

## Revelation: Setting, Purpose, Probable Date, and Significance

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Other than the genre, the historical setting of a book such as Revelation is an essential interpretive key to understanding it and its significance for churches today. It is important to realize that the book was not written to us primarily, in our own situation, and in our own time. While addressed to historical churches however, Revelation also points to future events beyond their own time (2:5, 16, 21; 3:3, 19).<sup>1</sup> Hence, we must begin with the “then,” before we can ascertain its message for the “now,” and the “later.” The historical situation of Revelation may give clues to its purpose and design and date of writing. In the following, I will briefly trace the historical conditions of Revelation through both external and internal evidence, sketch its persuasive intent, argue for a probable date, and propose its implications for us today.

### Historical Situation

J. Roloff explains that 11:1-13 is material that reflects the suffering of the Palestinian church toward the end of the Jewish War (60-69 C. E.). Based on the letters of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, the churches in Asia Minor were under heavy influence by Jewish Christians. It is to these churches that John may have sought to show the triumph of Christ in history, over any oppression that the satanic world system might throw their way. At this time, in the remaining years of Domitian (81-96 C. E.), there was a perceived widespread empire-wide promotion of the imperial cult. Domitian is said to have conferred on himself the divine title, “our Lord and God.” Asia Minor became the center of this cult in 92-96 C. E., with excavation in Ephesus showing the remains of a large statue of Domitian and the temple dedicated to him. For Christians who refuse to bow down to the emperor, it means social, cultural, governmental pressures, and worse, economic deprivation (2:13). If the beast is the symbol of the Roman emperor, as Morris suggests, then Revelation is to be dated around the time of Domitian (13:4, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 15:2; 19:20; 20:4).<sup>2</sup>

John therefore proclaims an imminent worsening of the conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan, which is behind the present crisis. The kings and inhabitants of the earth are actually enjoying the seductive allure of Babylon, the powerful political, economic, and cultural system that holds sway over the world in collusion with the beast. In the clash between the rule of Christ and the rule of Babylon and the beast, there should be no acquiescing to the idolatry and immorality of the present satanic world system. Believers must endure to the end. Yet John also proclaims a word of hope and comfort, in that the Lamb shall ultimately triumph over all the powers of Satan, destroying the system by both internal self-destruction and external devastation—all according to the sovereign act and purpose of God (17:1-18:24).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Where there are no Scripture abbreviations, the verse numbers refer to Revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* (trans. John E. Alsup; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 9-10; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1969), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Roloff, *The Revelation*, 10.

As to an empire-wide persecution of Christians, it is disputed however. There seemed to be no strong historical evidence for a general persecution of believers at the time of writing. But there was sporadic repression as well as a genuine threat of persecution for those who would not acknowledge that “Caesar is Lord.”<sup>4</sup> On the conclusion that a wide-ranging oppression is not the immediate background of writing Revelation, we must look further. We look to internal evidence. The problem is internal. There is a church that has lost her love for Christ. There is a church that has lost her fervour. There are false teachers in the churches, leading many into idolatrous and immoral compromise with the demon-inspired world system opposed to God. Such syncretism equals idolatry and false worship.

Yet the crisis is also external—Babylon and the beast. The loss of love for Christ, the creeping idolatry, theological heresies, and the lukewarm-ness of spirituality, point to signs of complacency over time and compromise with the satanic world structure. It is most likely therefore that Revelation was written to address a discerned spiritual crisis in the churches that the churches themselves are too complacent and lukewarm to perceive.<sup>5</sup>

### **Persuasive Design**

In understanding the book of Revelation, other than the historical situation of the intended recipients of the book, it is also important to determine its purpose for writing. The question has to do with the persuasive design of John in Revelation. What does John want his hearers and readers to do or not do? John’s pastoral words of exhortation to his readers in light of internal (perceived problems in the churches) and external factors (the struggle against evil spiritual forces) may determine John’s aims in writing the book.

John devotes the first three chapters to the penetrating words of Jesus to the seven churches, in view of the crisis he mentions (7:14; 13:10; 14:4-5; 18:4-5; 20:4; 21:8; 22:12-15).<sup>6</sup> As to whether the crisis relates to persecution is not clear in all cases. Historical studies seem to negate the notion that the churches were suffering under an intense empire-wide persecution under Domitian at the time of writing. But there was occasional oppression (2:9; 3:9).<sup>7</sup> John does mention tribulation, captivity, and the increasing possibility of death.

The movement of the book sets the followers of the Lamb towards a collision course with the satanic world order. Yet it is all under the controlling purpose of a holy, powerful, and sovereign God, as the vision of the throne in heaven shows (4:1-11). The Lamb that was slain takes center stage in opening the scrolls (5:1-14). The “woes” are to follow before the ultimate day of the Lord. They include the seals, trumpets, and bowls (6:1-17; 8:1-9:21). But the 144,000 Israelite servants of God are sealed by heaven. People from every tribe, tongue, and nation are recognized (7:1-17). The beast kills the two witnesses in Jerusalem; and judgment falls on the city (11:1-14). After the seventh

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 8-9; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 28, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 77; L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 27-28, 174-185; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (INTCS; ed. Grand R. Osborne; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Where there are no Scripture abbreviations, the verse numbers refer to Revelation.

<sup>7</sup> Ladd, *A Commentary*, 8-9; Beale, *The Book*, 28.

trumpet, the ultimate victory of God and his Christ is sealed, making the kingdom of the world his kingdom (11:15-19). John makes his readers deeply aware of the forces of Satan working in the world order, symbolized by the woman and the dragon, and the first and second beast (12:1-13:8). He warns his hearers of increasing hostility against satanic forces working among the nations, but also assures them of eschatological victory (14:8; 16:19).

The message of the three angels may be pivotal. The first angel calls on people to fear God and honour him, for judgment is coming. The second proclaims the fall of Babylon. The third warns against worshiping the beast and receiving its mark (14:6-11). The concluding remark calls for the endurance of the saints in keeping God's commands and trusting Christ (14:12). Then a voice proclaims blessing to those who obey the Lord to the point of death (14:13). John then reveals the reward of the martyr (20:4). He drives home the point that the satanic kingdom shall fall in total destruction (17-19:5). But he also warns believers against acquiescing to the satanic world system, calling for perseverance in the Lord. In the visions of the resurrection, the judgment, and new Jerusalem, John assures his readers of the strengthening thought of God's faithfulness to carry out his purpose to deliver his people, to destroy the satanic world system in eschatological wrath, to eliminate the beast and the antichrist, and to establish his eschatological kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Through it all, Christ controls the destiny of all peoples and all evil forces. Despite the raging rebellion of the nations against him, the Lamb shall overcome (20-22).

Looking closely at the issues with the seven churches and relating it with the coming time of persecution of believers (11:7; 20:7-9), we see some hints of Christ's concerns that may shed light on the design of the book. There were false teachers in the midst of the churches, who taught compromise with the world by way of engaging in trade guilds honouring false gods. They have led some believers to join the pagan festivities. They had to be confronted, exposed, and opposed (2:14-15, 20-24). There were also signs of ominous compromise in Sardis and Laodicea (3:2, 14). John calls some believers "liars" who may have committed the lie of idolatrous syncretism, by combining the worship of Christ with pagan practices (21:8, 27). Such compromise constitutes falsehood (22:15).

If we connect these concerns with warnings against sexual immorality with Babylon, calls for endurance in the face of oppression, and rewards for martyrdom (17:2-6), we get the idea that the enemy is not just outside, but inside the churches. The churches face two enemies—one internal and one external. The first enemy is their tendency to forsake their first love and replace it with seductive Babylon in spiritual complacency. The second enemy is the corruptive seduction of Babylon itself—a political, economic, social, and religious system of alluring wealth, worldly values, and rank idolatry—that seeks to draw them away from true worship of the true God and Christ (17:1-6). Thus, the promise of eschatological reward, vindication, and victory is not pledged to everyone in the churches, but only to the overcomers.<sup>9</sup>

John's chiasmic presentation of the spiritual health of the seven churches is revealing.

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<sup>8</sup> Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 208-213.

<sup>9</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 20.

- A1 Ephesus: abandoned her first love (2:4).
- A2 Smyrna: suffering tribulation, poverty, and slander (2:9).
- A3 Pergamum: tolerated false doctrines of Balaam/Nicolaitans (2:14-15).
- C Thyatira: tolerated the false doctrine of Jezebel (2:20).
- B3 Sardis: spiritually dead
- B2 Philadelphia: obeyed God's Word and faithful to Christ (3:8-10).
- B1 Laodicea: lukewarm—neither hot nor cold (3:16).

Analyzing the chiasm, the first church is in danger of losing her lampstand for forsaking her first love, unless she repents (2:5). The last is at risk of being spit out for being lukewarm (3:16). The third, fourth, and fifth churches have serious internal problems. The third church tolerates the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, leading them to compromise their faith with idolatry and immorality (2:14-15). The fourth church follows the way of Jezebel in the same sins (2:20). The fifth church is a dead church (3:1). Only the second and sixth churches are in relatively good health (2:9; 3:8-10).<sup>10</sup> There is therefore a “perceived” spiritual crisis in the churches.<sup>11</sup>

The overall tenor of John's exhortation, warnings, and challenges mixed with consolation in times of pressures and persecution, leads us to posit a threefold purpose for writing Revelation. John aims: (1) to call the faithful in Christ to endurance in him; (2) to warn those who compromise their faith in Christ to repent and remain steadfast in their witness to Christ, showing them the spiritual danger of forsaking their first love and following the false doctrines and idolatrous practices of Balaam, Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, Babylon, and the beast; and (3) to warn of impending judgment against those who have apostatized, showing themselves false believers and false teachers.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, the purpose of the book is to wake up the spiritually dead in a dead church, to heat up the spiritually lukewarm in a lukewarm church, to call to repentance the idolatrous believer in an idolatrous church. It seeks to warn against spiritual compromise with an appealing world system that is soon coming to an end and to encourage the faithful in Christ to expect the final eschatological triumph of the rule of God in Christ over all opposing forces.

### **Probable Date**

That the likely date of writing of Revelation is 90-95 C. E. is seen in the state of the churches in John's time. There is no hint of Pauline missionary endeavours, indicating that at this time, it was already past. The spiritual, theological, and moral complacency among the churches may indicate that the churches are second generation churches. The church in Smyrna was non-existent in the time of Paul, but exists now in the time of John. The church in Laodicea is considered rich, although an earthquake destroyed it in 60-61 C. E. The Nicolaitan school, already developed at this time, is never mentioned in Paul's letters, suggesting a later development of the heresy. More significantly, to date Revelation before 90 C. E. would put it in existence before Paul's letters.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Irenaeus, a church father in Asia Minor, points to Revelation as having been written toward the end of the reign of Domitian. Eusebius and Polycarp, the

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<sup>10</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 28-33.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Revelation*, 406.

bishop of Smyrna, confirm that Revelation was also written or existing at the end of Domitian's rule.<sup>14</sup>

### **Significance for Churches Today**

Although differing in socio-cultural, political, and economic environments, the churches of the twenty-first century are no different from the churches of the first century in Asia Minor. In many parts of the world, believers suffer from intense persecution from opposing culturally entrenched religions and godless authorities. False teachers abound. Countless churches have fallen away from the faith. Many worldly churches prostitute with the idolatrous ways of Babylon. Some are neither hot nor cold for the gospel. Revelation allows us to see through the apocalyptic world of John the spiritual struggle between the forces of Christ and the forces of Satan. We face the same spiritual internal struggles and fight the same external spiritual battles that they did. We must wake up to the realization that the enemy is indeed out there. But the enemy is also within.

In the midst of suffering and persecution, Revelation calls us to endure in Christ. It warns us that compromise with the idolatrous values of the world system is not an option, but a precarious slide into spiritual idolatry, immorality, complacency, and loss of love for Christ. If the seven churches represent the churches throughout the present age, then every church should assess its health against the criteria set forth by the Head of the church in Revelation. Every church is at risk of losing its first love and its lampstand. Every church should guard against theological heresy, worldly compromise, and spiritual complacency, as it engages in cosmic battle with Christ. Revelation calls every church and every believer to persevere in their witness to Christ, to endure in the struggle without compromise, and to overcome in the midst of a spiritually immoral church and demonic world system.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Beckwith, *The Apocalypse*, 207-208; John Sweet, *Revelation* (TPI NTC; London: SCM, 1990), 21-27; Roloff, *The Revelation*, 10-11;

<sup>15</sup> Beale, *The Book*, 33.

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