

Reading the Book of Revelation

The last book of the New Testament is in danger of falling off the end of the Bible and being forgotten. It rarely appears in church lectionaries and is seldom cited. It was indeed perched somewhat precariously in the discussions in church councils in the early Christian centuries about what the New Testament should include, before the decision was made by most to keep it in.

If all engagement with the books of the New Testament is to be seen as cross-cultural encounter, engagement with Revelation is especially so. It is strange, full of symbolism and predictions about the future, dear and dire. It has inspired some to see it as a blueprint for what was about to occur in their own day. The image of the seven hills of Rome, for instance, referred, according to some, to the seven nations which formed the EEC (European Economic Community) in 1958, the forerunner of the European Union.



Some saw 666 as a reference to the introduction of the bank card (!) and others saw allusions to Rome as referring to the Roman Catholic Church. History is littered with such follies and with groups seeing themselves as living in the last days and applying the predictions of Revelation to their times.

What kind of writing is this? In these studies, we shall look at the contents of the book, but before that, we shall explore the special nature of this literature as a first step to sensitise ourselves to what we will find. There are, therefore, four studies:

1. Behind the Book of Revelation: Imagining Hope
2. The Letters to the Seven Churches
3. What was Happening?
4. What was about to Happen?

The Book of Revelation has 22 chapters and not all can be read during a study session. Under the title for each session there is reference to the chapters which it will cover. These can be read before the group sessions at your leisure. Within each session there are suggestions for reading selective portions.

Each study offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like

- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

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Behind the Book of Revelation

Imagining Hope

What kind of book is this? It bears the name “Revelation”. That is a translation of a word which has also found its way into English: “Apocalypse”. The word, “Apocalypse”, is used to describe writings of the similar kind to the Book of Revelation, sometimes therefore called “apocalyptic writings”. The “apocalyptic” word sounds a little like “eucalypt”. The “calypt” part means “covered” and “eu” means “well”, so a eucalypt tree is one where the seeds are well covered. In the word “apocalyptic”, the “apo” means “un-” and so the word means “uncovered, revealed” and so: “Revelation”.

Apocalyptic writings claim to uncover/reveal things, especially about the heavenly world and “plans” for history and how it will soon end. They developed partly from prophetic tradition (about the future) and partly from wisdom tradition (knowledge about things). They were often produced at times of persecution to reassure people that everything was under control and relief was imminent. They frequently used codes and symbols instead of naming political powers directly.



Some of them used pseudonyms, claiming to be visions which Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Daniel, etc. saw, but had remained hidden until the author’s time. Works attributed to Enoch were especially popular. Later there was even an Apocalypse of Peter, claiming to channel his voice. They frequently recycled older material, reworking and reapplying it and frequently reported visions, sometimes as visits to the heavenly world where they saw and heard secrets, sometimes as dreams.

Most people have dreams, generated by data the brain has assembled, and many dreams are a strange mixture of symbols and images. In the ancient world, dreams were often attributed to the supernatural because of their mysterious nature. While some actual dream and visionary experiences may lie behind these writings, they are mostly literary creations, composed with considerable care. We need to be sensitive to the way people in those days tolerated such imaginative writing and its claims: they would not have seen this as fabrication and forgery, but as seeking to convey truth.

Authors composed these writings in order to offer people hope in contexts which seemed hopeless. The foundation of their belief in hope was that God had acted in the past and would do it again. God liberated Israel from Egypt and later restored Israel from exile after the major deportation of the early sixth century BCE. God did it then and so, they believed, God would act again to address present crises.

Israel’s history had been turbulent. Split in two in the tenth century as “Israel”, the ten tribes in the north, and “Judah”, the two tribes in the south, they faced successive invasions and incorporations into empires. The Assyrians all but wiped out “Israel” in the north in the late eighth century BCE, and the south was overrun by successive empires: Babylonian, Persian, Greek/Hellenistic, and Roman.

The early prophets like Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and Micah declared disaster to be divine punishment for sin. Priestly sages wrote up Israel's early history from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings as an alternation of sin and disaster and repentance and success. Reality, however, called this scheme into question. Wicked nations (and people) seemed to prosper. Good people sometimes suffered. Famously the sixth century prophet whose works are incorporated into the later chapters of Isaiah depicted God's faithful servant as someone who faced innocent suffering. Some Psalms said the same. The Book of Job challenges the view that suffering must be punishment.

Over time, hope for liberation from oppressive regimes within history faded. With that grew the expectation that the only hope would be a new beginning, a fresh start. The prophet who wrote of God's servant also had God declare: "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17). The world as they knew it was seen as a mess. They came to attribute it to wicked angels who slept with women (Genesis 6), produced giants, from whose corpses came half-caste evil spirits who had infested the earth. They were to blame for illnesses and disasters.



People therefore looked in hope to the day when the demons and their chief, Satan, the devil, would be destroyed. Hope fired the imagination. Not only had God rescued Israel before and would surely do it again, but some went further to point to the wonders of creation and the heavenly bodies as evidence of order and so of hope. Apocalyptic writings often contain such "science".

The common pattern of hope usually had two stages: Israel would be restored to its homeland and would triumph over its oppressors, often under the leadership of a warrior king like David, a Messiah, and then history would be wound up: all would be brought back to life and stand before God as judge. To be present they needed bodies, and thus was born belief in resurrection of the dead, first evident in Daniel, the last Old Testament book to be written, around 165 BCE.

Some versions of hope depict the violent crushing and annihilation of enemies or their excruciating torture forever in hell and the defeat of Satan and his minions, leaving the righteous safe and free. Some are more generous, with fantasies of the formerly oppressive nations turning to God, coming on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, bearing gifts, turning their swords into ploughs and spears into pruning hooks. Imagination ran wild. There would be abundant fertility of plants, trees, animals and humans, wine and food in plenty, a restoration of paradise. Jerusalem would be renewed in splendour.

But when? One means of offering reassurance was to recite past history up to the author's time but do it as though an ancient figure was revealing a divine plan, and then to project what the author believed was about to happen. The predictions often failed and clearly those that predicted their generation was the last had no idea that history would still be rolling on 2000+ years later.

The book of Daniel is an example. It purports to be written in the sixth century BCE and uses some tales about Daniel which may well have emanated from then. It was in fact composed in the early 2nd century BCE, in the time of crisis when the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, took control of

Jerusalem, 167–164 BCE, and erected an altar to Zeus in the temple. In typical apocalyptic style Daniel 8 reports a vision and then for our good fortune explains it for us.

“I looked up and saw a ram standing beside the river. It had two horns. Both horns were long, but one was longer than the other, and the longer one came up second. 4 I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. All beasts were powerless to withstand it, and no one could rescue from its power; it did as it pleased and became strong.” (8:3–4)

Later in the chapter comes the explanation: “As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia” (8:20). The reference is to the defeat of the Babylonian empire in 538 BCE by the Medes and Persians under the leadership of Cyrus. The Persians came to dominate and so the Persian Empire was born. The vision continues:



“As I was watching, a male goat appeared from the west, coming across the face of the whole earth without touching the ground. The goat had a horn between its eyes. 6 It came toward the ram with the two horns that I had seen standing beside the river, and it ran at it with savage force. 7 I saw it approaching the ram. It was enraged against it and struck the ram, breaking its two horns. The ram did not have power to withstand it; it threw the ram down to the ground and trampled upon it, and there was no one who could rescue the ram from its power. 8 Then the male goat grew exceedingly great; but at the height of its power, the great horn was broken...” (8:5–8)

Alexander the Great

Explanation: “The male goat is the king of Greece, and the great horn between its eyes is the first king” (8:21). The reference is to Alexander the Great, who in the 330’s BCE in very short time conquered the Persian Empire, reaching as far as India, but then died in his prime only in his thirties.

“... the great horn was broken, and in its place there came up four prominent horns toward the four winds of heaven. 9 Out of one of them came another horn, a little one, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the beautiful land. 10 It grew as high as the host of heaven. It threw down to the earth some of the host and some of the stars, and trampled on them. 11 Even against the prince of the host it acted arrogantly; it took the regular burnt offering away from him and overthrew the place of his sanctuary.” (8:8–12)

Explanation: “As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power.” The reference is to Alexander’s generals breaking up of the empire. Ptolemy took Egypt and Palestine (till ca 200 BCE); Seleucus took Syria and in 200 BCE the Seleucid king invaded Palestine taking it from the Ptolemies.

The author is then moving close to his own time and writes:

“At the end of their rule, when the transgressions have reached their full measure, a king of bold countenance shall arise, skilled in intrigue. 24 He shall grow strong in power, shall cause fearful destruction, and shall succeed in what he does. He shall destroy the powerful and the people of the holy ones. 25 By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall be great. Without warning he shall destroy many and shall even rise up against the Prince of princes. But he shall be broken, and not by human hands.” (8:23–25)

The reference is to Antiochus Epiphanes. The Book of Daniel has other visions which depict the demise of Antiochus followed by the day of resurrection. It was all about to happen. Thus, in Daniel 12 we read of Michael, the archangel's intervention:

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. ²Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” (12:1–3)

It did not happen that way. It was always safer for authors to say “soon” than to predict, and so we see Mark portraying Jesus as saying about history's climax: “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (13:32), while nevertheless having him assert: “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (13:30). Mark has Jesus predict the destruction of the temple as part of the climax of history and it had happened in 70 CE shortly before Mark wrote. The Book of Revelation also looked to the end of the world occurring within a generation.

After the temple's destruction in 70 CE the form of Judaism which became Rabbinic Judaism distanced itself from such literature, so that most of it has survived only through later Christian sources. Only Daniel made it into the Old Testament and Revelation only just made it into the New. Our viewing such writings from 2000+ years later means we cannot embrace some of what they say. On the other hand, some of their images of hope can continue to inspire.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in this session do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What was behind the development of apocalyptic literature and thinking?
3. Hopelessness is one thing. Having hope is another. But what kind of hope? How do you imagine hope? How can hope be healthy or unhealthy?

Session Two

The Letters to the Seven Churches

Revelation 1 – 3

In this session we look at the first three chapters of Revelation. Our focus will be first on the opening chapter, and then on chapters 2–3 in overview with a closer look at two of the “letters to the churches”.

The Beginning: Read Revelation 1

The book begins with a brief introduction in 1:1–2 explaining what it is. The introduction might have been written by someone else, but is probably written by John, who will go on in 1:10–11 to explain how the revelation came to him. The author explains that God first gave the revelation to Jesus, who then passed it onto him via an angel. People familiar with apocalyptic writings would recognize that the claim that an angel passed on secret information was a common feature in their composition.

If that is the “how”, the “what” is “what must soon take place”. In other words, behind all the complicated images the focus is: what is about to happen as we approach the end of the world? We see this also in the last words of the book where we read: “The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20).

It follows a threat typical of such writings: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; ¹⁹if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (20:18–19). This echoes the words in the opening: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). The reference to its being read aloud reminds us that this was standard practice. Books were written not for silent reading but for reading aloud.

The “who” question, who wrote this, also receives an answer in the introduction: “John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw”. Beside Revelation we have also a Gospel and three letters attributed to someone called John, but these are not all the same John. The language and style of Revelation rules that out.

In 1:9 he tells us that he was: “on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The island of Patmos, ca 750 km west of Turkiye, is relatively small and was scarcely inhabited at the time. John was almost certainly using it as a safe haven to escape danger of persecution. The fact that he seems well informed about the seven churches near the eastern coast of Turkiye suggests he has recently been active there. When? The content of the book suggests that he wrote during the latter part of the reign of Emperor Domitian, 81–96 CE.



Patmos

In 1:4 we have the typical beginning of a letter. We start with “Dear x”. Their standard pattern was: X to Y, + formal greeting and then often a statement of thanksgiving. There are often expansions. The expansions here already take us into the realm of the imaginative with the reference to the “seven spirits” and reemphasise Christ’s second coming, typically via an Old Testament citation, comprising a mixture of references (Dan 7:13; Zech 12:10; Gen 12:3).

There follows John’s account of a vision of Christ, who tells him: “write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this” (1:19). At least there is some explanation of the strange symbols: “the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (1:20).

The imagery in 1:12–16 derives in part from Daniel as the table below shows:



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_churches_of_Asia

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³in the midst of the lampstands I saw **one like the Son of Man**, clothed with a long robe and with a **golden sash across his chest**. ¹⁴**His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow**; his eyes were like a **flame of fire**, ¹⁵his **feet were like burnished bronze**, refined as in a furnace, and his **voice was like the sound of many waters**. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. 1:12–16

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was **white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool**; his throne was **fiery flames**, and its wheels were burning fire. ... I saw **one like a human being** coming with the clouds of heaven. Dan 7:9, 13 ⁵¹I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, **with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist**. ⁶His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and **legs like the gleam of burnished bronze**, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude. Dan 10:5

The commission to write to the seven churches is fulfilled in chapters 2 – 3. Each letter is addressed to the church’s heavenly angel, but in reality, to the church. Each is also recorded in the book and so intended to be given attention by all. The letters follow a set form:

- “To the angel of the church in ... write ...”
- “These are the words of ...” (using some aspect of the call vision)
- Specific commendation and/or warning: “I know ...”
- A set ending: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers” ... using some aspect of the images of the end of time (paradise, Jerusalem, tree of life, etc)

Read the Letter to Ephesus: Revelation 2:1–7.

Ephesus was the main city of the Roman province of “Asia”, site of temple of Artemis, and a centre of Roman emperor cult with a temple for Domitian. The “endurance” (2:2, 3) relates to persecution and pressure from the authorities which John has escaped. The other issue is within the congregations: “those who claim to be apostles but are not” (2:2) and “the Nicolaitans” (2:6); and that they have abandoned the love they once had (2:5).



Ephesus

The letter to Smyrna also mentions Roman persecution: “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison” (2:10), but also touches on problems with the Jewish synagogue: “slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9).

The letter to Philadelphia also mentions them (3:9).

One possible explanation is that Rome acknowledged the legitimacy of Judaism and so guaranteed them protection, not requiring them to acknowledge the emperor as a god but did not do the same for the church congregations. It seems that they had failed to convince the authorities about their Jewish origins. Apparently, some Jews were dobbing them in to the authorities, who then demanded they submit to emperor worship or face persecution.

The letter to Pergamum mentions a martyrdom. That will have been at the hands of the Romans. From later in the book, we find indications that some persecution took the form of economic oppression. Unless exempt, as was the case with Jews, people needed to swear allegiance usually in a religious form to the emperor and carry a mark indicating that they had done so; otherwise, they could not buy or sell. The letter to the Philadelphians mentions “hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth” (3:10) and assures them: “I am coming soon” (3:11).



Pergamum altar to Zeus

The internal issues within the congregation alluded to in the letter to Ephesus also appear in other letters. The Pergamum letter mentions some “who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication” (2:14) and also “some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:15).

The church at Thyatira is scolded for tolerating a false prophet.

The letter names Jezebel: “who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20), depicted also as teaching “the deep things of Satan” (2:24). It describes those following her as symbolically engaging in adultery with her (2:22). The letter to Sardis may be describing similar dangers when it suggests some have soiled their clothes (3:4).

The congregations will have known to whom the author was referring with his coded allusions to false prophets, Balaam, Jezebel and the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans, rejected in Ephesus but tolerated in Pergamum will have been followers of a person called Nicolaus, but we have no idea

who he was. Their teaching has in common with the teaching of the figure called Jezebel, that they tolerated eating food which had been sacrificed to idols. How else could you eat meat when it was routinely butchered in temples! Paul already had to deal with this in the 50's CE, when he advised against it, but rejected any notion that the meat was really contaminated, and so should never be eaten, because he argued idols are not real. A liberal interpretation of Paul's comments may have persuaded some to feel free to eat such meat. To "practice fornication" is probably not meant literally, but like adultery was used of any act of unfaithfulness to God.

Possibly the would-be apostles whom the author praises the Ephesians for rejecting were advocating such views, although we know that there was another issue with visiting apostles and would-be missionaries. For some exploited local congregations, profiteering from their generosity. When Paul made a collection for the needy Judeans facing famine in their land, his critics falsely accused him of such exploitation.



Another concern which features in some letters is poverty. This is especially so in Smyrna ("I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich" 2:9) and the opposite is the case in Laodicea. Its letter states: "You say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17).

Laodicea

Challenging them to change then brings the promise: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (3:20), more a statement about Christ engaging believers about their wealth than its more common usage in evangelism suggests.

The letters which John felt inspired to write address situations with which he was familiar. He clearly cares, though sometimes his warnings and threats are stark and problematic. Some cities like Ephesus, Pergamum (capital of "Asia", a major seat of imperial power with a temple to Emperor Augustus), and Smyrna (a centre of emperor worship with a strong Jewish population) will have had many house churches and possibly with diverse spiritualities. It is hard for us to imagine what life would have been like for such communities. How far should they go in engaging their wider communities? Did eating their meat matter? When should they resist pressure and when conform? 2000 years later pressure to conform takes different guises. Being lukewarm appeals.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in this session do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What was the main issue of dispute within the churches as the author sees it?
3. Where do you draw the line or need to resist in relation to imperially powerful influences today? What is your experience?

What was Happening Then?

Revelation 4 – 17

After the dictation of the seven letters, John reports having a door to heaven opened before him. The instruction he hears remains focused on future events: “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). There follows a highly imaginative description of God’s throne in heaven and divine worship. The description is shot through with imagery drawn from similar accounts in the Old Testament, especially in Ezekiel 1.

The model of worship is based on the splendour of oriental courts, including the motifs of throne, sceptre, crown, bowing, and adulation. No description is given of God except for the very brief comment: “the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian” (4:3). People created images of worship based on what they saw as the highest model of human greatness and how people responded to it. The royal court model of God and worship still persists today despite understandings of human greatness having changed significantly. These days we tend to see greatness differently, as characterised by love and generosity, which, in turn, inform our awe and gratitude in worship.

Read Revelation 5:1–5

Chapter 5 begins a sequence of stages unleashed by the opening of seals on the scroll where the secret of what is to happen is inscribed. At first it appears that no one is worthy to open it but then one of the elders surrounding God’s throne tells John: “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). Pictured then as a slaughtered lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, he is declared worthy: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; ¹⁰ you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth” (5:9).

The image of a scroll containing future history reflects the assumptions of apocalyptic ideology, namely that everything that happens is known/predetermined in advance. That means you can endure hardship because a positive end is guaranteed. It is striking that the one authorised to unleash history is a paradoxical figure: a lion who is a slain lamb!

To make the cross, an instrument for executing criminals, the key to the meaning of life, as the first Christians did, was an affront to Roman values which placed big strong males at the heart of what they saw as strength and hope. Revelation offers a similar affront: a slain lamb is the key to unlock life’s meaning! The lion is reduced to being a vulnerable lamb.

It invites us to see love and vulnerability as the key to greatness and also as the key to understanding God’s ways. The author remains focused on hope and how it will unfold and so uses the unrolling of the scroll as a way of offering hope and reassurance.



The subsequent chapters reveal what is beneath the seven seals. When we get to the seventh seal, we find considerable elaboration because the author means to point to his own time. Under the seventh we hear of seven trumpets and later at the point of the seventh trumpet we have seven angels with bowls. The composition shows signs of having had a history and having been expanded with supplements over time. They include reference to events which had already occurred, like the persecution of Christians and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. There are also repetitions and overlaps resulting from the expansions.

The author sees himself and his communities as living at the stage of history depicted under the seventh seal. Events of the present and immediate future are expanded and adjusted on the basis of experience and imagination. The seventh seal now runs from chapter 8 to chapter 22!

- Seal 1* a white horse conquering 6:1-2
- Seal 2* a red horse bringing war 6:3-4
- Seal 3* a black horse with scales 6:5-6
- Seal 4* a green horse with killing by war, famine, animals 6:7-8
- Seal 5* souls of the martyrs seek vengeance on their killers 6:9-10
- Seal 6* the day of wrath 6:12-17
- Seal 7* 7 angels with 7 trumpets 8:1-5



- 1st trumpet* hail and fire rains onto the earth 8:6-7
- 2nd trumpet* a burning mountain thrown into the sea 8:8-9
- 3rd trumpet* star fell from heaven 8:10-11
- 4th trumpet* a third of all light removed 8:12-13
- 5th trumpet* (= 1st woe): locusts unleashed 9:1-12
- 6th trumpet* (= 2nd woe): 9:13
- 7th trumpet* (= 3rd woe) 11:15 – 14:20 eating little scroll, 2 witnesses, woman
- 7 bowls* 15 – 16
- The fall of Rome and details of the end* 17 – 22

For this study we cannot visit what every seal reveals, so we pass over the first four, represented employing the imagery of horses, first used in Zechariah (1:8; 6:1–6). Under Seal five are Christian martyrs crying out for revenge against their killers, not very edifying. We have more detail under Seal six. Here we have reference to 144,000 people with marked foreheads to ensure they will be saved from the wrath to come. The symbolism is obvious: the twelve tribes of Israel, 12,000 each, but then 7:9 goes on to add “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”. At one level this refers to Israel and the Gentiles. All are saved and John depicts their saved status using a wonderful patchwork of Old Testament references.

The 144,000 reappear in Revelation 14 where, perhaps in a new adaptation, they are described as those “who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins” (14:4). They are believers who practised celibacy. To “defile oneself” with women meant having sexual intercourse, not seen as sin, but like other aspects of being human, such as menstruation, childbirth, and seminal emission, were seen as requiring ceremonial cleansing. Such ritual is not to be confused with moral defilement. The author thinks in terms of males, typical for his time.

The assumption is that the 144,000 would be joined by the great multitude of the rest of the believers, who, once they entered the sacred space of heaven, would be celibate. Sexual relations were forbidden in temples and sanctuaries and so had no place in the sanctuary of heaven. Mark reflects this widely held assumption when he portrays Jesus as saying: “when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (12:25). This

assumption inspired some (like Jesus and Paul) to live in the present the way they would live in the future. Paul had to resist others who insisted that all should do so. He defended sex and marriage as part of God's good creation.

Seal seven begins a whole sequence of events, depicted by seven trumpets (associated also with 3 woes) and then seven bowls. At the sixth trumpet (the second woe) we have reference to the conquest of Jerusalem, the destruction of its temple and the killing of two witnesses, probably representative of Christian preachers, and then their being brought back to life and taken to heaven. "The beast", mentioned here for the first time, a symbol of Rome, is the killer.

Read Revelation 11:15–19



With the seventh trumpet (the third woe) we have reference to coming of the Messiah (11:16–19) which forms an introduction to what follows. In chapter 12, then, we have the vision of a pregnant woman in heaven and a dragon (Satan) wanting to eat her baby (the Messiah) (12:1–6). War breaks out in heaven and Michael throws the dragon down to earth, where it first chases the woman and then her children, also an image of persecution of believers (12:7–17). John is now talking about what is going on in his own time.

In chapter 13 he returns in detail to "the beast". The beast rises from the sea with seven heads (one wounded), governs all, and persecutes Christians (12:18 – 13:10). It represents the Roman empire. John then reports that a second beast gets people to worship the image of the first beast, making all wear the mark or number of the beast (666) on their right hands or foreheads and permitting only those so marked to buy or sell (13:11–18). The second beast represents the Roman imperial authorities in the province of Asia who were seeking to enforce emperor worship through such economic pressure.

John then adds: "This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is 666" (13:18). The number of the beast, 666 is the numerical value of the Hebrew letters of Nero, who killed Peter and Paul and many Christians in 64 CE. Many believed he would return at the end of time. Some Jewish writings also reflect this fear.

The author returns in chapter 17 to the issue: "This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated [= Rome]; also, they are seven emperors, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth, but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction" (17:9–11). Rome's emperors were Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero (54 – 68 CE), (then three for a very short time), Vespasian, Titus, Domitian. The eighth is probably Nero. Most see Revelation in its present form as written late in reign of Domitian (81 – 96 CE).



Emperor Domitian

The statement “five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while” was probably written at an earlier stage, perhaps in the 60’s CE. The author has not corrected it, but now assumes the reference is to the seven main emperors listed with Nero to return as the eighth. This is the situation the author sees himself in, just before the climax of history unfolds with Nero’s return. In our next study we shall see what he thinks will happen next.

Faced with state terror and resultant poverty and distress as a result of Rome’s promotion of emperor worship, the author and his churches faced a hopeless situation. They clung to the belief that God would soon intervene to set things right. To help them imagine how this might happen, the author drew on a body of tradition which had dealt with such questions in the past and updated it to his own time. These may reflect dreams and visions – did they use drugs? – but mostly they are a recycling and reworking of existing material drawn from their Jewish Old Testament sources elaborated in early Christian communities.

They assumed things would get much worse before they got better: listing wars, natural disasters, earthquakes, disease – plagues. Accordingly, the author, writing in the late first century CE, mixes coded concrete references to emperors and the imperial cult in Asia Minor with standard images of disasters, plagues, wars, and a final last battle to say: God will soon intervene. It was an elaborate and speculative way of giving expression to the fundamental belief: in the end, God! Such is hope.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in this session do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. 144,000 celibates – why feature celibates? What were and are or can be the implications?
3. A slain lamb? Why this image? What can we make of it today? How would you see the cross as giving meaning to life and to hope today?

Session Four

What was about to Happen?

Revelation 17 – 22

The author of Revelation sees himself and his communities living in the last time. Drawing on traditional images such as the plagues brought on Egypt by Moses, he has expanded events under the 7th seal and then the 7th trumpet even further with the account of 7 angels pouring out plagues on the earth.

Angels with bowls of plagues for the earth 15:1-8

1st angel: foul and painful sores 16:1-2

2nd angel: sea becomes blood and everything in it dies 16:3

3rd angel: does the same to the rivers 16:4-7

4th angel: scorches people with fire 16:8-9

5th angel: plunges the kingdom of the beast into darkness 16:10-11

6th angel: dries up Euphrates and 3 foul spirits from the dragon, beast, and false prophet perform miracles and assemble nations at Armageddon 16:12-16

7th angel : earthquake, huge hailstones, on cities, and especially Babylon (Rome) 16:17-21

Read Revelation 17:1–6

Rome and its Empire is the source of oppression. It is code-named Babylon, not inappropriately because the Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 586 BCE and Rome did it again in 70 CE. Pictured as a prostitute, Rome, the city set on 7 hills, whose empire had engulfed the nations and who had slaughtered believers, is about to come to an end when the nations represented by the ten horns of the beast rise up against her in revolt.



Ancient Rome

Revelation 18 then depicts the demise of Rome and its empire. Revelation 19 begins with an acclamation: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, ²for his judgements are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (19:2).

We then move rather quickly to the image of the marriage feast of the Lamb. This reflects the widespread image of salvation as a feast, a favourite image in sayings of Jesus, and foreshadowed in Holy Communion. The idea of it being a marriage feast reflects use of marital imagery in early Christian tradition and probably goes back to use of such imagery by Jesus in his defence of his disciples not fasting, saying: “The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast” (2:19). It then helped generate the image of the faithful as the bride, such as we see in Ephesians 5.

Read Revelation 19:11–16

Before the great feast could take place, another traditional expectation had to be fulfilled. God’s Messiah must defeat the enemies. Here the Messiah is Jesus depicted as riding a white horse, followed by the faithful on white horses. They make war. The imagery draws in part on Psalm 2 where the king is declared to be God’s son, and who is to subjugate the nations and “break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (2:7–8). Familiar images include:

“robe dipped in blood”, “Word of God”, “King of kings and Lord of lords”, from whose mouth comes a sharp sword. The victors are to feast on the flesh of their enemies, with some left for the birds.



The situation which was confronting the author and his communities reappears in the reference to the beast and the false prophet who lured some to receive the mark of the beast, probably an allusion to provincial authorities and those who colluded with them.

The lake of fire burning with sulphur is an image designed to depict the worst possible pain and suffering.

Revelation 20 then recycles another traditional Jewish expectation, namely that the Messiah would finally reign in Jerusalem over God’s people in peace. Accordingly, an angel ties up Satan and confines him to a dungeon for a thousand years. A first stage of judgement takes place. Those who had remained faithful and not taken on the mark of the beast and been martyred for it, would be raised from the dead: “they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years” (20:6).

Resurrection of others to face judgement would have to wait till after the thousand-year reign. At that point Satan would be released, the nations would surround Jerusalem (another traditional motif) and be annihilated by fire from heaven and Satan turfed into the lake of fire to join the beast and false prophet there (20:10). Judgement day follows based on people’s deeds and all whose names were not written in the book of life (another traditional motif) were also thrown into the lake of fire.

A Jewish apocalypse preserved in the Apocrypha, 2 Esdras, expresses similar hopes.

“My son the Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and those who remain shall rejoice four hundred years. Then the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days ... After seven days ... the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it, and the Most High shall be revealed on the seat of judgment, ... here are delight and rest, and there are fire and torments. ... for you ... paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, ... illness is banished from you, and death is hidden; Hades has fled and corruption has been forgotten” (2 Esdras 7:28–36)

Read Revelation 21:1–8

A further traditional element follows in Revelation 21, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17). The traditional assumption is that it is hopeless expecting change the way things are, so better to begin again. It may be surprising to see the promise that there will be no more sea (21:1), but its background is that the sea was seen as treacherous and dangerous. It was also the means Rome used to expand its oppressive empire (the beast rising from the sea).

Jerusalem was central in traditional hope. Here it is depicted as coming down from heaven adorned as a bride on her wedding day. Earlier the author had used marriage imagery of Christ and the

faithful. Here the city represents the faithful. There follows a patchwork of Old Testament allusions celebrating God's dwelling with the people, and tears being wiped from every eye.

God, "the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' ⁶Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (21:5–6), wonderful images of hope. Those who are not God's children are then confined to "the lake that burns with fire and sulphur" (21:8).

The elaborate description of the city includes allusions to the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. The imagery is complex because it depicts a city yet is also depicting the city as "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). There is "no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb", who are also the source of eternal light. The imagery continues in the detail that (the faithful of) the nations will come to it, its gates are always open, and as a sacred place nothing unclean or morally sinful will have a place there.



The final chapter creatively recycles an image from Ezekiel (47:1) with echoes of the garden of Eden in portraying a river of life flowing from God's throne, accompanied by the tree of life whose leaves bring healing.

The work concludes with the author being instructed not to seal up his book, as was the practice when authors wrote in the name of a figure from the remote past, but to publish it, together with warnings that no one change it in any way. Again, we read the author's assumption: "The time is near" (22:10) or as he puts it in the words of Jesus: "I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work" (22:12).

The author has employed what were a standard set of expectations about the climax of history: distress and disaster, followed by the coming of the Messiah to defeat the forces of evil and reign in Jerusalem for a substantial period, followed by general resurrection for judgement, hell for the wicked and a new heaven and earth, including paradise for the faithful. He saw himself and his communities as on the brink of the first stage of this climax: the overthrow of Rome and the coming of Christ and the beginning of his thousand-year reign from Jerusalem. The events from 20:7 to 22:5 are to take place, therefore, a thousand years later.

In the twenty-first century we have, of course, exceeded that timeline and need to look back at this work and read it in its context. It is a prophecy about what the author believed was about to happen in the late first century CE, in particular the demise of the Roman Empire. It is not a prophecy about empires since, even though history is littered with attempts to apply it to later contexts. What it predicted was soon to happen did not happen. That was usually the case with such apocalyptic prophecies. Had the Jesus movement made future predictions its main message, it would have soon died out. Fortunately, it was grounded not in such expectation but in an understanding of God as caring.

The author engages in fantasy and imagination, inspired by biblical images and their use in Jewish and early Christian Jewish tradition. For us, it as though the author's elaborate images now present themselves as in an art gallery. Some will inspire. The understanding of hope as much more than the fate of the individual but as something which addresses political and social issues deserves our attention. Some images are painful and problematic when we hold to love as meaning never to give up loving, never to seek vengeance, and never to delight in the prospect of others' suffering.

We engage Revelation with a discernment informed by values it sometimes appears to flout. In it we find both treasure and also what we must leave aside.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in this session do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What images do you find attractive and meaningful? What images do the opposite for you?
3. The author could never contemplate salvation as just about individuals going to heaven. His was a much wider picture informed by the traditions he inherited and how he understood his world. What would you say are the important elements in hope for the future for faith today?