s, prime numbers, complete and indivisible. Revelation 1: 19 offers a key to its overall structure, when the risen and glorified Christ says to John: "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." The basic structure of Revelation is thus tripartite: 1) what was (chapter 1); 2) what is (chapters 2-3); and 3) what will be (chapters 4-22).

Here is a structural outline of Revelation:

Part One: What Was (Revelation, Chapter 1)

- Prologue (1: 1-3)
 - The revelation of Jesus Christ . . . to John, "unveiling" what must soon take place.
 - Audience is the general reader
 - The "unveiling" is by Jesus Christ
- Introduction (1: 4-8)
 - The message is addressed specifically to "the seven churches in the province of Asia."
- The Commission (1: 9-20)
 - John is on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."
 - "One like a Son of Man" speaks to him (parallel figure to Daniel 7: 13-14 and 10: 4-6)
 - The commission is: "Write, therefore, what you *have seen*, what *is now* and what *will take place later*" (Revelation 1: 19).

Part Two: What Is (Revelation, Chapters 2 & 3)

- The seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor
 - Ephesus (2: 1-7)
 - Smyrna (2: 8-11)
 - Pergamum (2: 12-17)
 - Thyatira (2: 18-29)
 - Sardis (3: 1-6)

- Philadelphia (3: 7-13)
- Laodicea (3: 14-22)

Part Three: *What Will Be* (Revelation, Chapters 4-22)

- Prologue, “The Throne in Heaven” (4: 1-11)
- Opening the Scroll (5: 1-14)
 - **The Seven Seals**
 - 1—White Horse, enforced peace (6: 1-2)
 - 2—Red Horse, war (6: 3-4)
 - 3—Black Horse, famine (6: 5-6)
 - 4—Pale Horse, sword, famine, plague and wild beasts (6: 7-8)
 - 5—Souls of the Slain (6: 9-11)
 - 6—Earthquake (6: 12-17)
 - *Interlude* (7: 1-17)
 - 144,000 Sealed (7: 1-8)
 - Great multitude in white robes praising God (7: 9-17)
 - 7—Silence (8: 1-5)
 - **The Seven Trumpets**
 - 1—Hail and fire, mixed with blood (8: 6-7)
 - 2—Huge mountain, all ablaze (8: 8-9)
 - 3—Blazing star (8: 10-11)
 - 4—Sun, moon and stars turned dark (8: 12-13)
 - 5—Star, fallen to the earth (9: 1-12)
 - 6—Four angels, released (9: 13-21)
 - *Interlude* (10:1-11:14)
 - Little scroll (10: 1-11)
 - Two witnesses (11: 1-14)
 - 7—Temple in heaven, opened (11: 15-19)
- **Flashback** (back story of *Revelation*) (12: 1-17)
 - Woman clothed with the sun (12: 1-6)
 - War in heaven (12: 7-17)
- Setting the Stage for Armageddon (13: 1-14: 20)
 - The Enemy (13: 1-18)
 - Satan’s grotesque parody of the Trinity (13: 1-18)
 - Dragon (Satan/God the Father) (13: 1a)
 - Beast 1 (Antichrist/God the Son) (13: 1b-10)
 - Beast 2 (False Prophet/God the Holy Spirit) (13: 11-18)
 - The Heroes (14: 1-20)
 - The Lamb and the 144,000 (14: 1-5)
 - The Three Angels (14: 6-13)
 - The Son of Man (14: 14-20)
 - **The Seven Bowls** (15: 1-16: 21)

- Prologue (15: 1-16: 1)
- 1—Ugly and painful sores (16: 2)
- 2—Blood, like that of a dead man (16: 3)
- 3—Rivers and springs of water turned to blood (16: 4-7)
- 4—Sun, scorching people with fire (16: 8-9)
- 5—Satan’s kingdom plunged into darkness (16: 10-11)
- 6—Euphrates River dried up (16: 12-16)
- 7—Massive earthquake—“It is done!” (16: 17-21)
- *Profile: Rome, “The Whore of Babylon”* (17: 1-18: 24)
- All Creation Praises God! (19: 1-10)
- Armageddon! (19: 11-21)
- The Aftermath (20: 1-22: 21)
 - The Millennial Kingdom (20: 1-10)
 - The Last Judgment (20: 11-15)
 - The New Jerusalem (21: 1-22: 21)

First, notice the tripartite structure of the whole composition:

- Part 1—*past* (chapter 1)
- Part 2—*present* (chapters 2-3), and
- Part 3—*future* (chapters 4-22).

Then, notice that Part 1 itself consists of **3 parts**:

- Prologue (1: 1-3)
- Introduction (1: 4-8), and
- The Commission (1: 9-20).

Next, Part 2 consists of **7 parts**, (the 7 letters to the 7 churches, 2: 1-3: 21).

And finally, Part 3 consists of **3 parts**, each in sets of 7:

- 7 seals (6: 1 – 8: 5)
- 7 trumpets (8: 6-14: 20), and
- 7 bowls (15: 1-16: 21).

Structurally, Revelation is a *very* carefully planned composition, reflecting the deep symbolic significance of the numbers 3 and 7. When we examine each part of Revelation more closely we see this numerical significance at the micro-level as well. For example, consider the structural details of Part 1 (Chapter 1).

Prologue (1: 1-3)

The 3-verse Prologue addresses John's general audience, telling us that what we are about to read is a "revelation" (*apokalepsis*, "unveiling") of events that "must soon take place," an "unveiling" by Jesus Christ himself, as it was revealed to him by God. Notice that the message is: 1) *from God*, 2) *through Christ*, and 3) *to the reader*.

John concludes his 3-verse Prologue with a 3-part benediction: "Blessed is the one who 1) *reads* the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who 2) *hear* it and 3) *take it to heart*," noting that "the time is near" (1: 3).

The Prologue consists of 3 verses; the message involves 3 persons; and the benediction elicits a 3-part response.

Introduction (1: 4-8)

This is a general introduction to the 7 churches of Asia Minor, John's immediate audience to whom he is writing.

He begins with "Grace to you and peace from him 1) *who is*, and 2) *who was*, and 3) *who is to come*, and from the *seven spirits* (*epta pneumaton*, better, "seven-fold spirit") before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1: 4b-5a).

Notice the use of 3s in the structure here, as well. "Grace to you and peace" from *three* persons: 1) God the Father (*who is, was and is to come*); 2) God the Holy Spirit (the "*seven-fold* spirit"); and 3) God the Son (Jesus Christ) who himself is three things: 1) the *faithful witness*; 2) the *firstborn from the dead*; and 3) the *ruler of the kings of the earth*.

And it continues:

"To him who
1) *loves us* and
2) *has freed us* from our sins by his blood, and
3) *has made us to be a kingdom of priests* to serve his God and Father to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Look, he is coming with the clouds and
1) every eye will see him,
2) even those who pierced him; and
3) all peoples of the earth will *mourn* because of him.
So shall it be! Amen" (1: 5b-7)

We wrap up the prologue with a final set of 3s: "I am the Alpha and the Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet: completion, as the numbers 3

& 7 are numbers of completion) . . . 1) who *is*, 2) and who *was*, and 3) who *is to come*, the Almighty” (1: 8).

Commission (1: 9-20)

John introduces himself as “your brother and companion in: 1) the *suffering* 2) and *kingdom* 3) and *patient endurance* that are ours in Jesus” (1: 9a); and he notes that he is on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1: 9b).

“On the Lord’s Day” John is deep in prayer, when suddenly he hears a voice behind him, startling him: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the *seven* churches [those in the province of Asia]: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea” (1: 11). As we have been working with sets of *three*, now we move to sets of seven, prefigured by the “*seven-fold* Spirit” of God in the introduction (1: 4).

John looks behind him to see “*seven* golden lampstands” (1: 12), and among the *seven* lampstands is a figure, startling similar to the figure Daniel sees in Daniel 7: 13-14 and who speaks to him in Daniel 10: 4-6. Here is a point-by-point comparison of the two figures, each consisting of *seven* elements:

Daniel 10: 4-6

Revelation 1: 13-15

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1) “a man dressed in linen” (5a) | 1) “ <i>someone like a ‘Son of Man’</i> dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet” (13b) |
| 2) “with a belt of finest gold around his waist” (5b) | 2) “with a golden sash around his chest (13b) |
| 3) “his body was like chrysolite” (6a) | 3/4) “his <u>head</u> and <u>hair</u> were white as wool, as white as snow” (14a) |
| 4) his face like lightning” (6a) | 5) his eyes were like blazing fire” (14b) |
| 5) “his eyes like flaming torches” (6a) | 6) “his feet were like bronze glowing of burnished bronze” (6a) |
| 6) “his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze” (6a) | 7) “his voice like the sound of rushing waters” (15b) |
| 7) “his voice like the sound of a multitude” (6b) | |

When John observes that the one to whom the voice belongs is someone “like a Son of Man,” he makes a direct allusion to “one like a son of man,” the figure in Daniel’s vision (Daniel 7: 13), prompting the reader to draw a direct correspondence between the two, which John then makes explicit in the *seven-part* comparison above.

John’s figure in Revelation holds *seven* stars in his right hand, “and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword” (1: 16a). John goes on to say that “his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (1: 16b), reinforcing the comparison (item 4 in Daniel 10: 6a above).

When Daniel encounters this figure he says: “1) I had no strength left, 2) my face turned deathly pale and 3) I was helpless. Then: 1) I heard him speaking, and 2) as I listened to him, 3) I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground” (10: 8). Likewise, John says: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (1: 17). Daniel then reports: “a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, ‘Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, 1) consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and 2) stand up, for 3) I have been sent to you’” (10: 11). A message is then given to Daniel regarding “what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come” (10: 14). In the same way, John reports that “he placed his right hand on me and said: “. . . Write, therefore, 1) what you have seen, 2) what is now and 3) what will take place later” (1: 19). In both Daniel and Revelation the primary message is about *future* events, events of a catastrophic nature.

The parallels between Daniel and Revelation can hardly be more explicit. As Daniel receives a message concerning “a time yet to come,” so John receives a message concerning what *was*, *is* and *will be*, the composition’s overall structure.

Finally, John reveals the meaning of the *seven* lampstands and the *seven* stars: “The mystery of the seven stars . . . and the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (1: 20). That is, the seven stars are the seven “messengers” (or leaders) and the seven lampstands are the seven churches themselves.

Structural Conclusions

John carefully, intricately plans the structural elements of Chapter 1, much like Mozart plans the movements, structure, thematic and motivic links in a string quartet. Both John’s Prologue and the Introduction reflect 3-part elements at the syntactical level, and his Commission reflects three 7-part elements: (1) the seven churches, 2) seven lampstands and 3) seven stars, with the imbedded 7-fold comparison of “someone like a Son of Man” in Daniel and Revelation—concluding the 3-part Commission.

On a stylistic level, within the individual movements of Chapter 1, John deftly weaves allusions to Daniel and Zechariah. Revelation 1: 7, for example, offers a brilliant example of weaving allusions—three in one verse:

Look, he is coming with the clouds
 (a direct allusion to Daniel 7: 13)
and every eye will see him even those who pierced him,
 (a direct allusion to Zechariah 12: 10)
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him
 (a direct allusion to Zechariah 12: 12).

This is dazzling stuff! Such intricate craftsmanship reflects the work of a world-class poet, and it continues throughout the Book of Revelation.

The Message

Like all prophecy, the Book of Revelation speaks first and foremost into its own historical context, through the conventions of its own literary genre. Revelation's context is the tumultuous time of the Roman Empire in the 2nd half of the 1st century, and Revelation is a masterpiece of the era's apocalyptic genre. For those living at the time, history seemed to be careening toward a cliff: whether a Jewish prophet like Ezekiel, Zechariah, Daniel or Jesus witnessing the catastrophic events of their day, or a Roman historian like Pliny the Younger witnessing the eruption of Vesuvius, it seemed clear that God—or the gods—was bringing history to a close through a series of great calamities. For Christians that meant the return of Christ and the advent of the Kingdom of Heaven, of God redeeming all creation. Indeed, Revelation ends with Jesus' assurance: "Yes, I am coming soon" and John's response, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22: 20).

And John expected to see it.

When the 1st century passes into the 2nd, the 2nd into the 3rd and the 3rd into the 4th, the imminent advent of the Kingdom fades into the past. By the 4th century the apocalyptic genre seemed anachronistic, a remnant of less sophisticated times. In A.D. 313 Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, officially tolerating Christianity in the Roman Empire, and on February 27, 380 Theodosius I declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In A.D. 325 the Council of Nicea ended the Arian controversy by declaring Christ consubstantial with God the Father, laying the groundwork for the doctrine of the Trinity. Nicea marked the first of seven Ecumenical Councils—A.D. 325 – 787—that sought to form a consensus that would unify Christendom throughout the Empire, and that consensus was achieved—to a degree—by referring to the authority of inspired Scripture. These rough-and-tumble years saw the Church grow in wealth, power and influence; the Bishop of Rome supplant the Roman emperors; and Christian belief permeate the very fabric of society. By the 8th century the Church itself appears to have emerged as the Kingdom of God on earth.

Although the Church believes that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3: 16), precisely what writings should be considered as inspired Scripture was an open question for the first 300 years of Church history. A generally accepted canon of Scripture only emerges gradually in the late 4th century. Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-386) offers one of the first such lists of canonical books. In his *Catechetical Lectures*, written as instructions for catechumens preparing for baptism at Easter Vigil, Cyril's list omits Revelation, deeming it a book of secondary importance, which should not be read even in private. In A.D. 363 a regional synod of thirty or so clerics from Asia Minor met in Laodicea (A.D. 363-364) to address issues regarding normative church behavior. The Council expressed its decisions in a list of sixty

“canons.” Canon #59 states: “No psalms composed by private individuals nor any uncanonical books may be read in the church, but only the Canonical Books of the Old and New Testaments.” Canon #60 then proceeds to list the books accepted as canonical: Revelation is not among them. Toward the end of his life, Gregory of Nazianus (A.D. 329-389) drew up a list (in Latin verse, in iambic pentameter!) of approved books: Revelation is not among them. A late 4th-century poem, generally attributed to Amphilochius, a Cappadocian and bishop of Iconium, lists the books of Scripture, and he does include Revelation, but with the caveat that “some approve, but most say it is spurious,” reflecting the ambiguous attitude of the late 300s.

But there were those who *did* approve of Revelation. In A.D. 367 Athanasius, the influential bishop of Alexandria, wrote an Easter letter to his congregations—usually referred to as his 39th *Festal Letter*—that lists Scriptures approved for reading in the churches. His list includes 27 books in the New Testament, ending with Revelation. It is not until the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393, however, that a council of bishops produced a definitive canon of Scripture, which includes Revelation. Significantly, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, organized the Council and spoke at it, and in A.D. 395 in *On Christian Doctrine* (2.13) Augustine affirms as canonical the 27 books listed by the Council two years earlier. The next year, in A.D. 397, the Council of Carthage also affirms the canon produced at Hippo, and in A.D. 405 Pope Innocent I mentions all 27 books of the New Testament—including Revelation—in his letter to Exsuperius, bishop of Toulouse (*Epistle* 6.7). By the 5th century, with the completion of Jerome’s Latin *Vulgate*, the full canon of 27 New Testament books becomes normative throughout Christendom.

Including Revelation in the New Testament canon carries with it the great difficulty that the events so vividly portrayed in the text—the apocalyptic vision of the end times, the return of Christ, the Last Judgment and the advent of the Kingdom of God—had in fact not occurred. Including Revelation in the canon requires a different way of reading the text, and Augustine provides it.

In his *Confessions*, written A.D. 397/398, Augustine tells of his conversion to Christianity over a decade earlier, in A.D. 386 at the age of 33. Enormously bright, highly educated and groomed for success at the highest levels of Roman society, the young Augustine left his native Thegaste for Carthage in A.D. 371, at 17 years old. At Carthage he sampled the fullness of life, with all its sexual, theatrical and gastronomic pleasures, while at the same time being drawn into a search for truth, largely as a result of reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*. (It was in Carthage that Augustine uttered his famous prayer: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”) In Carthage Augustine sampled Scripture for the first time. He recounts his experience in Book 3 of the *Confessions*:

Accordingly, I turned my attention to the holy scriptures to find out what they were like. What I see in them today is something not accessible to the scrutiny of the proud nor exposed to the gaze of the immature, something lowly as one enters but lofty as one advances

further, something veiled in mystery. At the time, though, I was in no state to enter, nor prepared to bow my head and accommodate myself to its ways. My approach then was quite different from the one I am suggesting now: when I studied the Bible and compared it with Cicero's dignified prose, it seemed to me unworthy.

Only later does Augustine understand that although the literal meaning of Scripture is important—the story that it tells: its diction, grammar and style—its “deeper” meaning is *more* important. In Books 1-9 of his *Confessions* Augustine recounts the story of his conversion. In Books 10-13 he meditates upon his conversion, ruminating on “memory” in Book 10; “time” in Book 11; and presenting a detailed exegesis of Genesis 1 in the latter part of Book 11 and in Books 12-13. In his exegesis Augustine goes beyond the literal meaning of Scripture to probe its “spiritual” meaning; in short, Augustine makes the leap from literal text into allegory.

Although shunned by modern biblical scholars, approaching Scripture as allegory allowed the great thinkers of the 4th and 5th centuries the flexibility to insist upon the literal truth of the biblical narrative, while seeing in that truth much deeper meanings. For them, all Scripture ultimately spoke of God redeeming humanity through Christ. The story of David in 1 & 2 Samuel tells the literal truth about King David and his life as king, but at a deeper level the story of David foreshadows Christ. The Song of Songs is a literal erotic love poem, but at a deeper level it speaks of the love of Christ for his Church or the love of Christ for the individual's soul. In the Greek-speaking world, Origen (c. 180-254) masters this approach; in the Latin-speaking world, Ambrose (Augustine's mentor), Augustine and Jerome lead the charge. In Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* (the first two books and part of the third written in A.D. 395/396; the rest in A.D. 426/427) Augustine examines in great detail the allegorical approach to reading Scripture, and his approach becomes foundational for the next 1,000 years.

Once free to move beyond a literal reading of Revelation and see it as an allegory of humanity's redemption or even the individual soul's redemption, barriers to including it in the canon fall, and it slips easily into the canon as a fitting conclusion to the vast sweep of the biblical narrative, Genesis through Revelation.

Today we understand that the rise of the Church in the 4th and 5th centuries and its apex in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance did not signal the arrival on the Kingdom of God on earth. Quite the contrary. The centuries that follow saw the Church fracture like crystal into a thousand shards, diminishing in luminosity, credibility and authority in the modern world.

God only knows what the future holds for the Church.

Yet, Revelation continues to be as popular as ever. If we engage Revelation as *educated readers of Scripture*, placing it within its proper historical context, recognizing its literary genre, understanding its structural and stylistic devices and

discerning its meaning on multiple levels, a reading of Revelation need not be limited. Indeed, like the rest of Scripture, Revelation is rich in meaning, its depths never exhausted. Limiting our understanding to a simple 2-dimensional prophecy of imminent future events *à la* Hal Lindsey or the *Left Behind* series, or giving up and classifying it as “a mystery,” impoverishes our experience of the text and diminishes our understanding of Scripture itself.

The Bible is world-class literature of the highest order: it is dazzling in its structure, profound in its subtlety and glittering in its richness. Revelation functions as the final chapter in the grand story of humanity. It brings into bold relief the pain and struggle of the human condition. It illuminates the quest for meaning. And it opens the door to eternity.

Outline

Part One: What Was (Revelation, Chapter 1)

- Prologue (1: 1-3)
 - The revelation of Jesus Christ . . . to John, “unveiling” what must soon take place.
 - Audience is the general reader
 - The “unveiling” is by Jesus Christ
- Introduction (1: 4-8)
 - The message is addressed specifically to “the seven churches in the province of Asia.”
- The Commission (1: 9-20)
 - John is on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”
 - “One like a Son of Man” speaks to him (parallel figure to Daniel 7: 13-14 and 10: 4-6)
 - The commission is: “Write, therefore, what you *have seen*, what *is now* and what *will take place later*” (Revelation 1: 19).

Part Two: What Is (Revelation, Chapters 2 & 3)

- The seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor
 - Ephesus (2: 1-7)
 - Smyrna (2: 8-11)
 - Pergamum (2: 12-17)
 - Thyatira (2: 18-29)
 - Sardis (3: 1-6)
 - Philadelphia (3: 7-13)
 - Laodicea (3: 14-22)

Part Three: What Will Be (Revelation, Chapters 4-22)

- Prologue, “The Throne in Heaven” (4: 1-11)
- Opening the Scroll (5: 1-14)
 - **The Seven Seals**
 - 1—White Horse, enforced peace (6: 1-2)

- 2—Red Horse, war (6: 3-4)
 - 3—Black Horse, famine (6: 5-6)
 - 4—Pale Horse, sword, famine, plague and wild beasts (6: 7-8)
 - 5—Souls of the Slain (6: 9-11)
 - 6—Earthquake (6: 12-17)
 - *Interlude* (7: 1-17)
 - 144,000 Sealed (7: 1-8)
 - Great multitude in white robes praising God (7: 9-17)
 - 7—Silence (8: 1-5)
- **The Seven Trumpets**
 - 1—Hail and fire, mixed with blood (8: 6-7)
 - 2—Huge mountain, all ablaze (8: 8-9)
 - 3—Blazing star (8: 10-11)
 - 4—Sun, moon and stars turned dark (8: 12-13)
 - 5—Star, fallen to the earth (9: 1-12)
 - 6—Four angels, released (9: 13-21)
 - *Interlude* (10:1-11:14)
 - Little scroll (10: 1-11)
 - Two witnesses (11: 1-14)
 - 7—Temple in heaven, opened (11: 15-19)
- **Flashback** (back story of *Revelation*) (12: 1-17)
 - Woman clothed with the sun (12: 1-6)
 - War in heaven (12: 7-17)
- Setting the Stage for Armageddon (13: 1-14: 20)
 - The Enemy (13: 1-18)
 - Satan's grotesque parody of the Trinity (13: 1-18)
 - Dragon (Satan/God the Father) (13: 1a)
 - Beast 1 (Antichrist/God the Son) (13: 1b-10)
 - Beast 2 (False Prophet/God the Holy Spirit) (13: 11-18)
 - The Heroes (14: 1-20)
 - The Lamb and the 144,000 (14: 1-5)
 - The Three Angels (14: 6-13)
 - The Son of Man (14: 14-20)
 - **The Seven Bowls** (15: 1-16: 21)
 - Prologue (15: 1-16: 1)
 - 1—Ugly and painful sores (16: 2)
 - 2—Blood, like that of a dead man (16: 3)

- 3—Rivers and springs of water turned to blood (16: 47)
- 4—Sun, scorching people with fire (16: 8-9)
- 5—Satan’s kingdom plunged into darkness (16: 10-11)
- 6—Euphrates River dried up (16: 12-16)
- 7—Massive earthquake—“It is done!” (16: 17-21)
- *Profile: Rome, “The Whore of Babylon”* (17: 1-18: 24)

- All Creation Praises God! (19: 1-10)

- Armageddon! (19: 11-21)

- The Aftermath (20: 1-22: 21)
 - The Millennial Kingdom (20: 1-10)
 - The Last Judgment (20: 11-15)
 - The New Jerusalem (21: 1-22: 21)

The Book of Revelation

Week 1 (April 25, 26)

Lesson #1: Introduction to Revelation, Part 1

Our task at hand is the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Johannine canon, the final book in the Christian canon of Scripture and the concluding narrative in the story of redemption. No other book in the Bible seems so cryptic as Revelation, no other book so extravagant in its symbolism and wild visions, and no other book so given to misreading and misinterpretation. From the 2nd century through the 4th, debate raged as to its inclusion in the canon, finally being accepted at the Council of Hippo in 393 and affirmed at the Council of Carthage in 397. As far back as the 2nd century, Syrian Christians rejected Revelation as heretical; in the 4th century Gregory of Nazianzus viewed it as difficult and dangerous; Martin Luther held it in contempt as being “neither apostolic nor prophetic”; and it is the only New Testament book for which John Calvin did not write a commentary. In modern times Thomas Jefferson omitted Revelation from his *Jefferson Bible*, considering it “the ravings of a maniac”; Friedrich Engels dismissed it as no more than “a political and anti-Roman” work; and George Bernard Shaw thought it “a peculiar record of the visions of a drug addict.”

Yet, Revelation has always been and still is wildly popular. Although written nearly 2,000 years ago, Revelation still grips our imagination with its drama, nightmare visions, exotic imagery, stunning colors, full-tilt sound, and over-the-top, blood-soaked violence. Yet, most who read Revelation come away baffled and bewildered, scratching their heads. What are we to make of this puzzling work?

In Lesson #1 we introduce Revelation, exploring the historical and cultural context from which it emerged.

Lesson #2: Introduction to Revelation, Part 2

To understand Revelation we must understand its historical and cultural context, for Revelation—like any other literary work—mirrors the time and place from which it emerged.

But we must understand, as well, that Revelation did not suddenly appear at the end of the 1st century A.D. in a literary vacuum; it is one of many works within the genre of apocalyptic literature, works that date all the way back to the 7th century B.C., such as portions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Zachariah; Scriptural works from the 3rd century B.C. through A.D. 70, such as Daniel, portions of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Matthew 24 (the Olivet Discourse), 2 Peter

and Jude. The apocalyptic genre also includes many extra-biblical texts, such as the Sibylline Oracles (books 3, 4 and 5); the Dead Sea “War Scroll”; 1, 2 and 4 Enoch; 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch; and the 2nd-century Apocalypse of Peter and The Shepherd of Hermes.

And, of course, we must also understand the structural and the stylistic devices our author uses to bring his apocalyptic vision to life, blazing with color, tone and texture.

Finally, if we are to engage Revelation as *educated readers of Scripture*, we must also understand the message our author intends to convey. It is an urgent one. Revelation ends with Jesus’ assurance: “Yes, I am coming soon” and John’s response, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22: 20).

And John expected to see it.

Enrichment Material

Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Book of Revelation,” *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 507-524.

Donald Senior and PHEME PERKINS, “Revelation,” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 520-525.

“The Revelation to John,” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 1751-1753.

Week 2 (May 2, 3)

Lesson #3: What Was (1: 1-20)

When the risen and glorified Christ says to John, “Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards” (1: 19), he lays out the basic 3-part structure of Revelation: 1) what *was* (past); 2) what *is* (present); and 3) what *will be* (future). In Lesson #3 we focus on what *was*; that is, what prompted John to write Revelation to begin with.

Lesson #4: What Is, Part 1 (2: 1-17)

The risen and glorified Christ commands John to write a letter to each of seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. If, as tradition holds, our Apostle John is the leader of the church at Ephesus and the author of Revelation, then all six of the other

churches are within John's geographical sphere of influence, and the letters are to serve as "cover letters" for the vision that John will receive and that he will transmit in writing to the other churches.

In Lesson #4 we examine the first three of the seven churches and John's letters to them: Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

Assignment

Read: Revelation 1: 1 – 2: 29.

Week 3 (May 9, 10)

Lesson #5: What Is, Part 2 (2: 18 – 3: 22)

In Lesson #5 we continue examining the letters to the seven churches, focusing on the final four: Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Lesson #6: What Is, Part 3: John's Vision (4: 1 – 5: 14)

In Lesson #6 John suddenly looks up and he sees an "open door to heaven." Then he is suddenly snatched up, and instantly he finds himself standing before the throne of God. It is a glorious vision, and he gives us all the details!

Assignment

Read: Revelation 2: 18 – 5: 14.

Week 4 (May 16, 17)

Lesson #7: The Seven Seals (5: 15 – 8: 2)

As John stands before the throne of God the figure sitting on the throne morphs into "a Lamb that seemed to have been slain" (5: 6), and the Lamb is holding a scroll, sealed tightly with seven seals. As in a dream, John weeps and weeps, for he understands that no one is worthy to open the scroll. Then, one of the twenty-four elders seated around the throne of God comforts John, telling him that the Lamb—"the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David" (5: 5)—has triumphed, and he will open the scroll.

The twenty-four elders cry then out as one in praise: "Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open the seals" (5: 9).

Then the Lamb opens the scroll . . . and we witness the results in graphic detail!

Lesson #8: The Seven Trumpets, Part 1 (8: 3 – 9: 21)

If we thought things were bad when the seven seals were opened and unleashed the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, blowing the seven trumpets escalates the drama exponentially, raising it to a cosmic plain, with the very heavens raining down fire upon the earth!

As we end this lesson only six trumpets have sounded.

There is still one more to go!

Assignment

Read: Revelation 5: 15 – 9: 21.

Week 5 (May 23, 24)

Lesson #9: The Seven Trumpets, Part 2 (10: 1 – 11: 19)

John is stunned by his vision of the catastrophic disasters that befall humanity and the earth itself; it sickens him. But the visions continue. Two witnesses appear in (what is left of) Jerusalem, prophesying for 1,260 days, hated by all who hear them. A great beast rises from the abyss, wages war against them and kills them, their torn corpses lying in the street for three and a half days, while the whole world rejoices.

And then, to the horror of all, they begin to draw breath, they stand on their feet and they ascend into heaven. With that, a great earthquake strikes Jerusalem and a tenth of the city collapses, killing thousands.

And then the seventh trumpet sounds.

Lesson #10: The Woman and the Dragon (12: 1-18)

Lesson #10 introduces a flashback to a time before Genesis 1: 1, giving us context for the story that we are reading. Chapter 12 opens with a great sign appearing in the sky: “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth” (12: 1). And then a huge red dragon appeared in the sky, seeking to devour the child!

War breaks out in heaven, the dragon leading his minions and the archangel Michael leading God's army of angels. Michael and his army thunderously defeat the dragon and his minions, casting them down to earth where the dragon vows revenge. He hunts the woman who had fled with her child to devour him and those who follow him.

For John Milton this is epic material, grist for the greatest epic poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost*.

Assignment

Read: John 12: 1-18.

Week 6 (No class on Memorial Day weekend, Monday, May 30; Tuesday classes DO meet on May 31)

Lesson #11: The Two Beasts (13: 1-18)

In Lesson #11 we meet the two beasts, one who comes “out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its heads were ten diadems, and on its heads blasphemous names” (13: 1). In contrast to the many “antichrists” we hear John speak of in his correspondence, this is *the* Antichrist, the arch-deceiver and the minion of Satan. Accompanying him is a second beast, the “false prophet” who “had two horns like a lamb’s but spoke like a dragon. It wielded all the authority of the first beast in its sight and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” (13: 12); this is the false prophet.

Combined, Satan, the antichrist and the false prophet comprise a grotesque parody of the Trinity, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

And they prepare to do battle for the very soul of humanity.

Lesson #12: The Lamb and His Companions (14: 1-20)

In direct contrast to the grotesque parody of the Trinity that we met in Lesson #11, Lesson #12 introduces the Lamb, three angels and 144,000 who have “his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (14: 1).

This is God’s army who will cleanse the earth and engage the final, climactic battle with Satan and his minions on the plains of Meggido: Armageddon (16: 16).

Assignment

Read: John 13: 1 – 14: 20.

**SPRING VACATION, JUNE 5 – 18.
CLASSES RESUME ON MONDAY MORNING, JUNE 20.**



Week 7 (June 20, 21)

Lesson #13: The Seven Bowls (15: 1 – 16: 21)

Before the final battle we unleash another set of plagues. This time seven angels pour out seven bowls: “the seven bowls of God’s fury upon the earth” (16: 1).

At this point the earth is little more than a smoking cinder, wobbling in space!

Lesson #14: Babylon the Great (17: 1 - 18: 24)

In Lesson #14 we meet the great “Whore of Babylon” riding upon a beast with seven heads: Babylon the great, “the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth” (17: 5), and “the great city that has sovereignty over the kings of the earth” (18: 18): Rome.

And we watch it collapse!

Assignment

Read: Revelation 15: 1 – 18: 24.

Week 8 (June 27, 28)

Lesson #15: The Battle of Armageddon (19: 1 – 21)

In Lesson #15 the final climactic battle is joined as Christ returns with his army of saints, crushing the forces of Satan, led by the Antichrist and the False Prophet who are captured and “thrown alive into the fiery pool with burning sulfur” (19: 20).

Lesson #16: The Millennial Kingdom (20: 1 – 15)

With Christ’s return and victory, he and his martyred saints reign for 1,000 years. He imprisons . . . but then at the end of the 1,000 years Satan is set free to deceive the earth once more! His defeat and punishment are swift and severe: Satan is “thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they [are] tormented day and night forever and ever” (20: 10).

Assignment

Read: Revelation 19: 1 – 20: 15.

**(No class on 4th of July weekend,
Monday, June 4 OR Tuesday, June 5)**



Week 9 (June 11, 12)

Lesson #17: The New Heaven and Earth (21: 1-27)

With the final judgment the sad, sorry story of humanity on earth ends. In Lesson #19 we witness a new heaven and a new earth, for “the former heaven and the former earth had passed away” (21: 1). The linear narrative across the Christian canon of Scripture comes full circle as the new Jerusalem descends “out of heaven from God” (21: 2). We are in a new Eden, a place where God dwells with us, where we are his people and he is our God.

Revelation 21 takes us on a tour of our eternal home.

Lesson #18: Epilogue (22: 1-22)

The tour of our new home concludes with a final blessing, and with John exclaiming: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (22: 20).

Assignment

Read: John 21: 1- 22: 21.

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