

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Ron Roberts

Lesson One

PREFACE:

Revelation tops the list of the most misunderstood books in the Bible. There are numerous views of the book's purpose and content. Someone once said, *"Regardless of your understanding of the book of Revelation, you will be able to find an 'expert' that agrees with you, and many others who disagree with you."* I would not be writing this study if one of the previously written books provided what I believe to be the proper understanding of the book of Revelation and its message.

Back in 1964, I was asked to teach Revelation in a Sunday morning bible class. At the time I was a 23 year-old serving in the U.S. Air Force teaching Advanced Electronics. I agreed to take on the class and after only a few sessions realized I didn't know enough to teach it. The day I admitted that to myself, I also made myself a promise not to let something like that happen again. I relinquished the class to another, began a lengthy process of modifying my bible study habits, and thereby embarked on a long, continuing study of the book of Revelation.

So in 1999 when I was again asked to teach this book, I felt as though I was finally ready. Most of the hundred plus folks in the class came to me at one time or another and told me it made more sense than any other class on Revelation they had ever attended. I was encouraged at that time to put my material into book format, but chose not to. After all, I'm a teacher not a writer. In 2011, I was asked to teach it again as a refresher and for the sake of those new members who would be hearing it for the first time. Once again, it was suggested I put it on paper.

I appreciated the encouragement and was very flattered by their comments, but the greatest motivation for me to write this study came from my wife, friend, and loving companion for more than 60 years, who told me as bluntly as she frequently does, *"You're getting old. Don't let your knowledge die with you!"* So I dedicate this to her with the fervent prayer that these pages help you come to know and understand this powerful book better.

It is my long-held belief that we are intended to understand the Bible even though it may require much study and time. In fact, if we truly believe the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine,*

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for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,” then we must also believe that ALL scripture can be understood. At its most basic level, this book should be looked upon as words of encouragement to the believer regardless of his or her circumstance in life, with the assurance that when all is said and done there will be victory for the righteous! Even though it was written primarily to those early Christians who were suffering from a great persecution in the first few hundred years after Christ’s resurrection, it still contains a message for us and anyone who might come after us until Jesus returns. Don’t be intimidated by the symbolism. While early Christians were familiar with the signs and symbols used in this writing and therefore easily able to see the truths hidden behind them, you and I don’t have to be left in the dark. If we work at it, we too can see beyond the apocalyptic language and be bolstered by the message of this book.

You should know from the outset that I reject any claim that the book refers to the Catholic Church, the Pope, Mohammed’s Conquest, the Reformation, or any other specific event in history. These things certainly impacted Christianity, but the book of Revelation is not pointing to any of those specific things. Instead, it deals with humanity and our relationship with our Creator and His Son while living in the world. If you believe differently, I certainly understand the inclination to not read further, but I urge you to follow this study to its end anyway. I predict you will see things you have not thought of before.

Since we are dealing with an apocalyptic book, which by design is intended to be difficult to understand unless you know the symbolism, it would be impossible to proceed with this study without discussing the symbols and numbers referenced throughout the book. As a matter of fact, a proper understanding of these things will enhance your understanding of the Bible as a whole. For example, do you know why the apostle Paul only prayed three times to the Lord for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed? If not now, you soon will.

This material is meant to help you understand the book of Revelation, but it does not replace it! While I will often include the text, I encourage you to have your Bible open as you read. The text I use for all of my study is the 1611 King James Version of the bible. Because I

choose not to elaborate on every verse, but instead draw relevant conclusions from the “stories” in the text, I refrain from referring to commentary, preferring to call it “a study” of Revelation.

The Title:

Many Bibles include a printed title at the beginning of each book like, “**The Gospel According to Matthew,**” for example. Those titles were mostly added later, usually by the publisher, and are probably not a part of the inspired writings. As for the book of Revelation, depending upon which bible version you use, the title may be “*The Revelation of John,*” or “*The Revelation to John,*” or even something different. My copy of the New King James Version has the title, “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ.*” Another title often applied is “**The Apocalypse.**” We should not consider *The Apocalypse* to be a second title for the book. It is actually a descriptive term for the style of writing contained in the book. The term “*Apocalypse*” stems from the Greek word “Apokalupsis” defined by Joseph Henry Thayer in his “*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament,*” as “**to dis-cover; to be revealed, to make naked.**” James Strong in his “*Greek-English Dictionary*” defines the word as “**Laying bare, making naked; a disclosure of truth or instruction concerning things which before were unknown (a term used of events by which things or states or persons, hitherto withdrawn from view, are made visible.); a ‘manifestation’ or appearance.**”

Apocalyptic writings differ from other sacred writings. Most educators say there are three major types of sacred writings: **Doctrinal, Historical and Prophetic.** *Doctrinal* writings lay out the rules for following that particular doctrine. *Historical* writings are generally comprised of accurately recorded events that have happened in the past. *Prophetic* writings are most often thought to be predictive, but can be instructive as well. They usually foretell events that are going to happen at some point in the future so that the reader can be prepared for them. Prophetic writings often contain some apocalyptic elements. We are told that we can discern the true prophets from false ones by whether or not the events predicted actually happen when stated. Unless it is apocalyptic, the doctrinal, historical, and even prophetic material must be written in such a way that it is clearly understandable by anyone who reads it. Otherwise it could not fulfill its purpose.

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Apocalyptic writings, on the other hand, have 2 unique purposes:

1. To reveal a subject that, up until the time of writing, was hidden, kept from view, or concealed in some way.
2. To purposely “veil” the revealing of the subject in such a way as to make it easily understood by those for whom it was intended, but not by others!

Apocalyptic writing is similar to what we might call writing in a secret code. We’ve seen examples of “coded” writing in history. For instance, prior to the D-Day invasion that was pivotal to ending World War II, all of General Eisenhower’s communications to his allies were “coded” to keep his allies informed but his enemies in the dark.

It is generally accepted that there are four apocalyptic writings in the Bible: Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah from the Old Testament, and of course the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

Daniel & Ezekiel wrote during the period of the powerful Babylonian Empire when God’s people were either being carried into captivity or already there. The people were distraught, confused, in despair and in need of comfort and assurance.

Zechariah prophesied during the time of the Persian rulers, just after the fall of Babylon. His purpose was to instruct God’s people of His expectation of them and to prepare them for the trials and persecution that were to befall them, but above all to encourage His people during a period of extreme hardship.

The book of Revelation carries the same responsibility: to enlighten and encourage the saints of a different era during the hardship they were enduring and to **give assurance** that God’s overruling providence will ultimately bring victory to them and eternal judgment and destruction to the unrighteous. The book’s style is dramatic and awe inspiring.

The Author:

There can be no doubt that the writer of the book was named John, because four times within the book the writer refers to himself by that name. One of the best ways to help determine the writer is to look at some of the very early Bible translations: The ***Vulgate Latin version***

contains the printed title ***“The Apocalypse of John the Apostle.”*** The *Syriac version* reads *“The Revelation which was made to John the Evangelist.”* The *Arabic version* has the title: *“The Vision of John, the Apostle and Evangelist, to wit, the Apocalypse.”* All of those versions are very old translations and they all acknowledge the Apostle John to be the writer of the book. As a matter of fact, early writers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, and Origen (*some of whom wrote in the 2nd century, only a few years after John wrote the book of Revelation*) ALL believe the author was the apostle John.

The Place of Writing:

Most scholars believe that the book of Revelation was written in the same place the revelation was given, **on the island of Patmos**. Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea among the group known as the “Sporades,” which means the “scattered ones.” In the present time, Patmos is a very popular tourist attraction and is vastly populated and farmed. But when John was there, it was mostly uninhabited and barren, with caves along its mountainous coast.

The photograph at right is of a monastery built near the site of the cave where John was kept. There is an arch over the entrance to the “Cave of St. John,” which is dug out of the face of the rock located below the monastery. Beside the entrance to that cave is a plaque (shown below) embedded into the wall next to the entrance (probably placed there after the cave was opened



to tourism) that

reads: **“Holy cave of the Apocalypse, ‘I was on the island of Patmos,’”** which appears to be a quote from the book of Revelation, Chapter 1, Verse 9. Many commentators believe John was on the Isle of Patmos for several years, perhaps a decade. But if the time frame we speak of next is correct, I doubt he could have been there for a

decade. Scholars believe John was born about 6 AD which would put his age at about 90 years old at the close of Domitian’s reign in 96 AD, and his age at his death is estimated to be 100

years old. It is more likely that John was banished to Patmos early in Domitian's reign and was on Patmos for about 5 or 6 years. We know he did not die on Patmos.

The Time of writing:

Several different dates have been ascribed to the original writing of the book of Revelation, but the weight of evidence among scholars seems to narrow the possibilities to two distinct periods generally referred to as the *“early date”* and the *“late date.”* It has already been stated that one purpose of an apocryphal book would be to shield those who were knowledgeable of its meaning from harm by veiling the writing in such a way that outsiders did not understand the true meaning. The most obvious harm might come from a ruthless heathen emperor. Scholars have arrived at the two date ranges based on the terrible persecution Christians suffered during the reign of two particular emperors of Rome. The first date range is between **64 & 69 AD** corresponding to the reign of **Nero** (54 to 68 AD) and shortly after. The second date range is between **96 & 100 AD**, just after the reign of **Domitian** (91 to 96 AD). Let's look a little closer at each range...

The “Early Date”

Nero took the throne when he was 16 years old in 54 AD. Indications are that he had no particular hatred for Christians during his first 10 years. As a matter of fact, most scholars think the apostle Paul was in Rome for two years somewhere around 61 to 63 AD awaiting his trial before Nero. Those scholars agree that Nero, after hearing Paul's defense, released him and allowed him to continue his travels and work in the Gospel. If that is true, then it seems reasonably conclusive that Nero had no particular opposition to the Church prior to 64 AD.

But 64 AD was the year of “The Great Fire” and according to some historians Nero was accused of starting it and needed an escape. They believe Nero devised a plan to convince the Roman citizens that Christians had started the fire. In order to make his plan more believable, he began to persecute them, at some points very severely. At “**Nero's Circus**” for example, near what later became known as “**The Vatican**,” Christians were thrown to wild animals and many were set ablaze to illuminate the night paths after being smeared with pitch. In time the executions became so grisly that even the general populace displayed sympathy for the victims.

After the fire and in order to continue his deception, Nero began to proclaim Christians as “hostile to society” and as having a “hatred of mankind.” Some historians say the Apostle Paul returned to Rome shortly after the fire to teach, and it is believed that Peter was also there at that time. If these things are true, the situation would have been volatile. The general population was being coerced into believing that Christians were hostile to society, and two of Christianity’s most significant teachers were right there in Rome. They made ideal scapegoats. Legend has it that Paul was beheaded along the Via Ostiensis in about 66 AD, and that Peter was crucified upside down on Vatican hill in either 66 or 67 AD. Interestingly enough, however, during Nero’s reign, the persecution of Christians did not extend beyond Rome. Actually Nero passed no formal laws against Christianity. In fact, the persecution from the Romans ended in 66 AD, just after Nero left Rome and went to Greece. Based on the above information, it seems unlikely that there would be persecution in Asia, where the seven churches named in chapters two and three were located. Since we know from that text that those Christians were being persecuted, it throws this early date writing into doubt.

The “Late Date” (96 to 100 AD):

There is much that makes this later date far more likely. After Nero’s death, there is no record that the persecution he had initiated was continued by either Vespasian or Titus, Nero’s two immediate successors. However, under the reign of Domitian (Titus’ successor) the persecution of Christians was carried to the extreme. Domitian had an insatiable desire for divine honor. In fact, he had decreed that all citizens bow down to him as “Lord and God” and had a paranoid fear of conspiracy. Obviously, the teaching of the Church precluded worshipping Domitian as “Lord and God” as he demanded of Roman citizens and anyone refusing was deemed guilty of sacrilege and treason. He used this, along with his hatred of all religious cults (except that of the Syrian Goddess Atargatis to whom he sacrificed three times a day) to impose imperial edicts that made Christianity unlawful. It appears his determination was to make Christianity extinct. He made it political and the lines were thereby drawn. The conflict turned out to be long and bloody for the Saints. The entire book of Revelation deals with the struggle of moral and spiritual forces. Truth and loyalty to Christ are pitted against error and loyalty to a great ruling power (Satan). This period fits more perfectly into the tenor of Revelation.

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The historian Irenaeus (120-202 AD) wrote concerning the vision John beheld: ***“For that was seen not very long since, but almost in our own day, toward the end of Domitian’s reign.”*** Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius agree that John’s exile to Patmos was a result of the intense persecution caused by Domitian. Standing beside all of that is the internal evidence in the book itself.

The letters to the seven churches:

The general condition of these churches when John wrote fits the later period much better than the earlier one. There is a marked difference between the conditions and attitudes of these congregations than when Paul wrote in the late 50’s and 60’s AD during the time of Nero’s reign. If you recall, that was at a time when Roman persecution of Christians did not extend into the provinces.

The question often arises, “Why is so much importance placed on the date of writing?” The general thinking of those that hold to the early view is that ALL of the prophecies within the book of Revelation were fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the rise of the Roman Catholic Church a little over five-hundred years later. In other words, this group believes everything discussed in the book of Revelation took place before 1000 AD.

On the other hand, the general thinking of those who hold to the late view is the idea that the book is both a history and a prophecy (forecast) of the Church from John’s day until the end of time as we know it. Accordingly, from our viewpoint almost two thousand years later, some parts of it have already been fulfilled but some parts have not! We will talk more about this later. The late view seems to be a more accurate setting for the book. All that being said, while dating this writing is of some importance, a far more significant subject to focus on is its purpose.

The Theme of Revelation:

The grand theme of Revelation is threefold: First, it is a conflict between good and evil which results in victory for the righteous and defeat for the wicked. Satan incorporates the

power and character of Rome to support paganism and social worldliness while God uses the victorious Christ to strengthen His saints and defeat Satan with all his powers. The outcome is eternal.

Second is the concept of authenticity. For a claim to be authentic it must be proved. Jesus came into this world and ***claimed to be*** the Son of God with power over death. That claim was tested when He was hung on the cross and put to death. When Jesus was placed in that tomb, Satan thought he had won the battle. But Jesus' claim was verified by His resurrection and triumph over death!

Thirdly, it is a test of the kingdom of Christ, the church. Jesus and His apostles taught that His kingdom would stand forever. The gates of hell could not prevail against it! That claim had to be tested and proved also. This book, the Book of Revelation, is the account of that testing – but more than that, it is the assurance of victory for Christ!

The Symbolism, Imagery, and Numbers:

A characteristic of apocryphal books is imagery defined as “*descriptive or figurative language that causes the listener or reader to form a picture in his mind.*” A good writer can describe a particular scene in such a fashion that the reader can mentally “see” each element of the scene as if he was there. In the book of Revelation much of the imagery is symbolic, but not all. Some of the imagery and symbols are explained, but others are left in doubt. Those unexplained portions force us to rely on our judgment and application based on the text for a proper explanation. Not all readers will agree on each and every symbol, so each of us must reach our conclusions based on our understanding of the total revelation of God.

We must use care in our interpretation of the symbolism. ***We cannot be arbitrary. We MUST be consistent throughout the book.*** Bible students are familiar with the use of symbols. One of the most readily recognized examples is the rainbow God placed in the sky after the great flood, a symbol of promise and faithfulness.

Then there are the numbers. There are a lot of numbers used in the book of Revelation. As with the imagery, we must use care in interpreting the numbers. Throughout the Bible, numbers are used to represent particular ideas or concepts. Some of those instances are easy to see but others – many others – are missed or overlooked. A proper knowledge of the way numbers are used in the bible is an absolute necessity for a full and complete understanding of

what the bible teaches. Numbers, of course, always have their “quantity” figure: Noah did actually have three sons, and there actually were ten virgins, five foolish and five wise. However, it is when we understand the symbolic meaning of those numbers that we find the reason for Noah having three sons, and why there were ten virgins.

Let’s look at those three numbers here and now:

The number **THREE**:

The number three has always held a special significance in scripture, in both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. For example:

1. There are three entities in the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. Noah had only three children, all sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.
3. The great patriarchs were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... Three of them.
4. Daniel had three friends that were cast into the furnace, and Daniel prayed three times each day.

In the New Testament, in the book of Acts of the Apostles, we see:

1. The sheet which Peter saw on the housetop was let down three times before he understood its meaning.
2. Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?”
3. The Apostle Paul asked three times for his thorn in the flesh to be removed.
4. And, of course: The resurrection of Jesus was on the Third day!

The number three represents God’s *“Whole” or “Completeness,” but it is in the sense of **ENOUGH***. We find the Apostle Paul asking for his “thorn in the flesh” to be removed only three times, because he understood that was enough. If God chose not to remove that affliction after being asked three times, there would be no need to ask a fourth time.

The number **SEVEN**:

If I have counted correctly, the number seven appears a total of 34 times from Matthew - Jude, and 54 times in the book of Revelation alone! The number seven is the symbol of *“Perfectness,” but it is in the sense of **completeness***! An example is a familiar passage from the book of Ezekiel 39:6-10, in the Old Testament:

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Ezekiel says the “city dwellers” of Israel will burn the weapons of Magog for seven years. They will not need to cut down other wood because the fire will be fueled only from the weapons and it will burn for seven years. In verse 12 we see that in order to cleanse the land, the house of Israel will be burying Gog for seven months.

In neither case is Ezekiel being literal. He is describing a “*complete*” and thorough cleansing of the land.

Notice the difference between “three” and “seven”.

- *Three* represents “**completeness**” in the sense of “Enough”!
- *Seven* represents “**perfectness**” in the sense of “Completeness”!

The number **TEN**:

The number ten is a “multiple meaning” symbol. One of its three meanings is “**Power**” or “**Rule.**” The second meaning for the number ten is a “**rounded total**” regardless of actual amount. That means whatever the actual quantity might be the total can be represented with the number ten. The “rounded total” meaning indicates “*fullness to a superlative or unlimited degree.*” The third meaning for the number ten, especially as it is used in the book of Revelation, is as a multiplier, such as 10, 100 or 1000. That is to say: $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1000$.

I’m going to throw in one more number here before we move on: “**Three and a half**”. Three and a half is used several times in scripture outside the book of Revelation, and each time it is for the purpose of indicating hardship, trial, and testing. In Elijah’s day, the land was without rain for three and a half years and there was a great famine over the land. In Revelation, the number “**three and a half**” always carries the idea of a period of oppression.

Interpretations of the Book --

Because of all of the symbols, signs and visions, it is easy to see why there are vastly differing views and interpretations of the book of Revelation. I will briefly introduce the five more popular interpretations:

A. The Futuristic View –

This may be the most popular view held by religious people today. It is the product of denominationalism and pre-millennialism that is so popular in our society today. The Futuristic outlook holds that Revelation reveals the conditions and events which will immediately precede the second coming of Jesus. These folks believe that the first three chapters of the book apply to the conditions in the churches of John's day and were directed especially to them. But chapters 4 - 19 point to the time immediately before the second coming of Jesus Christ. When He does return they believe He will set up a physical kingdom here on the earth and will reign over that kingdom for one thousand years. After the thousand years, the Devil will be loosed for "a little time" during which he will gather the nations of the earth together against all of the saints and the battle of Armageddon will be fought. Then, after Armageddon will be the Resurrection and Judgment during which time Satan and all of the unrighteous will be cast into the lake of fire.

B. The Continuous Historical View –

Those that hold to this view believe that Revelation is a forecast of the church's history and its fortunes, from John's day to the end of time. They believe that some parts of the book have already been fulfilled and some parts are yet to be fulfilled. I agree with that statement, but those who hold this view also see the rise of the papacy, the Roman Catholic Church, Mohammedanism, the Reformation, and other historical movements within the book and I don't believe they are there.

C. The Philosophy of History View –

Those that hold this view believe Revelation's symbols represent "*forces*" rather than specific historical events and persons. These forces are seen as moral and spiritual, good and bad, righteous and sinful, and they are at war in a deadly conflict. Good prevails, of course, but I believe this group tends to overlook certain historical settings which gave birth to this writing and which it was intended to address.

D. The Preterists View –

This view states that Revelation was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, and therefore was only written for the people of John's day. In their view, the only benefit you and I

get from the book is historical. Many in this group believe ALL of the events, symbols and visions were a forecast of the destruction of Jerusalem and that everything in the book has been fulfilled. Some Preterists concede the book might have been written after the destruction of Jerusalem, but still insist that all the prophecies were fulfilled during the conflict with the Roman Empire before it fell.

E. The Historical Background View –

These advocates see in Revelation a book written for the people of John's day, set in a definite historical background, and all fulfilled in the events of the first two or three centuries. This view is only slightly different from the Preterists View, but still suggests little or no application for us today.

This begs the question, "Which, if any, do I believe?" I personally cannot totally accept any of them. I do believe this:

1. The book of Revelation has a concrete setting in a very definite period of history.
2. It deals with very real problems faced by Christians during that period of time.
3. The various figures, symbols and scenes in the book do represent powerful moral and spiritual forces involved in a violent clash, in which the forces of God are triumphant.
4. The gaining of that "Crown of Victory" continues to instruct and encourage God's people today and will continue throughout time.

With this material in mind, let us dig into the text of the book...