

## Post-70 Apocalypses: The Book of Revelation

**Genre and authorship:** The Book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse of John (Greek *apokalypsis* = disclosure, revelation), is the only text of the genre apocalypse in the New Testament. Unlike earlier apocalypses, it is written, not in the name of an ancient sage or visionary (e.g., Enoch, Daniel, Ezra), but rather in the name of its own author, John of Patmos (note: not the same as the author of the Gospel of John).

**Historical context:** Revelation was most likely written in the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 CE; around the same time as 4 Ezra). During this time, Jews (including those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah) faced Roman animosity because of the failed Jewish Revolt against Rome, and even non-Jewish followers of Jesus were also facing animosity (often, it seems, perceived by polytheistic Romans as being “atheists” for abandoning their own ancestral gods and traditions and as perverse for adopting Jewish beliefs and practices). Christians suffered from sporadic persecution on the local level, not least because of the policies of the previous emperor, Nero, who blamed this new group for a great fire in Rome. Domitian, moreover, seems to have wished to be considered a god in his own lifetime. His request to be called *dominus et deus* (“lord and god”) may have been mocked as prideful among polytheistic Romans, but it seems to have been very deeply shocking to Christians and Jews, many of whom saw the acts of Nero and Domitian—and the elevation of such men to positions of extreme power—as being a sign of the impending end of all time.

**Similarities to earlier apocalypses:** Revelation stands firmly in the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic literature. It contains revelations of secret wisdom about the structure and contents of otherworldly realms (esp. heaven), about human history and its end, and about God’s justice at the End of Time, by means of the resurrection of the dead and their judgment. These revelations are presented as information given in visions. This knowledge is conveyed to the reader in a kaleidoscopically poetic style that evokes otherworldliness (as with Ezekiel’s oracles), and they are filled with rich and complex symbols (esp. using animals, as in the “Animal Apocalypse” and Daniel, and imagery of light and darkness, as in Qumran texts); John, like visionaries in other apocalypses, cannot understand the symbolism himself, but must have them interpreted for him by angels. The visions, moreover, make veiled allusion to the political situation of the author (as with apocalypses written during the Maccabean Revolt) at the same time as they reveal otherworldly truths and realities. Like the *Book of the Watchers*, Revelation describes a vision of the Throne of God. Like the Enochic *Similitudes* and 4 Ezra, it interprets and expands Daniel’s prophecies about the “one like a son of man.”

**Departures from earlier apocalypses:** Most notable is the fact that Revelation is not pseudonymous: this choice may point to the intensity of its author’s eschatological expectations, as also voiced throughout the text: he sees himself living in an age when “the time is near” (1:3). The Eschaton is imminent; revelation is no longer limited to prophets of the far past; heavenly secrets will not be hidden for long. Moreover, whereas earlier Jewish apocalypses predicted a coming time of the Messiah, Revelation sees the Messiah (i.e., Jesus) as already come. Hence, as with Paul and the authors of the NT gospels, the authors sees himself as living during the beginning of the consummation of all history in the eschatological age – and, more specifically, in the interim time between [1] when Jesus as Messiah ushered in the End of Time through his birth, life, death, and resurrection and [2] when he will return to the earth. It is notable that John refers, for instance, to his own time as one of “persecution and the kingdom and patient endurance” (1:9). Furthermore, even as he draws on literary tropes of the apocalyptic genre, John does so within the framework of a letter (a popular form among the earliest Christians, as clear e.g. from the letters of Paul).

### Rev 1-3: THE SEVEN CHURCHES

1:1-3. Title and description of the book. The revelation made by Jesus the Messiah to John.

1:4-9. Salutation. Salutation prefatory to the seven Epistles, wishing the churches the grace and the peace of God and Jesus.

1:9-20. The vision of Jesus as the Son of man. The portrait is taken from Daniel 10 and Henoah 46. Cf. the phrases, “one like the son of man” (Apocalypse 1:13, Daniel 10:16 and 7:13); “girded with gold” (Apocalypse 1:13; Daniel 10:5); “eyes like flames of fire” (Apocalypse 1:14; Daniel 10:6); “a voice like that of a multitude” (Apocalypse 1:15; Daniel 10:6); “I fell down like one senseless” (Apocalypse 1:17; Daniel 10:9); “and he touched me” (Apocalypse 1:17, Daniel 10:18); “hair white like wool” (Apocalypse 1:14; Daniel 7:9; Henoah 46:1).

2:1-3:22. The Epistles, to the seven Churches. The Churches are [Ephesus](#), [Smyrna](#), [Pergamum](#), [Thyatira](#), [Sardis](#), [Philadelphia](#), and [Laodicea](#). The Epistles are short exhortations to the [Christians](#) to remain steadfast in their faith, to beware of false apostles and to abstain from fornication and from meat offered to idols.

## (2) THE BOOK WITH THE SEVEN SEALS

Chapters 4 and 5. The vision of God enthroned upon the Cherubim. The throne is surrounded by twenty-four elders. In the right hand of [God](#) is a scroll sealed with seven seals. In the midst of the Cherubim and the elders the Seer beholds a [lamb](#), "agnus tamquam occisus", having on its throat the scar of the gash by which it was slain. The Seer weeps because no one either in [heaven](#) or on earth can break the seals. He is comforted on hearing that the [lamb](#) was worthy to do so because of the redemption it had wrought by its blood. The portrait of the throne is taken from Ezechiel 1. Compare in both accounts the description of the four beasts. They resemble a lion an ox, a man, and an eagle. Their bodies are full of eyes (cf. Ap., iv, 8; and Ez., x, 12). The twenty-four elders were probably suggested by the twenty-four courses of priests ministering in the [Temple](#). The [lamb](#) slain for the sins of [mankind](#) is from Isaiah 53.

Chapters 6 and 7. The seven seals and the numbering of the Saints. At the opening of four seals, four horses appear. Their colour is white, black, red, and sallow, or green (*chloros*, piebald), They signify conquest, slaughter, dearth and death. The vision is taken from Zach., vi, 1-8. At the opening of the fifth seal the Seer beholds the martyrs that were slain and hears their prayers for the final triumph. At the opening of the sixth seal the [predestined](#) to glory are numbered and marked. The Seer beholds them divided into two classes. First, 144,000 Jews, 12,000 of every tribe. Then a numberless multitude chosen from all nations and tongues.

Chapters 8 and 9. The seventh seal. After the interval of about half an hour, the seventh seal is broken; seven [angels](#) issue forth, each one holding a trumpet. The sounding of the first four trumpets causes a partial destruction of the elements of nature. One-third of the earth is burned, as also one-third of the trees and all the grass. One-third of the sea becomes blood (cf. Ex., vii, 17). One-third of the rivers is turned into water of wormwood. One-third of the sun, moon, and stars is obscured, causing one-third of the day to be dark (cf. Ex., x, 21). At the sounding of the fifth trumpet locusts ascend from the abyss. Their work is to torment men for five months, They are specially charged not to touch the grass. Their shape is that of horses (Joel 2:4) their teeth like those of lions (Joel 1:6), their hair like the hair of women. They have the tails of scorpions where with to chastise man. The command over them is held by the [Angel](#) of the [Abyss](#), named [Abaddon](#), the destroyer. At the sound of the sixth trumpet the four [angels](#) chained at the Euphrates are let loose. They lead forth an army of horsemen. By the fire which the horses spit out and by their tails which are like serpents, one-third of [mankind](#) is killed. After the sixth trumpet there are two digressions. (1) The [angel](#) standing on the land and the sea. He swears that at the sound of the seventh trumpet the mystery will be completed. He hands to the Seer a little book. When eaten by him it is found sweet to taste, but bitter when once devoured. Taken from Ezech., ii, 8; iii, 3. (2) The contamination of the court of the [Temple](#) by the heathens. It lasts three and a half years. Taken from Dan., vii, 25; ix, 27; xii, 7-11. During that time two witnesses are sent to preach in Jerusalem. They are the two olive-trees foretold by Zach., iv, 3,11. At the end of their mission they are slain by the beast. They are raised to life after three and a half days (= years). The seventh trumpet is now sounded, the nations are judged and the kingdom of Christ is established.

## (3) THE DIVINE DRAMA

First Act. Chapters 12-14. *The [lamb](#), the woman, and her seed; and opposed to them, the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the land.* The main idea is taken from Gen., iii, 15. "I will put enmities between thee (the serpent) and the woman, and thy seed and her seed". The woman is arrayed in [heavenly](#) splendour; a crown of twelve stars on her head and the sun and the moon under her feet (cf. Gen. xxvii, 9, 10). She is in travail. Her [first-born](#) is destined to rule all the nation (Ps., ii, 8, 9). She herself, and her other seed, are persecuted for three and a half years by the great dragon who tries to kill them. The great dragon is Satan (Gen., iii, 1). He is cast out of [heaven](#). With his tail he drags after him one-third of the stars. Taken from Dan., viii, 10. The fallen stars are the [fallen angels](#). The beast from the sea is in great part taken from [Daniel's](#) description of the four beasts. It arises from the sea (Dan., vii, 3); has seven heads marked all over with blasphemies. It had also ten horns, like the fourth beast of [Daniel](#) (vii, 7); it resembled a leopard, the third beast of [Daniel](#) (vii, 6), it had feet like a bear, the second beast of [Daniel](#) (vii, 5); and teeth like a lion, the first beast of [Daniel](#) (vii, 4). The great dragon gives full power unto the beast, whereupon all the world worship it (viz. those whose names are not contained in the book of the [lamb](#)). The followers of the beast have its mark on their head and hand. The beast from the land has two horns like a ram. Its power lies in its art of deceiving by means of tokens and [miracles](#). Throughout the remainder of the book it is called the false prophet. Its office is to assist the beast from the sea, and to induce men to adore its image. The first act of the drama concludes with a promise of victory over the beast by the [lamb of God](#).

Second Act. Chapters 15-16. *The seven vials.* They are the seven plagues preceding the destruction of the great city, Babylon. They were for the greater part suggested by the Egyptian plagues. The first vial is poured out on the earth. Men and beasts are smitten with ulcers (Ex., ix, 9, 10). The second and third vial upon the seas and rivers. They become blood (Ex., vii, 17-21). The fourth vial upon the sun. It burns men to death. The fifth vial upon the

throne of the beast. It causes great darkness (Ex., x, 11-29). The sixth vial upon the Euphrates. Its waters are dried up and form a passage for the kings of the East (Ex., xiv). The seventh upon the air. Storm and earthquake destroy Babylon.

Third Act. Chapters 17-18. *The great harlot*. She is seated upon the scarlet beast with the seven heads and ten horns. She is robed in scarlet and decked with gold. On her head is written: Mystery, Babylon the great. The kings of the earth commit fornication with her. But the day of her visitation has come. She is made a desolate place, the habitation of unclean animals (Ls., xiii, 21, 22). Her fall is lamented by the rulers and merchants of the earth.

Fourth Act. Chapters 19-20. *The victory over the beast and the great dragon*. A knight appears mounted on a white horse. His name is "The word of God". He defeats the beast and the false prophet. They are cast alive in the pool of fire. Their defeat is followed by the first resurrection and the reign of Christ for a thousand years. The martyrs rise to life and partake with Christ in glory and happiness. During these thousand years the great dragon is held in chains. At their completion he is once more set at large to torment the earth. He deceives the nations [Gog and Magog](#). These two names are taken from Ezech., chaps. xxviii, xxxix, where however Gog is the king of Magog. At last he also is east for all eternity in the pool of fire. Hereupon the general judgement and the [resurrection](#) take place.

Fifth Act. Chapters 21-22. *The new Jerusalem* (cf. *Ezekiel 40-48*). [God](#) dwells in the midst of His saints who enjoy complete happiness. The new Jerusalem is the spouse of the [lamb](#). The names of the Twelve Tribes and the Twelve Apostles are written on its gates. [God](#) and the [lamb](#) are the sanctuary in this new city.

Epilogue. Verses 18-21. The prophecy of the book is soon to be fulfilled. The Seer warns the reader not to add anything to it or take away from it under pain of forfeiting his share in the [heavenly city](#).