

## Revelation – Introduction

### Read: Revelation 1:1-3

#### Introduction

We come to the last letter in the Bible. Last in that it was the latest to be written – probably about AD 95 – and last in the sense that it gathers up and draws on so much of what has gone before throughout the Bible as a whole.

#### A church under pressure

This is no ordinary letter. It was written to a church under pressure by a man under pressure. So why the difficulty – and where did it come from?

In Acts the tribunal of the Roman magistrate was often the safest refuge of the Christian missionaries against the hatred of the Jews and the fury of the mob. Paul was proud that he was a Roman citizen and again and again claimed the rights to which every Roman citizen was entitled. (Acts 16:36–40; 18:1–17; 19:13–41; 21:30–40; 23:12–31; 25:10, 11; See also Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:12–17; 2 Thessalonians 2:7). By the time Revelation was written there is a complete change of attitude towards Rome. Rome is a Babylon, the mother of harlots, drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs (Revelation 17:5, 6). John wants to see her total destruction.

So, what has happened?

One of the problems facing the Romans in the maintaining of their empire was to hold it all together. The empire stretched from one end of the known world to another. It contained many languages, nations and traditions. How do you weld this varied mass into a self-conscious unity? There is no unifying force like that of a common religion but none of the national religions could have become universal. Caesar worship could.

Caesar worship was the result of a genuine gratitude to Rome. Life was better under the Romans. Where there had been tyrannical oppression there was impartial Roman justice. Great roads were built and these roads were safe from brigands and the seas were clear of pirates. As Virgil wrote, 'Rome felt her destiny to be "to spare the fallen and to cast down the proud."' Individuals were free to conduct their businesses, provide for their families, send letters and make journeys in safety – thanks to the strong hand of Rome.

Caesar worship was not initially imposed on the people from above. In fact, some of the early emperors tried to curb it. Caesar worship began with the deification of Rome. The spirit of the Empire was deified under the name of the goddess Roma. Roma stood for all the strong and benevolent power of the Empire. The first temple to Roma was erected in Smyrna as far back as 195 B.C. It was a small step to then think of the spirit of Rome being incarnated in one man, the Emperor. The worship of the Emperor began with the worship of Julius Caesar after his death. Only the Jews were exempt from it. There was a line of emperors after Julius Caesar, most of who tried to curb emperor worship and others who either allowed it or demanded it. One who insisted on such worship was Caligula (AD 37-41) who was a madman and a megalomaniac. A mixture of emperors

followed which included Nero (AD54-68) who persecuted Christians, not because of emperor worship but because he needed a scapegoat for the fire of Rome.

The coming of Domitian (A.D. 81–96) brought a complete change. He was a cold-blooded persecutor. With the exception of Caligula, he was the first Emperor to take his divinity seriously and to demand Caesar worship. He erected a monument to “the deified Titus son of the deified Vespasian.”

He called anyone who would not worship the ancient gods ‘atheists’ and launched a bitter persecution against them. Christians and Jews were special targets. He insisted that government announcements must begin: ‘Our Lord and God Domitian commands ...’. Everyone who addressed him in speech or in writing must begin: ‘Lord and God.’

Once a year everyone in the Empire had to appear before the magistrates to burn a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar and to say: ‘Caesar is Lord.’ It was the one common act and belief which turned the Empire into a unity. To refuse to burn the pinch of incense and to say: ‘Caesar is Lord,’ was not an act of irreligion; it was an act of political disloyalty. But no Christian could give the title ‘Lord’ to any other than Jesus Christ. This was the centre of his creed.

Once you had burnt your pinch of incense you were free to go away and worship any god or goddess you liked, so long as that worship did not infringe decency and good order. If you didn’t do that the likely outcome was death. This issue went to the heart of the Christian creed – ‘Jesus is Lord.’

A simple but stark choice! What would you do? Christians had little power or prestige – the might of Rome stood against them and gave them the choice - Caesar or Christ. It was to encourage believers in such times that the Revelation was written.

This was a time of pressure and Christians had to make up their minds about where they stood in relation to the Lordship of Christ. Many Christians today face similar choices. In such times our minds would be focussed on the priorities – we would spend less time worrying about peripheral issues. Our trust and allegiance would go deep. May we learn to live like that without having to wait for trouble to bring the realities of life into focus!

## **Author**

It is likely that the apostle John was condemned to the mines on the prison island of Patmos by Domitian. He saw his visions there and either wrote them on the island or back in Ephesus when he was released after the death of Domitian. This makes the most likely date for the writing of Revelation to be about AD 95.

## **Five distinctive characteristics**

We will find it helpful to recognise at least five distinctive characteristics that mark Revelation out as different:

### **1. Straight from God**

The letter opens with an unmistakable claim to come straight from God. It comes through five stages of transmission - from Father to Son to angel to writer to readers. Jesus frequently claimed (as John’s gospel tells us) that he only did and said what his Father was doing and saying – e.g. Jn 5:19,30.

## 2. A Drama

Revelation is written in the form of a play. It is a drama in eight scenes and is truth acted out. We are going to have to use our imaginations because we obviously cannot see this play – but we can read the script.

## 3. A Different Style

The very first word of this book is *apocalypsis* – meaning *an unveiling, a revelation*. This letter is in a style known as 'Apocalyptic'. There is a genre of prophetic writing known as Apocalyptic.

Apocalyptic elements can be detected in the prophetic books of Joel and Zechariah, while Isaiah chapters 24-27 and 33 are well-developed apocalypses and Daniel is a classic example of this type of literature.

The style particularly developed after the Jews returned from the Second Exile and in the period of time, about 400 years, between the Old and New Testaments. The prophets had predicted times of blessing and restoration but the way that prophecy works is that the prophet sees the 'end product' away in the distance – rather like a series of mountain peaks - with fulfilments of the prophecy taking place, often in relatively local situations but all pointing towards the ultimate fulfilment of those prophecies. God's history is written in such a way as to provide clues and pointers to that which will ultimately be. For example, Jeremiah promised that after seventy years Israel would be restored to their own land and then enjoy the blessings of the Messianic kingdom under the Messianic king. Israel did indeed return to their land after 70 years but still look for the fulfilment of the Messianic kingdom. We know that kingdom was brought in with the birth of Jesus, was made more universally available at Pentecost but will only be ushered in more fully at the return of Christ.

What became clear to the Jews was that the kingdom would not be brought in by human means but would require divine intervention. Because of that, they divided all time into two ages – this present age, given over to evil; and the age to come, the age of God. Between the two there would be a time of terrible trial. It is interesting that the development of Apocalyptic literature was at its height between the Old and New Testaments as the Jews became increasingly aware of their own helplessness and need of divine intervention. Much of that literature is wild and fanciful and says more about the hopes of its writers than the mind of God. Why then would such a style of literature be included in the Bible? Because the premise on which it operates is actually true. For example, John writes, 'We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 Jn 5:19). Satan is defeated but he still wields his power over those who submit to him but the day is coming when he will be completely overthrown and God's kingdom will be fully established. So we could say that God has taken a well understood and accepted means of conveying truth and used it to convey *his truth*. We are not used to this style of writing so we must take care not to confuse the imagery and symbolism with the reality that they represent. We don't need to be startled by the vivid language What we do need is a willingness to let Scripture interpret Scripture and this is what we intend to do.

## 4. A Different Perspective

As we have seen, the word *apocalypsis* means *the uncovering of something hidden, the making known of what we could not find out for ourselves* and as such it is not a book of human wisdom – it

is a revelation – from God. When we are under pressure, we can quickly lose an objective perspective – we shrink into a ‘worm’s eye view’ and our reality is shaped by what we feel in our circumstances. God always has the panoramic view and knows the end as well as the beginning. In times of pressure and trouble – we need ‘an unveiling’ of reality!

### **5. A Promised Blessing**

The person who reads these words is blessed. The reader here is the man who publicly reads the word in the presence of the congregation. The reading of Scripture was the centre of any Jewish service (Luke 4:16; Acts 13:15). In the Jewish synagogue scripture was read to the congregation by seven ordinary members of the congregation, although if a priest or Levite was present he took precedence. The Christian Church took much of its service from the synagogue order and the reading of scripture remained a central part of the service. ‘Reader’ became in time an official office in the Church.

Most people then could not read, and there would not at any rate be enough copies of the book (which would have to be copied by hand) for everyone to have his or her own. Thus the blessing is for the one who reads aloud to the congregation. The person who hears these words and takes them to heart is also blessed. There is blessing here for us!

It is interesting that there are seven *blesseds* in Revelation – 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14.

#### **‘The time is near’**

We will only really understand that phrase if we compare it with a phrase that frequently occurs in the OT - the ‘days to come’ or ‘latter days.’ (e.g. Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1 cf Acts 2:7; Hebrews 1:2). The early Christians believed that when the Christian era began, the ‘last days’ had actually begun also.

Daniel spoke of a time to come (2:28) when he interpreted the king’s dream and told him that there would be a succession of world empires beginning from his own. In the days of the last of those empires, ‘the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed’ (Dan 2:44). The setting up of God’s kingdom began with the coming of Christ, and the promise that ‘it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Dan 2:44) was already starting to be fulfilled. The fulfilment is a process, not a crisis – a process that will occupy the whole of the gospel age.