

The Book of Revelation

Study Guide

LESSON
ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF REVELATION



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STUDY GUIDE

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How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Outline

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Notes

I. Introduction

Revelation's context and setting can help us understand its original meaning and apply its message to our own lives.

II. Historical

Different interpreters understand the symbols and imagery in different ways.

Confusion about the book of Revelation stems from our unfamiliarity with its historical context.

A. Author

1. The Apostle John

The author of the book of Revelation identified himself as "John."

Two reasons to affirm that the apostle John wrote this book:

- Early Witnesses

Early church fathers identified the apostle John as the author:

- Justin Martyr
- Irenaeus
- Clement of Alexandria

- Vocabulary

There are many similarities between Revelation's vocabulary and John's other works.

Some early critics disputed the apostle John's authorship:

- Dionysius of Alexandria

- The author of Revelation identified himself, but the author of John's other writings did not.
- Different literary styles and use of Greek.

There are good explanations for why one author might have produced works that look different.

- No reason to conclude that John would never name himself in his writings.

- Stylistic differences can be explained.
 - Revelation was written in an apocalyptic style.

 - Different purposes for writing.

 - Different relationships with original audiences.

The evidence favoring the apostle John's authorship outweighs the evidence against it.

2. Location and Experience

John wrote Revelation while he was in exile on the island of Patmos.

Revelation is John's record of and commentary on the visions he received.

John wrote in obedience to a command from God.

God revealed visions to John and John wrote about his visions in his own words.

B. Date

Revelation was probably written either during the time of Nero or Domitian.

1. Nero

The Roman emperor Nero reigned from A.D. 54 to 68.

Nero blamed Christians for the fire of Rome in A.D. 64 and used this to persecute Roman believers.

Arguments dating Revelation during the late years of Nero's reign are based on three things:

- Seven Kings
 - The seven heads of the scarlet beast represented seven kings (Rev. 17).

 - The seven kings were Roman emperors:
 - Julius Caesar
 - Augustus
 - Tiberius
 - Caligula
 - Claudius
 - Nero
 - Galba

 - The sixth king was in power when John received his vision (Rev. 17:10).

- Temple
 - John mentioned the temple in Revelation 11.

 - The temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, two years after Nero's reign ended.

- Persecution
 - John wrote during a period of persecution.

 - Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute Christians in a noteworthy manner.

Objections against dating Revelation during Nero's reign:

- Julius Caesar wasn't actually an emperor.

- It's difficult to be sure that Revelation 11 refers to the temple that was destroyed in A.D. 70.

- There is no historical evidence that Nero's persecutions spread to Asia Minor.

2. Domitian

Scholars who favor a late date for Revelation place it during the reign of Domitian from A.D. 81 to 96.

- Church Fathers
 - Irenaeus reported that Revelation was written “toward the end of Domitian’s reign.”

 - This date concurs with the testimony of some early church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria.

- Seven Kings

Those who argue for a late date only count severe persecutors of the church:

- Caligula (A.D. 37 to 41)

- Claudius (A.D. 41 to 54)

- Nero (A.D. 54 to 68)

- Vespasian (A.D. 69 to 79)

- Titus (A.D. 79 to 81)

- Domitian (A.D. 81 to 96)

- Persecution

Christians were persecuted during Domitian's reign.

Domitian persecuted the church outside Rome more than any prior emperor.

- Emperor Worship

Domitian required emperor worship.

The beast requires people to worship him in Revelation 13, 14 and 16.

There is no evidence that Nero demanded that people worship him.

The view that John wrote during the time of Domitian has its weaknesses:

- John never said that the seven kings were significant persecutors of the church.
- John never mentioned the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

C. Audience

John addressed Revelation to seven churches in Asia Minor:

- Ephesus
- Smyrna
- Pergamum
- Thyatira
- Sardis
- Philadelphia
- Laodicea

Christians in these cities faced pressures to turn from the true Christian faith.

1. Trade Guilds

Trade guilds: groups of laborers and professionals that organized for economic purposes.

Christians who refused to worship the patron deity were often excluded from business dealings.

2. Jewish Communities

Judaism, unlike other religions, could legally be practiced throughout the Roman Empire.

Christianity lost its legal status once Jews began to disassociate themselves from Christians.

Christians felt pressure to conform to Judaism.

3. Roman Government

The Roman government demanded that Christians worship the emperor and Roman gods.

Christians who refused to worship these idols were at risk of being accused of atheism.

4. Wayward Christians

Problems in the churches of Asia Minor:

- Balaam (Rev. 2:14)
- Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6,15)
- Jezebel (Rev. 2:20)

Wayward Christians were pressuring other Christians to participate in false practices.

Some Christians gave up their faith and rejoined pagan religions.

III. Theological

The book of Revelation affirms the theology of every book in the Bible that was written before it.

A. Eschatology

The early church was experiencing great tension because Jesus hadn't returned yet to finish his work.

John wrote to reassure his readers that Jesus was building his kingdom, and that he would certainly return.

Eschatology: the study of end times or last things.

Eschatology refers to the study of the period from Christ's first coming to his return (Heb. 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:20).

Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah would come and usher in God's kingdom.

Jewish theologians divided history into two great ages:

- This age
- The age to come

Jesus frequently relied on this two-age view of history in his preaching.

Through Christ, God was bringing the final defeat of his enemies and the final blessings for his people.

The two-age view of eschatology is particularly evident in the writings of the apostle Paul.

Inaugurated eschatology: the age to come has begun, but it hasn't yet come in all its fullness.

The churches of Asia Minor were struggling with the reality of Christ's victory and the continuing presence of evil in the world.

John wanted to help Christians cope with the theological tensions created by the New Testament's outlook on eschatology.

B. Covenant

A three-fold pattern characterized all divine covenants:

- Benevolence
- Loyalty
- Consequences

God established David's dynasty as the conduit of God's blessings and judgments for his people.

Jesus Christ is the Son of David who fulfills the new covenant.

God's covenant people have always included both faithful and unfaithful people.

John reminded his audiences of the nature of life in covenant with God.

C. Prophets

1. Covenant Ambassadors

Biblical prophets served as imperial ambassadors of God's covenant.

Prophets reminded God's people of their covenant obligations and of the consequences of their behavior.

God's covenant required loyalty and provided consequences for obedience and disobedience.

God indicated his strong intentionality by adding assurances to his prophecies.

2. Potential Results

God may reconsider his blessings in order to address his people's disobedience.

Most prophecies of judgment are extensions of God's benevolence to his people.

Five ways that a prophecy might be affected by its recipients' responses:

- Revoked (Joel 2:12-14)

- Delayed (2 Kings 20:1-7)

- Reduced (2 Chronicles 12:5-12)
- Increased (Daniel 9:1-27)
- Unmodified (Daniel 4:28-33)

3. Apostle John

When John wrote the book of Revelation, he was acting as God's covenant ambassador.

Each letter affirms the greatness and benevolence of Jesus Christ, then stresses loyalty, and offers blessings or threatens curses.

IV. Literary

A. Prophecy

To make sense of the book Revelation we have to identify its genre.

John specifically called the book of Revelation a prophecy (Rev. 1:3).

1. Characteristics

- Typical forms:
 - Message of rebuke
 - Oracle of woe
 - Proclamation of blessing
 - Promise of vindication
 - Declaration of God's plan
 - Conversation
 - Prediction
 - Lawsuit

John's prophecies in Revelation functioned in the same ways as the prophecies of the Old Testament.

- Imagery:

Language that describes things in ways that incite imaginative sensory experiences.

The book of Revelation makes frequent use of imagery.

Revelation draws a lot of its imagery from the Old Testament.

2. Fulfillments

- Direct

Prophecies can be directly fulfilled when the events they predict come to pass as stated.

- Contingent

Occurs when the outcome of a prophecy is modified in light of the way human beings respond.

- Typological

Typology: The treatment of past persons, institutions or events in Scripture as foreshadows that prefigure later persons, institutions or events.

B. Apocalyptic

1. Characteristics

Apocalyptic literature: Highly symbolic literature that reports divine revelations, usually received through private disclosures, about the interactions among natural, preternatural and supernatural realities, and their impact on the past, present and future.

- Highly symbolic

Symbol: A sign or other representation that points to something beyond itself.

Biblical apocalyptic literature makes frequent use of symbols. Some are:

- Descriptive
- To illustrate a point
- Traditional representations

The purpose of the symbols in Revelation was not to confuse John's readers, but to communicate truth to them in a compelling way.

- Reports divine revelations

- Received through private disclosures

- Deals with interactions among natural, preternatural and supernatural realities.
 - Natural: the universe where we live
 - Preternatural: beyond nature
 - Supernatural: above nature

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we find glimpses into the spiritual forces that influence the history of the world.

Biblical apocalyptic literature heavily concentrates on natural, preternatural and supernatural matters.

- Describes the impact of natural, preternatural and supernatural realms on the past, present and future.

Revelation lifts the veil on the spiritual realities around us so we can see God's cosmic plan to bring salvation through Jesus Christ.

2. Historical Development

Many elements that became prominent in biblical apocalyptic literature appear in the earliest books of the Old Testament.

During the intertestamental period, apocalyptic literature fully developed into a distinct genre.

New Testament apocalyptic literature uses a style that is very similar to intertestamental apocalyptic writings.

The final development of biblical apocalyptic literature is best exemplified by the book of Revelation.

V. Conclusion

3. Who was John's audience for the book of Revelation, and what was his purpose in writing?

4. Explain the biblical doctrine of eschatology.

5. What is the biblical concept of covenant?

6. How did the apostle John fulfill the role of prophet in the book of Revelation?

7. What are some reasons why the book of Revelation fits in the genre of prophecy?

8. What is biblical apocalyptic literature?

Application Questions

1. How does affirming that the apostle John wrote Revelation impact the way we read the book?
2. What types of suffering or persecution have you undergone for your faith in Jesus Christ? How does this compare with the experiences of John's readers?
3. What temptations and pressures to turn from Christianity are Christians in your country currently facing?
4. In what ways have you been encouraged through reading the book of Revelation? In what ways have you been rebuked?
5. How should the fact that we are in "the last days" deepen our dependence on God?
6. As we live in these "last days," how are you anticipating the return of Jesus in your current circumstances and areas of ministry?
7. What are some ways that God's benevolence should encourage us to be loyal to him?
8. How have the prophecies of the Bible motivated you to remain faithful towards God and to keep your covenant obligations?
9. How can the truth that some of God's blessings are contingent on our obedience encourage us in our treatment of others?
10. How should the involvement of angels and demons in the real world affect the way we live and do ministry?
11. What hope and encouragement should we gain from the assurance found in Revelation that Jesus will return and consummate his kingdom?
12. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?