

PARISH OF FINCHAMPSTEAD AND CALIFORNIA



**FRIENDS OF ST JAMES', FINCHAMPSTEAD**

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**ALL IS REVEALED!**

**An Introduction to the Book of Revelation**

***Rev'd Canon John Edwards***

## 1. What type of book is Revelation?

- **Revelation** - making known God's truth (1:1)
- **Apocalypse** = Revelation (*apocalyptic* derives from the dramatic events recorded in the Book, not the other way round)
- **Vision** (1:2)
- **Prophecy** - proclaiming God's word into a specific situation (1:3)
- **NOT Detailed prediction** - John, like the OT prophets, used symbols and metaphors
- **Letter** - to seven named churches (1:4), but for the whole church and the world (see eg 4:4-9)
- Many generic similarities to Jewish apocalyptic writing of the period BC200 to AD100. Only *Daniel* (cBC170) made it into the OT.

## 2. Authorship and dating

- **John** (1.1), apparently in exile on Patmos, because of his faith (1.9). Most unlikely to have been the Apostle or Evangelist John.
- Probably written cAD90, possibly up to 20 years earlier.

## 3. Principal themes

- God is in control
- Jesus has taken his place at God's right hand
- Father and Son are worthy of endless worship
- The Holy Spirit mediates between heaven and earth
- A heavenly perspective is quite different from a worldly one
- God cares for the church
- Evil is endemic in the world but will be defeated
- Persecution and suffering will end
- Those who endure will be rewarded
- The whole creation will be conformed to God's will and desire

## 4. Aids to understanding Revelation

- Some knowledge of the OT, especially the prophetic books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah
- A broad overview of the religion and culture of the Roman Empire, especially in the Province of Asia Minor
- Being open to non-literal interpretation
- Symbolism of numbers

## 5. Structure

- **Introduction** (ch1)
- **Letters to the 7 Churches** (ch2-3)
- **Throne Room Vision** (ch4-5)
- **7 Seals** (ch6 & 8:1-5) with interlude (ch7)
- **7 Trumpets** (ch8-9 & 11:15-18) with 2 interludes (ch10; 11:1-14)
- **7 Visions** (11:19 - 15:4)
- **7 Bowls** (ch15-16)
- **Destruction of Babylon** (ch17-19:10)
- **7 Visions** (19:11 - 21:8)
- **New Jerusalem** (21:9 - 22:6)
- **Conclusion** (22:7-21)

## 6. The 7 Churches

- **7** = completeness or fullness. Here the named churches probably represent also the whole church.
- Imagery of 7 **lampstands** (1:12, 1:20) comes from the OT (eg in the tabernacle Ex 25:31-37; and in the temple 1 Kgs 7:49). Zechariah uses a 7-branched lampstand symbolically to represent *the eyes of the Lord, ranging throughout the earth* (Zech 4:2&10). Along with ideas of the church being the *light of the world* (Mt 5.14) this offers a multi-layered metaphor.
- 7 **stars** = the angels of the churches (1:16; 1:20) - meaning unclear but may stand for the separate identity of each church over and above its individual members. The letters in ch2&3 are written *to the angel* of each church.
- These letters are formulaic, but distinctive.

## 7. The Throne Room Vision

- A summons and the role of the Holy Spirit (4:1-2) - compare commissioning visions of Isaiah (Is 6:1-8) and Ezekiel (Ez ch1-3), from which much of the imagery in ch4 is taken. John's prophetic commissioning deferred to ch10.
- Initial emphasis on the splendour and absolute authority of God, the 'council' of 24 elders, the 4 living creatures, and their worship.
- Focus then shifts to *the Lamb who was slain*. He alone can open the seals of the scroll containing God's purposes. He is worshipped in

exactly the same way as God. Compare 4.11 (God as creator) with 5.12 (Jesus as redeemer) and the united praise of 5.13.

## 8. The scroll and its 7 seals

- The vision darkens. The scroll contains warnings and judgement, calling God's people to faithfulness and the world of evil to account. Reflects the two scrolls of Jeremiah - to Judah (Jer 36.2) and against the oppressor Babylon (Jer 51.60).
- 4 horses and riders - oppression (parody of Jesus?), war, famine, death.
- Evil effects limited (only? 25% - 6:8).
- Contrast between the faithful (martyrs) and the evil whose time has nearly come.
- But judgement delayed while the 144,000 *servants of God* from Israel are sealed, and join the worshipping multitude.
- 7th seal and the silence while prayers are offered and answered (thunder and earthquake - 8:5) lead into the 7 trumpets.

## 9. Seven trumpets

- God's power over nature displayed - earth, sea, freshwater, sky - again effects limited (only? a third)
- Tormenting locusts and fire-breathing killers
- Still no repentance from evil and idol-worship (9:20-21)
- John is told that *God's mystery will be accomplished* before the 7th trumpet. The roar of the lion (10.3) is explained by Am 3.8. The 7 thunders are further (undisclosed) judgements (see Ps 29).
- John eats the scroll (the same one as in 5:1-9?): sweet to the taste (cf Ez 3.1-3) but bitter to the stomach.
- Against the background of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, John sees the faithful witness of the two lampstands / two olive trees (cf Zech 4:1-14) = the church. The 42 months = 1260 days is from Dan 7:25, 12:7. The church seems to be destroyed (like Jesus) but is restored (like Jesus) and avenged by God.
- The 7th trumpet takes us back to the throne room, to praise and to the announcement of the time for reward and punishment, all in accordance with God's covenant.

## 10. Seven short visions

- The Woman and the dragon (ch12) - full of OT allusions, God protects his people (the woman) from the seemingly all-powerful dragon.
- The beast from the sea (13:1-10) - derived from Dan 7:1-8 the beast is uncontrollable. v3 is perhaps a parody of the death and resurrection of Jesus with a nod to the legend of *Nero redivivus*. In the face of such blasphemy and its irresistible power, at least for a time, the church can only endure patiently and faithfully.
- The beast from the earth and his mark (13:11-18) - the imperial priesthood deceiving people by 'miracles' parodying the power of God; enforcing the cult by the beast's mark, itself a parody of God's seal on the faithful.
- By way of encouragement, the Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1-5).
- Three angels announce the hour of God's judgement, the collapse of the power of Babylon and the implications for those who bear her mark (14:6-13).
- The harvest of grain and grapes (14:14-20) - the gathering in of the faithful, the destruction of the faithless (cf Joel 3:13).
- The song of those who escaped the beast (15:1-8) - closely modelled on the exodus experience (Ex 15:1-18) and intercut with an introduction to the 7 bowls of plagues.

## 11. Seven bowls

- The first four bowls, like the first four trumpets, affect the four elements of the earth, but totally, not partially. The plagues are reminiscent of the plagues in Egypt.
- The final three bowls prepare for the final destruction of Babylon by rendering it impotent, by setting the scene at Armageddon for the final showdown, and by displaying God's overwhelming power.

## 12. Destruction of Babylon

- Behind the picture of Babylon as a prostitute (17:1-6a) seems to lie Isaiah's similar description of Tyre (Is 23:17). In Tyre's case this relates to her trading links with *all the nations*. In Babylon (Rome's) to her economic exploitation of client kingdoms. This is supported by her military power - the beast in ch13 and here.
- The angel's explanation in 17:7 on is not as clear as it might be. It clearly refers to the *Nero redivivus* legend (v8) but distinguishes this myth from the truth of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus (see

v11); also the persecution of Christians under Nero may be implied in v6.

- The identification of Rome is unequivocal in the 7 hills of 17:9. The kings are thus Caesars though which ones are subject to endless debate. The power of Rome and its supporters is ranged against the power of the Lamb and his followers, who will prevail (17:12-14).
- Ch18 is written in the form of an OT prophetic oracle in which the causes of the fall of Babylon, other than the seeds of destruction within itself, are not given - just the fact of it. See eg Is 13:1 - 14:23; ch47; Jer 25:12-14.
- Unlike the exiles in the original Babylon, followers of Jesus must separate themselves from the sins of Babylon/Rome (18:4). The choice is between worldly power (18:10), wealth (18:16), trade (18.19), and heavenly joy (18:20).
- 18:21 repeats the enacted prophecy of Jer 51:63.
- The heavenly response is ecstatic (19:1-6). And because of her *righteous acts* (19:8), the church is prepared for her marriage to the Lamb (19:7,9).

### **13. Seven short visions**

- For the first time heaven stands open and Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Faithful and True, the Word of God rides out at the head of his army (19:11-16).
- An angel summons the birds to witness the defeat of the beast and the false prophet and their armies (19:17-20).
- The dragon, the source of evil, is incapacitated for 1000 years (to put this endlessly debated period in context see Ps 90:4) while the martyrs are vindicated and reign with the Lamb (20:1-3).
- The martyrs rule with Christ for the millennium (20:4-10).
- After the millennium Satan is released, seemingly so that he can be extinguished permanently (20:7-10).
- The dead are judged (20:11-15) according to whether the faithfulness of their lives has merited their inclusion in the book of life (Dan 7:10; 12:2).
- Finally (21:1-8), the distinction between heaven and earth seems to have been abolished in a re-created whole (cf Is 65:17-25; 2 Cor 5:17), leading to previously unimagined intimacy between God and his people. The absence of sea (v1) implies the absence of chaos or threat.

## 14. New Jerusalem

- The bride of the Lamb is no longer the earthly church but its heavenly counterpart, the Holy City. This city represents heaven embracing earth, not earth aspiring to heaven, as in the original Babylon (see Gen 11:1-9).
- The city reflects God's glory (20:11,23) and is tailor-made for his people (12 gates, 12 foundations, 12000 stadia long, 144 cubits of wall thickness. There is no need for a temple because *The Lord is there* (Ez 48:35).
- The river of the Water of Life flows from the throne of God and the Lamb (cf Ez 47:1) nourishing the tree of life (Gen 2:9) with its 12 crops and leaves *for the healing of the nations*.

## 15. Some of the numbers used in Revelation

- **7** - used some 60 times to represent completeness or fullness, and therefore a complete population (eg the 7 churches, standing for all churches).
- **4** - also used to represent a complete set, especially in relation to the earth (eg the 4 living creatures, 4 angels/corners/winds in 7:1).
- **12** - yet another way of describing completeness, especially for Israel (the 12 tribes) and by extension the church (also the 12 apostles).
- **144** = 12 x 12 - as for 12, possibly more so.
- **12,000; 144,000** - related but applied to larger numbers of individuals (thus the 144,000 sealed by God indicates an order of magnitude in a way that 144 or 12 could not).
- **24** = 12 x 2 - probably related in meaning to 12, but the precise connection is not clear (24 elders).
- **42** months = **1260** days (42 x 30) = **3½** years - derived from *a time, times, and half a time*. Represents a definite, but limited period and it's undoubtedly no coincidence that 3½ is half of 7 ie is incomplete in the way 7 is complete.
- **1000** years - a long time, though not in God's eyes (Ps 90:4).
- **666** - the number of the beast. 13:18 makes it clear that this is a code. The most likely solution is that under the Jewish system of *gematria*, where hebrew letters are given numerical values which are then added together, 666 can be derived from the hebrew

equivalent of the latin *Nero Caesar*. This is consistent with other likely allusions to Nero in Revelation. Some scholars have suggested further significance in 666 being the eighth *double triangular* number (666 is the sum of the integers up to 36; 36 is the sum of integers up to 8)! 17:11 refers to an eighth king who is also probably Nero. Finally, and more simply, 666 falls short of the completeness of 7 not just once but three times.



A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon ... (Revelation 12:1-3)

*Blair Hughes-Stanton 1933*

## A Summary of the Messages to the Seven Churches in Revelation 2&3

*The message from Jesus - the First and the Last, the Living One for ever and ever, who holds the keys of death and Hades (1:17-18) - to the churches:*

	<b>Ephesus</b>	<b>Smyrna</b>	<b>Pergamum</b>	<b>Thyatira</b>	<b>Sardis</b>	<b>Philadelphia</b>	<b>Laodicea</b>
<b>Further description of Jesus</b>	He who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands.	The First and the Last who died and came to life again.	He who has the sharp double-edged sword.	Eyes like blazing fire, feet like burnished bronze.	He who holds the seven spirits and seven stars.	He who holds the key of David.	Faithful and true witness, ruler of God's creation.
<b>Commended for</b>	Deeds, hard work, perseverance. Rejecting wicked men, false apostles, <i>Nicolaitans</i> .	Afflictions, poverty, slander.	True to his name, even when martyred.	Deeds, love, faith, service, perseverance, progress.	Deeds. Conduct of a small number.	Deeds. Kept his word. Not denied him. Patient endurance.	
<b>Encouragement</b>		Don't be afraid.				I am coming soon.	I stand at the door and knock.
<b>Criticised for</b>	Forsaking first love. Falling away.		Eating food sacrificed to idols. Sexual immorality. Following <i>Nicolaitans</i> .	Tolerating false prophet.	Appearing to be alive, but being dead.		Neither cold nor hot. Reliant on wealth.
<b>Action required</b>	Repentance.	Be faithful (even to death).	Repentance.	Reject the prophet.	Wake up. Repent.	Hold on to what you have.	Seek true riches. Repent.
<b>Sanction</b>	Removal of lampstand.		Use the sword against them.	Suffering for the prophet and her followers.	I will come for you.		Spit out of mouth.
<b>Promise to the one who overcomes</b>	The right to eat from the tree of life in Paradise.	The crown of life for eternity.	Hidden manna. Named stone.	Authority over nations. Morning star.	Dressed in white. Name in book of life.	A pillar in God's temple, with God's name.	Seat on throne.