

A thick black L-shaped border is positioned on the left and bottom edges of the page, framing the central text.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Introduction and
Prologue

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Direct, O Lord, we beseech you,
all our actions by your holy inspirations,
and carry them on by your gracious assistance,
that every prayer and work of ours
may begin always from you,
and by you be happily ended.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

- Among the 27 books of the NT, and indeed among all the books of Sacred Scripture, the Book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse) is unique for several reasons
 - *Its use of symbolism, a defining characteristic of this book, making interpretation a challenge*
 - *It is filled with images that are mysterious and can be frightening, especially since they deal with realities such as the end of the world, the devil, heaven and hell, persecution and spiritual battles, the last judgment and the second coming of Christ*
 - *There are a tremendous number of references – either direct or more often indirect – to the OT (particularly Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah and the Psalms), with which we should be familiar to properly understand the book.*
 - *The historical circumstances of the initial audience are vastly different from our own*

Introduction

- *The structure of the book is unusual, not following a straight line or chronological sequence*
 - *It is written in a literary style that is much different compared to contemporary genres*
 - *On top of all that, we typically approach Revelation with preconceived notions of what it is all about. Popular culture (books, movies, etc.) portrays an interpretation of Revelation that often completely misses the mark and the true message of the book.*
- A Catholic approach to this book must be faithful to the text, interpret it based on the whole of Scripture and Tradition, and understand its genre, author, audience, historical setting and its perennial relevance for believers of all time as the inspired Word of God.
- *We will also approach our study prayerfully, seeking to know our faith and follow Jesus Christ better as his disciples*

First century audience

- As was the case with the letters of St. Paul, Revelation would have arrived in the form of a scroll (or several) of parchment. There was a single, handwritten copy.
 - *It would have been read aloud at the community gathering (perhaps a few hundred people) during the celebration of Mass or some other assembly*
 - *Compared in size to some of Paul's letters, Revelation is large, and the people knew they were in for a rather long reading!*
 - *Presumably, the messenger/reader took this single copy to all the communities listed in the book, read it to the gathered assembly, and then went on to the next. At some point, copies were made for further reading and discussion, joining all the other NT texts that were being circulated at the time.*
- The original audience, as noted in the book, is to the faithful of the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, what is today called Asia Minor or Turkey.

The Seven Churches of Revelation



First century audience

- Though we understand who the original audience was, the Church has always understood this book as the living Word of God, applicable to all people of all times and places – just like every other book in the Bible.
 - *Just as Paul's letter to the Philippians was originally meant for the faithful of that local church, and just as the Gospel of Mark was originally meant for the Gentile Christian community in Rome, yet we understand that they are truly meant for all the faithful*
- The majority of the faithful of these cities were likely pagan converts to Christianity, though a substantial number were Jewish converts
- The Christian faithful of these cities were a tiny minority
 - *Their belief in the one God would have been strange (and perhaps even offensive) to most of the people, whose culture and religion included the worship of many gods.*
 - *The Christians (and Jews) of the time would have been oddities and totally counter-cultural*

First century audience

- Judaism was a legally recognized religion in the Roman Empire, giving it some protection and exemption from Roman religious laws.
- Christianity was, at first, seen as a branch of Judaism, but gradually, both Jews and Romans (and Christians themselves) regarded them as a distinct religion
 - *We will see in some of the churches that this separation had already begun*
 - *Without legal recognition, pressure and persecution increased*
- There was not widespread and wholesale persecution of the Christians at that time and place, though it did happen intermittently in certain locales with great ferocity
 - *The decades and centuries to come would see more and more of it.*

Genre

- The author called his work a “prophetic message,” and the people of the time would have understood what they were about to hear to be a type of religious letter written in the style of the Books of Daniel, Isaiah or Ezekiel
 - *They would not have found this book as strange sounding and confusing as we do*
 - *This style was common and popular at the time.*
- We have come to call this genre of writing “apocalyptic literature,” though at the time it did not have the ‘doom and gloom’ connotations that it does for us
- The word apocalypse comes from the Greek prefix “apo-,” corresponding to our prefix *un*, and “kalyptien,” meaning to *cover or conceal*
 - *So, apocalypse means to uncover or reveal, hence “revelation” which by itself does not connote ‘doom and gloom’*
 - *By the way, it is “Revelation” (singular), not “Revelations”*

Genre

- Today, we define apocalyptic literature as a form or genre of writing that deals with unseen spiritual realities behind worldly events, or that looks ahead to the culmination (ending) of history
- Apocalyptic literature typically utilizes highly symbolic language to convey its message, as those that might be pictured in a dream or vision
- Regardless of how the message is conveyed, our task is not to get lost in the symbolism but rather seek to discern (and take to heart) the message itself.
- This is challenging, and as we will see, some points here and there do not enjoy universal agreement as to their interpretation. But the overall message will be quite clear...

The author

- The author identifies himself several times as “John”
- Many early Church Fathers understood him as the Apostle John, the same author that wrote the fourth Gospel and the short letters of 1, 2 and 3 John
- But there is some doubt whether it is the same man
 - *The author never identifies himself as one of the Twelve, nor is he seated amongst the twelve apostles on their thrones (4:4)*
 - *A comparison of the original Greek of the various “Johannine” works of Scripture show differences in style, vocabulary and structure*
 - *John was a fairly common name, then as now.*
 - *He could have been a disciple of the Apostle John*

The author

- The conclusion of most scholars is that we cannot know for sure who wrote Revelation. We will call him John, as that is how he identifies himself, but we can't know for certain which John he is.
 - *Scholars believe that he was likely a Jewish convert to Christianity, very faithful to the Lord, with tremendous familiarity with the OT as well as the NT works in circulation at the time*
 - *He was certainly a Christian prophet, given a remarkable message and an extraordinary vision of the definitive victory of Christ and the final establishment of the Kingdom, one that has guided the Church and given hope to countless millions for centuries.*
 - *He was chosen and appointed by God to “write down what is happening and what will happen afterwards,” (1:19) in what has come to us as a perennially important and divinely inspired message*

Date of composition

- There is some debate as to exactly when the book was written, but most scholars say that John wrote the book towards the end of the first century
 - *95AD would be an educated guess*
- This would be during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96AD)
- This means that the Christian communities to whom the book is addressed were already familiar with the four Gospels, the writings of St. Paul as well as the OT, plus most if not all of the other NT books.
- What an amazing and dynamic time in Church history! We can learn much from the faith and practices of our Christian ancestors.

Structure

- The structure of Revelation is quite unusual and will present us a challenge in studying it
- There are two main sections:
 - *Chapters 1-3 focus on the state of the churches in the present*
 - *Chapters 4-22 (the rest of the book) concern the future, the “time of the Church,” the persecutions and spiritual battles to come and the certainty of God’s definitive victory at the end.*
- The structure is not exactly chronological, nor does it always move from one event to the next. As we’ll see, it will often re-tell the same event focusing on different characters or groups
- The text will periodically “take a break” from some of the more harrowing and frightening images – spiritual/worldly battles, earthly calamities and persecutions
 - *This is to remind readers of the joys of heaven and the glory of the holy ones now there, a glory which the faithful on earth will share.*

Symbolism and Imagery

- This is the most striking feature of Revelation, one that most captures the imagination and leads to the most confusion and misinterpretation
- We must seek to understand this symbolism in the way that the author intended and that the people of the time understood it.
- Symbols and images are not used in the literal sense, but rather are employed to convey deeper levels of meaning than words alone could describe.
 - *We are very familiar with this in our own time – music, poetry, literature, even advertising...*
 - *“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.” (R&J 2:2)*
 - *The names of products, for example, cars...*

Symbolism and Imagery

- “Then I saw standing...a lamb. He had seven horns and seven eyes...” (5:6)
 - *John is describing his vision of the conquering Christ. It is not meant to be taken as a literal description*
 - *But to understand it, we need to know what the number seven represents and what an eye and a horn represent*
 - *John is conveying a truth about the grandeur and power of the risen Christ, whom he saw with his eyes but cannot describe in words, so he uses images to try to convey that vision*
- Let’s understand that much of Revelation was not meant to be read in a literal way.
 - *Revelation is different from the Gospels or the letters of St. Paul*
 - *Let’s be mindful of our presuppositions and what we might have learned from popular culture, and let’s be open to learning new things together.*

Symbolism and Imagery

- Often, the symbolic meaning is much more powerful than the straight reading of the text, and it conveys much deeper content.
 - *For example, in Revelation, seven is a symbol for completeness or totality; the eye is a symbol of knowledge; a horn is a symbol of power.*
 - *So the above image that John describes portrays Jesus as the all-knowing and all-powerful Lamb of God.*
- Revelation will use many things with symbolic meanings, which we will discuss as we proceed through the book:
 - *Nature: sky, sun, moon, stars, land, sea, etc.*
 - *Animals: lamb, lion, dragon, eagle, locusts, the four living creatures, the beast*
 - *Natural phenomena: earthquakes, the sun darkening, the moon turning red, stars falling from the sky, etc.*

Symbolism in Numbers

- Numbers in particular are used in a very symbolic way, one that can cause confusion.
- Numbers in Revelation frequency describe qualities, not quantities
 - *Seven and ten represent completeness or totality*
 - *Three and a half (half of seven) and also six represent incompleteness*
 - *Four represents the world, as in the four corners of the world, the four compass points or the four winds*
 - *Twelve represents the people of God (twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles)*
 - *A thousand represents a great quantity or multitude, not necessarily that precise figure*

Symbolism in Numbers

- Some interesting numerical facts in Revelation:
 - *The phrases “Lord God Almighty,” “the one who sits on the throne,” and “Christ” are used seven times each*
 - *“Jesus” and the “Spirit” are used fourteen times each (twice seven)*
 - *“Lamb” is used 28 times, (four times seven)*
- John avoids using multiples of seven with evil things
 - *“Satan” is used eight times*
 - *The “dragon” is mentioned thirteen times*
 - *The “beast” is mentioned 38 times*
 - *“Babylon” is mentioned six times*

Four ways to interpret Revelation

■ Historicist view

- *Sees Revelation as a linear timeline of events in Church history leading to the end of time.*
- *The problem with this view is that it is difficult to fit historical events into the timeframe given in the book.*

■ Preterist view

- *Understands Revelation as pertaining only to the events and people of the first century, the original audience*
- *But the book ends with the return of Christ and a new heavens and new earth – things that obviously didn't happen in the first century and haven't happened yet.*
- *Besides, we don't regard any other book of Scripture in this time-specific way*

Four ways to interpret Revelation

■ Futurist view (Dispensationalism)

- *Sees Revelation as pertaining to the last few years of human history before the return of Christ, predicting a series of events that will foreshadow the end.*
- *This may be the most common view in popular culture and in fundamentalist circles*
- *But it reduces the relevance of the book to all but the last generation, and why address this book to the seven churches of Asia in the first century?*

■ Idealist view

- *Holds that Revelation provides narratives and images relating to the perennial struggle between good and evil, but with no specific historical component.*
- *Like a generalized good vs. evil story, it is given to comfort Christians in their struggles and encourage them to remain faithful.*
- *But John provides, through symbols and imagery, a specific narrative about what he saw – the end of history and the return of Christ.*

Our path of interpretation

- We will use elements of all four without committing to any one of them.
- As with all the books of Scripture, the Catholic faith understands Revelation as the inspired Word of God, intended to speak to all the faithful of all times
- On the one hand, Revelation (like other books) was intended for a specific audience. It is unlikely that John knew he was writing Sacred Scripture that would become part of the Bible, which didn't even exist then in its present form
- On the other hand, Revelation also has specific predictions about the end of history, the Church's trials and the return of Christ. In other words, it goes beyond the original audience.
 - *The visions may refer to some future time, but they are applicable to us now in the way we live because the spiritual "groundwork" that will lead to the end is already being laid in our time.*
 - *Or like chess, the pieces are already being moved into position for the final assault (and victory!)*

Our path of interpretation

- We recognize that John saw the end of history and he interpreted it through the lens of his own time, culture, language and the state of the specific church communities to whom he was writing.
 - *He sees in their current faith (or lack thereof) that they are on the path, or not, of sharing in the ultimate victory he foresaw, and he is writing to guide them – and us – to make sure we are on God’s side, no matter what*
 - *The task of the reader in any age is to discern the signs of the times and understand them in terms of which path those times are leading us – either the path of victory or defeat.*
 - *We need to discern what we experience in our day – whether governments, institutions, cultural movements and even the priorities of our own lives – and see where those things are leading us.*
- Finally, we will proceed with humility about how we approach this text, and about our ability to know and understand exactly how God will bring about the fullness of his victory.

Major themes of Revelation

- The condition of the churches in Asia
 - *Jesus (through John) will specifically address each of the seven churches (ch 2-3) with praise or (more often) admonition*
 - *We will rightfully interpret our own lives (and parish) in light of those words*

- God's sovereignty
 - *A huuuuuge and consistent theme is God's absolute sovereignty and complete control over history.*
 - *The victory has already been won through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he will reign without end and evil will be definitively destroyed*
 - *When Christians are worried about the things of the world, the state of the Church, the persecutions they are suffering, etc., Revelation reassures us of God's control and total power over everything.*

Major themes of Revelation

- The Church's trial before the end
 - *Revelation will depict the enemies of God and his people (the Church): the devil, the beast, the false prophet and the harlot Babylon, who all engage in (spiritual) battle against God and the faithful, trying to lure them away from God*
 - *In many ways, the evil forces will devise a society that is the opposite of the Church. It will be a culture that promotes wealth, luxury, immorality and idolatry in order to seduce God's people. Saint Augustine called this the "city of the world," cast in opposition to the "City of God"*
 - *It will also be a great source of persecution. There will be a time of unprecedented trial before the end.*
 - *Whether or not we are in that time period now, we do well to discern the signs of the times and understand the characteristics of the two "cities" and where they ultimately lead, and we must further definitively choose Christ and the "city of God"*

Major themes of Revelation

■ The promises of God

- *Jesus Christ fulfilled the OT prophecies about the salvation of God's people, but he did not definitively establish the Kingdom, nor were all of God's promises fulfilled in full just yet.*
- *As Jesus said, there will be a time between Christ's first coming and his second – the time of the Church – in which the Gospel must be preached.*
- *Revelation describes the time at the end of history when all of those promises will be absolutely fulfilled*
- *Just as God will fulfill his promises and remain faithful to his people, so too must the baptized remain faithful to him*

How does Revelation apply to us?

- It applies to us just as it did to its original readers and to the faithful of every generation. Revelation is a message to the seven churches of Asia, and through them, to all of us.
- Revelation reminds us that Jesus Christ is the victorious Lamb, that the final result is already assured. Despite appearances on earth, God is in total control – there is nothing and no one that can threaten his absolute victory
- The readers' call (and ours) is to remain faithful to him, always, no matter how things seem, no matter how bad things get, no matter how hopeless things appear, no matter what we must suffer or sacrifice. Remain faithful to God, bear witness to him, and you will share in that ultimate victory forever.

Prologue (1:1-3)

■ “The revelation of Jesus Christ”

- *This is the true title of this book. Ironically, this is the only use of the term ‘revelation’ in the entire book.*
- *The account that we are about to read consists of a series of revealed events, revealed by the Father to the Son, and from the Son – via mediation of an angel – to John*
- *As Jesus told his disciples: “But of that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” (Mt 24:36). The Father has now revealed it to the Son, who in turn reveals it to his people through John*

■ “What must happen soon”

- *It is given so that God’s people will recognize that God knows every detail and remains in complete control over history throughout all these events about to be revealed.*
- *It is also given to reassure the faithful and to urge them in powerful terms to remain steadfast until the end.*

Excursus: “Soon”

- Often in Scripture, we hear of a future event or a promise of God that will be fulfilled “soon”
 - *We saw a similar phrase in Mark: “The Kingdom of God is at hand”*
 - *The Kingdom did in fact arrive with the coming of Christ, but it is not yet fully realized, as if to say it’s here already, but not yet.*
 - *Similarly, we might see that the events of Revelation are beginning to take shape already, but they have not yet fully come to pass.*
- We realize that God exists beyond our time (he is the author of time) and does not count time in the same way we do.
 - *Telling a child that we’ll be at grandma’s house ‘soon’ may be perceived differently by the child than by us.*

Excursus: Soon

- The great CS Lewis expressed it well:
 - *If you picture time as a straight line along which we must travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we must leave 'A' behind before we get to 'B' and cannot reach 'C' until we leave 'B' behind. God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all.*
- The perennial temptation is to drop our guard since God is not following our notion of when “soon” should be. That’s the last thing we should do:
 - *The entire Book of Revelation is essentially a call to remain steadfast and faithful, to watch for the coming of the Lord and remain alert, lest the day catch us unawares.*
 - *How often did Jesus preach this very thing? (Mt 24, Mt 25, Mk 13, Lk 12, Lk 21, etc. – including this past weekend!)*
 - *Also, perhaps God is being patient, not wishing the sinner to die but to return to him and live (Ezk 33:11)*
 - *From heaven, we will (hopefully) see just how “soon” it all was!*

Prologue (1:1-3)

- “Blessed is the one who reads aloud...”
 - *This is the first of seven ‘beatitudes’ in Revelation*
 - *John pronounces a blessing upon those who read his testimony aloud and those who ‘hear’ it, meaning those who follow it.*
 - *Reminiscent of Mt 5 and the Sermon on the Mount, which began with the same words, “blessed are they...”*
 - *A beatitude is a type of saying in which a person is declared blessed or happy or fortunate, and the action or state that brings about that happiness is praised.*
 - *John is telling both the reader and the listeners that they are blessed, happy and fortunate if they put what they will now hear into practice...”*

Next Week...

- Chapter 1 and 2
 - *John's greeting to the seven churches*
 - *John's commissioning*
 - *The appearance of the resurrected Christ*
 - *The messages to the seven churches*

- Tomorrow night!
 - *Advent talk at 7:00 pm*
 - *"Bethlehem: History, Mystery and Meaning"*
 - *Nativity Christmas Market*

- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.