

THE BOOK OF
REVELATION
ALL CREATION'S HALLELUJAH



RESOURCE BOOK

*the*KERYGMA
—program—

Robert A. Bryant

THE BOOK OF
REVELATION
ALL CREATION'S HALLELUJAH



RESOURCE BOOK

BY ROBERT A. BRYANT

General Editors: Margaret E. Heely
Richard A. Ray

Copy Editor: Claudia Springer

Cover Design: Melissa Logan

Illustrations: Hannah Kitzmann

© The Kerygma Program, 2024. All rights reserved. Except where noted in the manuscript, portions of this publication may not be reproduced, stored in an electronic system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. Brief quotations may be used in literary reviews.

The Book of Revelation: All Creation's Hallelujah is published and distributed by

The Kerygma Program, 20 Russell Blvd.; Bradford, PA 16701

Phone: 800-537-9462 | Email: explore@kerygma.com | Website: www.kerygma.com

Resource Book ISBN 978-1-944558-22-2

Leader's Guide ISBN 978-1-944558-23-9


the KERYGMA
— *program* —

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	About The Author	v
	Preface	vi
	As You Begin.....	vii
1	Approaching God’s Revelation to John	1
2	Vision of the Risen Christ.....	13
3	Vision of Letters To Seven Churches	23
4	Vision of God and the Lamb	35
5	Vision of Seven Seals	45
6	Vision of Seven Trumpets of Engagement	57
7	Vision of Seven Figures of Power.....	69
8	Vision of Seven Bowls of Judgment.....	83
9	Vision of Hallelujahs, Victory, and the Last Judgment.....	95
10	Vision of God’s Heavenly Kingdom on Earth	107
	Appendix A The Seven Beatitudes of Revelation	122
	Appendix B Selected Classical Sources	124
	Appendix C The Canonical Context of Revelation	130
	Appendix D Creation Care Texts in Revelation	134
	Appendix E Map of the Seven Churches.....	136
	Appendix F The Vision of the Seven Candlesticks.....	138
	Select Bibliography	140

“In this remarkable volume, Robert A. Bryant provides an outstanding resource that blends first-rate scholarship with his deep love for the Church, as he offers his readers a journey through Revelation that is both accessible and profound. Prof. Bryant’s skills as an award-winning teacher are clear on every page, as he draws on his extensive knowledge of the Bible and the Greco-Roman world to answer many of the questions raised by this challenging book. This is a wonderful gift to the Church.”

Craig Vondergeest, Ruby K. Phillips Professor of Religion, Presbyterian College

“For many, Revelation is a scary book. It has often been hijacked by interpreters to promote violent scenarios of exclusion and horrific end-of-the-world predictions. Not here. I cannot think of a more theologically accessible and historically informed study of the book of Revelation than Dr. Bryant’s. As he ably demonstrates, Revelation is all about wonder, not terror. And take it from someone who once hated Revelation! Dr. Bryant’s study is a tremendous gift to the church.”

***William P. Brown, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament,
Columbia Theological Seminary***

“The Book of Revelation continues to mystify readers, and unhelpful interpretations abound. Not to worry! A new Kerygma commentary by Robert Bryant offers a clear, engaging, and accessible guide to this fascinating book. The Book of Revelation: All Creation’s Hallelujah will be a valuable resource for individuals and for group study—warmly recommended!”

John T. Carroll, Professor of New Testament, Union Presbyterian Seminary

“Professor Bryant is a gifted and experienced teacher whose many years of study of the book of Revelation bear fruit in this enlightening book on a regrettably neglected part of the New Testament canon. He does so with great skill and insight expressed with clear focus on essential theological perspectives. His writing style engages the target audience beautifully, making this concise expose a wonderful contribution to the entire series.”

***Dr. Gerald L. Stevens, retired Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Greek
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary***

“The Book of Revelation: All Creation’s Hallelujah will greatly enhance any study of the last book in the Bible, as Dr. Bryant skillfully illuminates its historical context, structural dynamics, primary themes, and often mystifying symbolism with the precision and nuance characteristic of a seasoned scholar. Indeed, Bryant’s many years of classroom and congregational teaching shine through on each page of this valuable resource as he explicates Revelation’s treasures and complexities in a remarkably accessible way.”

***Michael Barram, Ph.D., Professor of Theology & Religious Studies,
Saint Mary’s College of California***

About The Author

Robert A. Bryant

Dr. Robert A. Bryant is the Kristen Herrington Professor of Bible at Presbyterian College. He holds a B.S. from Virginia Tech and an M.Div. and Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from Union Presbyterian Seminary. He joined PC's Department of Religion and Philosophy in 1998 and teaches general education courses in Old and New Testament, upper-level New Testament courses, and biblical Greek. He also teaches courses in support of the college's Environmental Studies Program. He has served as department chair and member of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, a Visiting Scholar for Duke University, received PC's Faculty Scholarship Award and Professor of the Year Award, as well as the South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities Teaching Excellence Award, is an adjunct faculty member of the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies, and twice received a German Academic Exchange Fellowship to teach as a Visiting Professor of Religion at the University of Education in Karlsruhe, Germany. He is the author of *The Risen Crucified Christ in Galatians*, two other Kerygma studies: *The Gospel of Matthew: God With Us* and *First Corinthians: One In Christ*, numerous articles, and is a frequent lecturer. His work in rhetorical studies is included in the *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*.

Dr. Bryant is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and has served churches as Pastor and Supply Pastor in the Synods of the South Atlantic (South Carolina and Georgia) and the Mid-Atlantic (North Carolina and Virginia). He also teaches for lay schools of theology in a number of presbyteries and contributes to the development of Christian Education curricula. He is an avid outdoorsman and serves on the Board of Directors of the Laurens County Trails Association. He and his wife Leigh Ann live in Clinton, SC, and have two adult children, Stephen and Susannah.

PREFACE

Welcome to a study of one of the most puzzling and encouraging books of the Bible—The Revelation to John. This resource book, *The Book of Revelation: All Creation's Hallelujah*, is part of The Kerygma Program's celebrated, in-depth, adult Bible study series. It complements the previous Kerygma study on Revelation by James A. Walther by bringing to bear the latest scholarly assessments of this book's historical, literary, and theological dimensions, as well as the effects Revelation has had in history and still has today.¹ As with all Kerygma studies, the primary aim is to support responsible, effective study of the Bible in the church that strengthens faithfulness. Readers of this volume will gain a more intimate understanding of Revelation and many other texts in the Bible. They will also gain an appreciation for why Revelation is included in the canon of Scripture and why this book is vital to the self-giving life of the church today.

Readers should know, however, that the author of this volume has not been a life-long fan of Revelation. In fact, I disliked and shunned it for a long time. I formed a strong, negative first impression of Revelation in my adolescent years, based largely on its cultural representations; and even when I began to read the Bible in earnest, I thought its inclusion in the Bible was a horrible mistake. When I entered seminary, I was not at all surprised that Revelation had difficulty being accepted into the canon, and I took delight in learning that the Reformer John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible except Revelation because he thought it was too “re-veiling” and obscured Jesus. In seminary I came to accept the church's judgment for its inclusion in Scripture, but I was also happy to keep company with Calvin and ignore Revelation altogether.

Little did I realize then that the seeds for my present profound appreciation for this book were being sown and that a plant with fruit from those seeds would one day appear. In large measure, this present volume is a fruit of the community of faith—the church—at work in my life. At Union Presbyterian Seminary, I met Nelson Kraybill who had served the Mennonite Church in Uruguay and discovered that the Christians there living under an oppressive dictatorship received hope in Revelation's message of God's sovereignty. It was their book. Nelson was working on a disserta-

1 James A. Walther, Sr., *The Book of Revelation: Visions for the Church in Crisis* (Pittsburgh: The Kerygma Program, 1989). See especially also G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Black's New Testament Commentary, Reprint Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); Eugene M. Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989); Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, Vol. 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); and Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977).

tion on Revelation and his stories made it impossible for me to dismiss Revelation outright.² About the same time, I attended a weekly Bible study in the home of Mathias and Veronica Rissi. In addition to being my first New Testament professor, Mathias was a specialist in Revelation. He and his friend and former colleague John Bright took our small group on the most amazing study of angels in the Bible, which included the many angels in Revelation. This study revolutionized my appreciation for symbolic language and the limitations of language to express encounters with God and experiences of awe, holiness, and love. Additionally, I had a “dream team” of other faculty mentors in seminary and later as I worked on a Ph.D. in biblical studies³ who helped open the Bible for me further, such as Paul and Elizabeth Achtemeier, Jim Mays, Dean McBride, Jack Kingsbury, Peter Lampe, Bill Brown, and John Carroll, among others. Still, even with a seminary education, a decade of pastoral leadership, and a Ph.D. in biblical studies, and even though I affirmed what I took to be the essential message of Revelation that God wins, I was still no fan of Revelation. Except for a few selected verses from Revelation chapters 14 and 21 for funerals, I avoided it entirely. With Calvin, it seemed to me still that this book obscures the love of Jesus Christ.

I mention all this to point out that even ministers who profess “the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word”⁴ can ignore those parts of Scripture they do not like. Negative first impressions are difficult to change, and Revelation remained for me a text sealed with at least six of seven seals.

But twenty-five years ago I was called to teach Bible at Presbyterian College, and the Revelation seeds sown years earlier began to sprout and even bear fruit. The change began not by choice, but by necessity. In addition to teaching Revelation several times a year in general education survey courses of the New Testament, I was also responsible for teaching a regular upper-level course on Johannine literature, half of which focused on Revelation. The more I learned about the book, the more interesting it became. Then during my first sabbatical at the University of Education in Karlsruhe, Germany, and its Institute for Evangelical Theology, one of the courses I was asked to teach was *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Ursprungsintention und Aktuelle Wirkungen* (*The Revelation*

2 See Nelson J. Kraybill, *The Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse*, Volume 132 of The Library of New Testament Studies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 1996).

3 See Robert A. Bryant, *The Risen Crucified Christ in Galatians*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

4 A constitutional question asked of all persons ordained for any office in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). See The Book of Order 2019-21: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II, W-4.0404b (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2021), p. 104.

of John: Original Intention and Current Effects). Not only did I have to go deeper into Revelation, but I had to wrestle with it in a different language and social context and interpret America's apocalyptic fascination to Europeans who knew something already about disastrous misappropriations of apocalyptic fervor.⁵ When I returned to the Pädagogische Hochschule Karlsruhe for my second sabbatical, I was asked to teach a course we cast as *Apokalyptik – Grundlagen und Auswirkungen in Judentum, Christentum und Islam (Apocalypticism – Fundamentals and Effects in Judaism, Christianity and Islam)*. I then taught a similar course at Presbyterian College and created a new course offering on apocalypticism and extremism. I participated on several academic panels on this latter topic, as well. Through these years I also taught courses on Revelation for lay schools, Christian education workshops, retreats, and Sunday School classes. Now at the invitation of The Kerygma Program, I have had cause to go more deeply still into Revelation and can attest to this being one of the most exhilarating biblical interpretation rides of my life. I want to thank Kerygma for the joyful opportunity to offer this updated study and to write the kind of book that I wish I could have read when I first wondered about Revelation. Today I am thankful that Revelation is in the biblical canon and I happily receive it as the word of God. While the judgments of God in this book are severe, God's amazing grace and redeeming love for the whole world are clear.

Of course, this transformation has come by God's grace, not only through time and effort, but also through an amazing cadre of colleagues and students, friends and family who have nurtured, challenged, and enabled me to do such work. In addition to people I have already mentioned, I am especially grateful to everyone associated with The Kerygma Program, especially Grace Ferguson Zarou, Dick Ray, Peggy Heely, Claudia Springer, and Hannah Kitzmann, along with everyone else associated with this project. No doubt their efforts will spare readers much needless "trial and tribulation" from the author and enhance their understanding. Certainly, I have also benefited from friendships with many colleagues at Presbyterian College, but some have also played decisive roles in my developing appreciation for Revelation, particularly George Ramsey, Peter Hobbie, Pete Hay, Craig Vondergeest, and Daniel Adams. Additionally, were it not for Connie Colwell's friendship, instruction, and support, my lectures in German would have been diminished or even incomprehensible. Certainly, this volume has also benefited from my research and teaching experiences in Germany. Peter Müller and Anita Müller-Friese provided the best learning and teaching experiences imaginable, together with colleagues Liesel Hermes, Joachim Weinhardt, and Eva Jenny Korneck. Reinhold Zwick at the University of Münster also stirred and advanced my think-

⁵ See, for example, Richard G. Kyle, *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), and David Redles, *Hitler's Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

ing about how interpretations of the apocalypse in cinema affect lives, communities, and nations. Special thanks, also, to Laura Unger for her exceptional research and teaching assistance. Certainly, too, many thanks are due to the students who have journeyed with me into the fascinating world of Revelation and apocalyptic literature and whose questions and insights have fostered deeper understanding.

As great as all of these relations are for the making of a work such as this, I am most indebted to my family, which has exhibited to me the loving kindness and patient endurance of the Church of Philadelphia (Revelation 3). This joyful fellowship has been most instrumental in my growing understanding of God's Word and the meaning of faithfulness. Their encouragement, sacrifices, and countless expressions of love and grace through the years are most revealing to me of Christ's own love and redeeming power. I am most grateful to my wife, Leigh Ann, and our children, Stephen and Susannah, from whom I have learned the most about God's cruciform love and with whom I experience every day a joyful foretaste of the kingdom of God.

I mention all this not only because I am thankful, but because The Revelation to John is to be experienced in the community of faith—the church. The reading and understanding of this book require the community of faith. It is not just that all of us are smarter than any of us. Neither is it that everyone who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, hears it, and keeps what is written will all agree on what is said and heard. Rather, it is because the Spirit of Christ, which summoned forth the words of this revelation—as with all Scripture, is the same Spirit that enlivens individuals and the church for faithfulness. Together in faith, the risen, crucified Christ continues to be heard in The Revelation to John as the word of God, admonishing and comforting, confronting and guiding the life of everyone who belongs to the community of faith in fulfilling the will of the Lord in the neighbor-loving ways of Jesus Christ to serve and preserve all of God's creation. My hope and prayer are that by the end of this study of Revelation you will have a more intimate understanding of this book as well as other biblical texts and the church's early history and theology. May you also enjoy meaningful fellowship with others in your study.

Most of all, may your trust grow in the loving Lord Jesus Christ to whom belongs all creation's glory and praise. Hallelujah!

Bob Bryant

1

Basic Bible Reference

Revelation 1-22

Word List

apocalypse / apocalyptic

apocalyptic literature

BCE / CE

Bible

canon

Domitian

emperor cult

eschatology

gematria / numerology

John of Patmos

Nero

pseudonymous / pseudepigrapha

Scripture

symbol

SUMMARY

For many people, The Revelation to John is a book locked away with seven seals. Some do not care what it says. Others think its meaning is impenetrable. Still others believe they understand it all. Complicating matters further, few biblical books have produced so many divergent interpretations. Readers of every kind through the ages have drawn different conclusions about its meaning and relevance, some mutually exclusive. Clearly, then, not every interpretation or application is sound.

In this chapter, we begin our study of The Revelation to John by considering some important aspects of its background, character, and interpretation in order to build a more solid foundation for the greater work of hearing the text of Revelation speak for itself in delivering its message for our lives and the world today.



APPROACHING GOD'S REVELATION TO JOHN

Encouragement to Wonder

The text of The Revelation to John is astonishing and aims to provoke wonder. Here we encounter one like the Son of Man (1:13) with a sharp two-edged sword where a tongue should be, his face like the blazing sun (1:16). Strange beings praise God night and day (4:6-8), and every kind of creature in heaven and earth worships God together (4:11-13). Riders on colorful horses deliver conquest, anarchy, famine, and death (6:1-8). Martyrs under a heavenly altar cry continually for justice (6:9-11). Heaven and earth shatter (6:12-17). Trumpets blast judgments worldwide (8:7-11:19). Poisonous insects flow out of a bottomless pit (9:1-11). Fantastic beasts rise from sea and land (12:3-13:18). People with the mark of the beast are tormented in the presence of angels and the Lamb (14:9-11). A victorious Lamb teaches a choir to sing a new song on Mount Zion (14:1-3). The kingdom of God is fully established on earth (21:1-22:5). The text of Revelation is entirely graphic. Sounds, colors, smells, tastes, motions, and textures fill the narrative from beginning to end. Whether its events repel or attract, Revelation assails the senses and invites wonder.

The book of Revelation's vivid and boisterous word images press our capacities for theological thought and faithful wonder about God and the world in which we live. Everywhere the author, John of Patmos, struggles to wrap finite words around an experience with the living Lord God Almighty, whose power, glory, and holiness are infinite and who will not surrender the earth to evil. As you read the book of Revelation, watch how John of Patmos strains to describe what the Lord reveals about "what is and what is to take place" (1:19). He is compelled to use metaphors and symbols.

Revelation also raises critical issues about God's character and purposes. This book, so full of violence and destruction, may seem unrelated to Jesus as we meet him in the Gospels, whose singular ethic is love. By contrast, Revelation seems to elevate a wrathful God, who with his judge

and destroyer, Jesus Christ, annihilates the world as we know it. Revelation presses readers to wonder how Jesus in Revelation is related to Jesus in the rest of the New Testament. Similarly as readers we find ourselves pondering how God's love and justice are related, how the forces of evil in the world are overcome, and how much God values the earth.

The book of Revelation assails our senses, incites our imaginations, and storms our views of God. Its contents are meant to be experienced more than decoded. The faithful are provoked to wonder. Indeed, the symbolic nature of this text means that narrow interpretations are inherently misinterpretations. This does not mean, however, that Revelation cannot be analyzed and much of its history and message known. Indeed, modern scholarship has learned much about this amazing final book of the Bible. Thus, a review of some of these insights will be beneficial for engaging The Revelation to John.

Historical Contexts

Historical aspects of Revelation shed considerable light on its meaning and message. One helpful historical feature pertains to authorship. To begin with, the author calls himself John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). John was a common name among Jews in the Greco-Roman world and one that is used elsewhere in the New Testament (i.e., Matthew 3:1; Mark 10:35; Acts 4:6; 15:37; John 1:42). There is nothing in the book of Revelation, however, that connects the author to any of these individuals. Neither are there any links to the author of the Gospel of John or to the elder, identified as the author of the three epistles that also bear the name of John. Furthermore, the author does not identify himself as a prophet, but there are places in the text where this self-understanding is apparent (i.e., 10:11; 22:9). This author named John also calls himself a servant of Jesus Christ (1:1) and a brother in Christ to the suffering Christians to whom he writes (1:9). He is in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea just off the west coast of modern-day Turkey because his public testimony about Jesus Christ was deemed a threat to Roman rule (1:9).

The book's contents enable us to infer some additional things about this author. He is, first of all, intimately familiar with the seven churches in western Asia Minor, their lives and ministries (2:1-3:23), but he does not seem to belong to any of them. Because he has considerable influence with these churches, some scholars think he was an itinerant Christian preacher or prophet, and these churches constituted his circuit or charge.

The book's language reveals something more about its author John. Greek was unlikely to have been his mother tongue; it was at least a second language. The Greek in Revelation is often

awkward and frequently utilizes Hebraic grammatical forms, which suggest the author was originally from Palestine or had spent considerable time there prior to writing this work. By contrast, the Greek in the Gospel According to John is both excellent and elegant. There are theological connections in Revelation with the Gospel, however. As in the Gospel, this author also designates Jesus as the logos (Word), lamb, witness, shepherd, judge, and temple. Both stress the duality of good and evil, emphasize the presence of Christ in worship, and view Jesus's death as God's saving victory. Problematically, however, the book of Revelation mentions God's love only once and nowhere mentions Jesus's command to love.

The date of this book is widely positioned at the end of the first century CE, in particular during the reign of the Roman emperor, Domitian. The internal references to the government's hostilities toward Christians (1:9; 2:10, 13; 6:9-11; 14:12; 16:6; 21:4) fit with policies during Domitian's reign from 81 to 96 CE. External evidence also supports this assessment. The second-century church leader Irenaeus wrote around 180 CE, that Revelation was composed late in Domitian's reign, as did Clement of Alexandria (200), Origen (254), and Eusebius (325). Taken together, scholars typically date this work to 95 or 96 CE.

Certainly, a word about Nero, Domitian, and the Roman emperor cult is in order for engaging Revelation.¹ Nero was one of Rome's most notorious rulers, distinguished as much by debauchery as cruelty. At first, Nero ruled ably but descended rapidly into corruption and paranoia. He came to power in 54 CE, at the age of seventeen when his mother Agrippina poisoned her husband Claudius—Nero's adopted father—to set her son on the throne. He then had her murdered. Both father and adopted son Nero imposed hardships upon Christians and Jews. Claudius banished from Rome anyone who disputed or associated with "Chrestus," whom most scholars see as Jesus Christ. And although Nero allowed Jews and Christians to return to Rome, he scapegoated Christians as the cause of the great fire in Rome in 64 CE. Many thousands were martyred in Rome during his reign, including Paul and Peter.

This first great persecution of Christians in Rome does not mean that there was an empire-wide persecution of Christians. The Roman Empire was vast and encompassed many diverse peoples and practices. Still, making too little of the persecution of Christians in the first century CE is also inexact. The maxim "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" could be rendered for much of Roman imperial history as, "When seeking Caesar's favor, do as Caesar does," or "An enemy of Caesar's is an enemy of mine." This would have been especially true for any colony city that was dependent

1 See Appendix B for a selection of texts from classical sources.

upon Caesar's benevolence. Nero's persecution continued in Rome until he was declared a public enemy and committed suicide in 68 CE. His assault on Christians opened the door for others to follow (See Acts 16:9-15; 18:2; 20:27-26:32).

Caesar Domitian (81-96 CE), like Nero, became notorious for his cruelty and ostentation, but unlike Nero, he remained competent as a military and governmental leader. He was the son of Vespasian and younger brother of Titus—both of whom played decisive roles in crushing the Jewish Revolt (66-73 CE), which included the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE. He demanded divine honors—prayers, sacrifices, and worship—during his lifetime and required that people address him as “Master” and “God.” Emperor worship was a sign of patriotism and loyalty to caesar, and Christian refusal to do so provoked severe retribution. In the end, Domitian's cruelty, even to Romans, brought about his murder in 96 CE, and the Roman Senate ordered that his name be removed from every inscription in the empire in order to remove any memory of him. An inscription in Ephesus indicates that the decree was carried out.

Throughout the first and second centuries, Christians were deemed enemies of the state and even of humanity. Unlike Jews who had received official status as an accepted religion and were exempt from participating in the imperial cult, no such allowances existed for Christians. Because Christians largely refused to participate in the imperial cult and other Roman religious festivals, they were seen as enemies of the gods and “haters of humanity.” Rumors even spread that they were cannibals who ate flesh and drank blood (a misrepresentation of the Lord's Supper). As a result, Christians were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. When Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia-Pontus, the area where John's seven churches existed, wrote to Emperor Trajan (98-117 CE) about resolving his difficulties with Christians, within two decades of the writing of Revelation, he describes his judging the “trials of Christians.” Anti-Christian sentiment, like anti-Jewish sentiment, ran high in the first and second century Roman world.

An Apocalyptic Text

From the start, it is helpful to know that Revelation belongs to a literary category called apocalyptic. In fact, the book is sometimes called “The Apocalypse of John.” This is because our English word “revelation,” which is drawn from the Latin word *revelatio*, is a translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means “stripping away,” “unveiling,” “uncovering,” “disclosing,” and “revealing.” An apocalypse is an uncovering of something previously hidden, especially as it pertains to unseen realities of the spiritual realm. Apocalyptic literature professes to reveal transcendent

realities of God. As such, it is written to appeal heavily to a reader's faithful imagination through the use of vivid word pictures. Many of its details serve this end and are not to be interpreted independently or literally.

Apocalyptic literature is also eschatological, which means it addresses the end of history. The word eschatology literally means "discourse about the last things." Jews and Christians hold that God's covenant promises will be fulfilled and God's reign will be fully in place over the entire world. God will judge and renew the earth. Toward the end of the Old Testament period, however, through the crucible of persecution, Israel's hope was expressed increasingly in apocalyptic terms, which permeates the New Testament, as well. For Christians, this involves the second coming of Christ (*parousia*); for Jews, the arrival of the messiah. For both Jews and Christians, apocalyptic is a particular eschatological view that highlights signs and omens preceding the messiah's coming, cosmic and earthly disturbances, a great battle between the forces of good and evil, the victory of God and the people of faith, the final judgment, punishment of the wicked, and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

Apocalyptic literature expresses experiences of suffering and hope of deliverance. It is the literature of the oppressed and downtrodden, and it is rooted largely in some of the most difficult periods of Israel's history. Generally, it holds the following tenets: 1) the people of God are overcome by the forces of evil and cannot deliver themselves; 2) God is now acting to deliver the faithful; 3) God's deliverance will come through a cosmic confrontation in which the forces of evil will be destroyed; and 4) God will establish the faithful remnant in a godly kingdom. Apocalyptic also divides the universe into two parts—good and evil. Behind each part is a supernatural power—God and Satan, respectively—who work through people and institutions in pursuit of their ends until a climactic point at which God is victorious and the earth's people receive a final judgment resulting in blessing or curse.

This kind of literature enjoyed widespread popularity throughout Palestine and the Greco-Roman world from 200 BCE to 200 CE.² Perhaps you know something of Jewish apocalyptic writing already from your study of books like Ezekiel (Chs. 1, 38-48), Daniel (Chs. 7-12), and Zechariah (Chs. 12-14), perhaps even the books of Enoch.³ That is because apocalyptic literature has deep

2 The abbreviations BCE ("Before the Common Era") and CE ("Common Era") are widely used today by historians and biblical scholars instead of BC ("Before Christ") and AD ("Anno Domini").

3 The books of Enoch belong to a collection of writings called the "pseudepigrapha," which are works written under a pseudonym. See James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments, 5d., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010.

roots in Israel's prophetic tradition, too. While Israel's prophets were largely "forth-tellers" who measured Israel's past and present life by God's expectations for relationships of every kind, they were also "seers" who sometimes saw the future. Oftentimes, they expressed their received oracles and visions about the future with vivid word-pictures that involved angels, fantastic events, and journeys to the farthest realms of heaven and earth.

The New Testament also offers such visionary experiences. Consider, for example, the accounts of Joseph (Matthew 2:19-23), Mary (Luke 1:26-38), Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11; 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36), Paul (Acts 9:10; 16:9, 18:9; 22:17; 27:23; Galatians 1:16), and Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10). The example of Peter at the house of Simon, a tanner, in Joppa, is especially helpful as we prepare to encounter visions in Revelation. Peter's vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven filled with all kinds of food forbidden by Jewish law and the accompanying command of the Lord to "kill and eat" (10:13) does not mean that a literal sheet filled with unclean animals was lowered from heaven to earth. Neither should we think that John's visionary accounts in Revelation of a "great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns" (12:3), or a leopard with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's (13:2), or a horrible beast disguised as a lamb (13:11) are to be interpreted literally. Rather, what matters is the significance for Peter and John of what they see and what relevance their visions have for readers today.

In the book of Revelation, the author aims to foster nothing less than a conviction of God's present and future work to vindicate the faithful and redeem the whole of God's creation. Toward this end and characteristic of all apocalyptic literature, The Revelation to John is steeped in symbolic language. How could it be otherwise? It aims to communicate realities that transcend the limitations of experience and words themselves. It attempts to express that which cannot be encapsulated by words alone or reduced to indicative or propositional talk—which in the case of this book of Scripture is a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). Hence, vivid word pictures steeped in symbolism become the vehicles for conveying the experiences of the one who receives a revelation. This means that interpreters who insist on "translating" symbolic language literally may become as intransigent as a motorist who interprets a stop sign literally and never proceeds because the stop sign never changes to "go." Rather, a broader context and more flexible range of understanding is necessary for interpreting a symbol.

Symbols, by their nature, point to meanings and realities beyond themselves. They are multi-faceted and cannot be exhausted by any single interpretation. Moreover, symbols not only shape the imagination, but they also evoke the imagination and stir the emotions. Apocalyptic literature's symbolic character, however, is not the offspring of an untethered imagination. Some

of the symbols in Revelation are explained, but others are not, because the original readers needed no explanation. Furthermore, many of the symbols in Revelation correspond to symbols in the Old Testament. Indeed, nearly seventy percent of all the verses in this book have one or more allusions to Old Testament texts. Clearly, consideration of the Old Testament will be essential for mining riches from The Revelation to John.

The symbolic language of Revelation also draws heavily from Jewish culture, as with the symbolic meaning of numbers and numerical patterns. In the ancient world, the assignment of meaning to numbers (that is, gematria or numerology) was common. Colors, animals, and situations also had symbolic value. Our recognition of these literary characteristics will help us remember to wonder about this book's multivalent word-pictures. While we may not be sure exactly what John and his book's first recipients thought about all of the symbolic values and images, we will see that much can be known today.

A Pastoral Letter to Churches and a World in Crisis

Finally, it is helpful to recognize that this book is a pastoral letter from the Lord through John to seven churches that are facing various crises in Asia Minor in the first century CE Greco-Roman world. Thus, we will examine the particular difficulties our ancient sisters and brothers in the faith faced then. But the church today also faces crises that impinge upon its life and ministry, and we will soon see that our crises are not so disconnected from the first century as we might suppose.

Throughout our study, then, it will be helpful for us to consider how this text was given and received as an expression of Christian love, as well as how it offers hope to believers. After all, John, "a servant (literally, "slave") of Jesus Christ" (1:1), who identifies himself as a "brother" to the letter's recipients and has suffered with them (1:9), has been exiled by the Roman government on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea because of his proclamation of the gospel (1:9). He is writing to them with the full conviction of God's revelation that God cares for them and is at work for their salvation, which will come soon (1:1-3; 3:11; 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). He is writing to foster faithful courage and abiding hope in God's certain victory over evil.

Interpreting The Revelation to John

The Revelation to John has been interpreted in various ways. Scholars who study the history of this book's interpretation, however, show that these different interpretations are not arbitrary or unconnected. In fact, the varying interpretations of the same content fit generally into one of five

categories, depending especially upon the interpreters' historical situations and their views of the relationship between the book's visions and time.⁴ An overview of these categories can help us in our own considerations of what Revelation means.

In one category of interpretations, The Revelation to John has been read chiefly as a guide to current events. Wars, famines, mass migrations, epidemics, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, injustice, extinctions, and a sickening planet "prove" that the end of the world is not only near but is happening. In various times of history, Revelation's rich images are thought to align with and describe the people, places, and events contemporary with that particular time period. From this perspective, the catastrophic battle that will end all things is upon the reader now, and the new creation order will be here very soon.

Interpretations of Revelation have also concentrated on the long lens of history. The contents of Revelation are viewed in light of many dark times in the past when people wondered if the world could possibly get any worse. The present day is thus viewed in the context of prior tumultuous periods. The book's abundant symbolism addresses the long march of history toward the sure fulfillment of the book's forecast that God triumphs over evil. The end of life as we know it and the new creation are both in the future.

A third interpretive category focuses foremost on the text of Revelation as an historical record that provides insight into first-century Christianity. The text is seen as a fascinating work of literature that sheds light upon the variations of Christianity, Judaism, and the Greco-Roman world of the first century. Any fulfillments that the text may have projected have already occurred, and there is no present or future fulfillment to come. The text, like any event associated with it, is literally history.

Fourth, some interpretations champion a spiritual orientation and view Revelation's symbolic narrative as an ever-present guide to spiritual realities and challenges for believers of any time and place. The mystical struggle between good and evil is an inner battle common to the human experience as well as a corporate struggle for a common good. The text was not written for a particular historical moment or application; rather, it is perennially relevant.

4 Other factors include the degrees to which interpreters address Revelation's various historical, literary, and theological characteristics and contexts. See especially: M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 47-51; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 39-45; and Adela Yarbro Collins, "Revelation, Book of" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 706-707.

Finally, there are interpretations that mix in varying degrees any or all of these prevailing orientations. The interpretation of Revelation presented in this Resource Book fits into this latter category. It receives the book of Revelation as a single united narrative with consistent language, symbolism, and theology. This Resource Book also accepts that John's message was relevant for John and the churches he addressed and that by the Holy Spirit these scriptures continue to have relevance for people of faith in every time and place. Moreover, it seeks to interpret the text of Revelation with close attentiveness to its historical, literary, and theological dimensions.

Of course, in matters of interpretation, it is striking that Revelation closes with a stern warning for interpreters to neither add to nor take away from its message (22:18-19). Such messages occur elsewhere in the Bible (cf., Galatians 1:6-7; Deuteronomy 4:1-2, and Proverbs 30:5-6), but Revelation's closing caution is worth our noticing from the start. In truth, Revelation has been misinterpreted and misapplied with harmful and even deadly consequences.⁵ But this book also has a long history of fostering the church's faithfulness in the manner of Jesus Christ in doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (cf., Micah 6:8).

And even if the church has not always appreciated this book, it has long called it holy Scripture because it is held to be uniquely the written word of God. Why? Because the book is intelligible and the church has perceived and continues to perceive God's will in it. Moreover, the church believes it to be relevant—not just for today but for every day.

Of vital importance to our reading the book of Revelation is our willingness to let the text speak for itself without imposing meaning upon it. In prayerful humility, then, let us give close attention to the biblical text before us that we, too, might "hear what the Spirit is saying" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) about Jesus Christ who lives as the Lamb who has been slain (5:6), calls the saints to faithful endurance (13:10), will conquer evil (19:11-16), will renew creation (21:1-7), and will rule forever as the Lord God Almighty (22:1-5).

⁵ See, for example, Richard G. Kyle, *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012); Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford University Press, 2006); and David Redles, *Hitler's Millennial Reich: Apocalyptic Belief and the Search for Salvation* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

1. Memorize Isaiah 40:5, 28-31.
2. Memorize Isaiah 55:10-11(12-13).
3. Memorize Revelation 21:5.

Research

1. Study the first century CE Greco-Roman world and learn about its expansive territory as well as its characteristics, values, and influences. Especially helpful is Calvin J. Roetzel's book *The World That Shaped the New Testament*. Key primary texts are available in C. K. Barrett's *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire that Illuminate Christian Origins*. See also Appendix B.
2. A revisionist read of history today views the "persecution" of Christians under first and second century Rome as evangelistic hyperbole, Nero and Domitian as victims of exaggeration and vilification, and general persecutions of Christians as fiction (cf., Julian Bennett, *Trajan: Optimus Princeps* [Routledge, 1997]; Brian W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* [Routledge, 1992]; and Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* [Oxford University Press, 1990]). Learn what you can about the issues and the sources upholding the traditional and revisionist views.
3. Since over two-thirds of the verses in Revelation have at least one allusion to the Old Testament, one's understanding of Revelation will be enhanced through familiarity with texts that first-century Christians considered Scripture—the Old Testament. For a wonderfully concise, comprehensive, accessible survey, see especially *Old Testament Roots of Our Faith*, rev. ed. (Baker, 1994) by Paul J. and Elizabeth R. Achtemeier.
4. The history of Revelation's acceptance into the canon of Scripture by the whole church is complicated by the book's apocalyptic character and the challenges it raises for the reader's theological views and imagination (See Appendix C). In addition to learning about the formation of the canon, learn what you can about Jewish apocalyptic writings. In addition

to consulting a Bible dictionary, consider going deeper with John J. Collins's *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*.

Reflection

1. As you begin this study, how would you describe your present perspective of Revelation? Does anything you know about it or its popular use today attract and/or repel you?
2. Now that you have read through Revelation on your own for this introductory chapter without an examination of the text, how would you relate it to the other parts of the New Testament you have read?
3. Regarding martyrdom in the early church, what do you know about it? Would it make any difference to your faith if the church's traditional view of persecution in the ancient Roman world were overstated? How? In what ways do Christians face social pressure, ostracism, and persecution today?
4. Have you ever encountered God or experienced awe (what we might call being "awestruck")? What was it like? To what extent can words express such an experience?