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# The Book of Revelation: The Apocalypse Debunked

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## **Abstract**

In the psyche of the modern Christian, the Book of Revelation has become synonymous with hell and the end of the world. The believed imminent apocalypse becomes a tactic to scare people into faith, citing some of the most gruesome images of Revelation. Christians either sit on the edge of their seat, awaiting the trumpets and hellfire, or choose to ignore the book altogether. This interpretation has neglected the importance of the first century context, particularly its symbols and the purpose of Revelation. To appreciate the meaning of the Book of Revelation and its relevance today, it is crucial to view it as a highly symbolic work of literature, based in the Jewish Apocalyptic genre, that would have made sense to those who heard it because of the symbols John specifically chooses to use from the Hebrew Bible as well as the First Century Roman world. Using archeological findings, biblical scholarship, and knowledge of other Jewish texts, it becomes clear that the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to confront the seven churches of Asia Minor for participating in Emperor Worship, reflecting a very specific time and set of circumstances. In the spirit of the Apocalypse (which just means revelation) of John, it is time to take a step back in order to see how the text can really serve us in the modern church, while still keeping it fully in its first century context.

*Keywords:* Apocalypse, Emperor Worship, 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity

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## Overview

The Apocalypse of John begins with John stating himself as a witness to Jesus Christ and establishing the letter as both apocalyptic and prophetic. Integral to our understanding of Revelation is its audience. It is a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (see figure 8). Beginning in Revelation 2 and through Revelation 3, Jesus, through John's vision, commends the churches and commands them to repent.

In chapters 4 through 5 we are transported to the cosmic throne room of God. John details the spoils of the throne room, there are elders, angels, lightning and thunder, a sea of glass before the throne, like crystal. The angels do not cease to praise God who is seated on the throne making Yahweh's power, wealth, and authority strikingly clear. In the throne room there is a scroll sealed with seven seals only able to be opened by the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the root of David, who manifests as a Slain Lamb, an interesting paradox indeed. The elders begin to worship the lamb who is of course, Jesus.

Chapters 6 through 16 discuss a series of divine judgements, each parallel versions of the same story. The seven seals are broken, and four horsemen are released, symbolizing Rome's conquest, civil war, famine, and death. The second series is seven trumpets, which catalyze a number of cataclysmic events including hail and fire falling to the earth, a star falling from heaven, and plagues. Seven bowls full of wrath are poured out on the earth, bringing sores, turning the sea and rivers to blood, causing burns by the scorching sun. The fifth bowl covers the throne of the beast, the six dries up the Euphrates river, and the seventh brings a great earthquake.

Chapters 12 through 14 divert from the divine judgement and focus instead on a series of signs and symbols. First, a pregnant woman (Mary) awaits delivery while a dragon (Satan) waits for her to give birth so as to devour the child. The woman and child are protected by God and the dragon instead makes it his mission to “make war” on the rest of her offspring, or the church. A beast rises out of the sea, authority is given to it by Satan and all the people worship it. John sees 44,000 “virgins”, symbolizing their allegiance to God alone rather than literal virginity, on Mount Zion with the Lamb.

Chapters 17 through 19 show the fall of Babylon. The sins of Rome, greed, oppression, idolatry, and violence among a few, bring about its judgement and ultimate destruction. The underlying question of God’s response to evil reaches its head in the second half of chapter 19 and continues through 20, describing the final battle between Jesus and the ancient serpent. The beast and serpent are thrown into the lake of fire. The martyrs are redeemed, and Jesus is victorious not through violence but through his own sacrifice and his word.

Chapters 21 and 22 describe the apex of the tension between good and evil, God is triumphant and new creation is established. The New Jerusalem descends to earth, ushering in the new, redeemed kingdom of God.

### **Historical Background**

Failing to place Revelation in its proper historical context of the Roman Empire has been the main cause of its misinterpretation. Understanding the nuances of the symbols, many of which were easily recognizable to John’s audience, opens up Revelation to a vibrant, instructive, highly symbolic, piece of literature that can be useful to Christians even today.

Most scholars give the book of Revelation a date around 90 CE, which places it in the reign of Emperor Domitian, who ruled over Rome from 81 to 96 CE. The tension between God

and empire came less from systemic persecution (Friesen, pg. 143), as some may suggest, but rather from emperor worship.

The church's role in emperor worship was a particular concern for John. All but one of the churches in Asia Minor John wrote to had temples to a deified emperor (Koester). Thiyatira had no provincial temple, but still had evidence of worship of Augustus since the beginning of the first century (Koester). It would make sense, and indeed most people would assume that the Roman Imperial Cult began in Rome. Shockingly, the first temple to the deified Augustus started in Pergamum (Kraybill, p. 56, see figure 2), described in Revelation as the "throne of Satan".

Emperor Domitian is infamous for being the first emperor to be deified while he was still living (see figure 7), other emperors were not awarded this honor until after their deaths. Emperor worship had so permeated the culture of Asia Minor that it became impossible to avoid. The problem here is not active persecution of Jews and Christians<sup>7</sup>, it is more the role the imperial cults played in Asia Minor. Provincial cults depended on Roman authority in a way that was not true for other imperial cult institutions (Friesen, p. 54). Rome did not deny Christians the right to worship their god, but it did demand that it worship them also, something John says is impossible for the devout Christian.

There are various theories about persecution and deprivation under Domitian, though recently the narrative of persecution has been abandoned altogether. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues the general deprivation of all Roman society in Asia Minor, citing oppressive taxation, famine, colonial corruption, slavery and others (Friesen, p. 144). Leonard Thompson argues against this saying that there is no case for persecution or even deprivation in this time period. Instead he asserts that the urban setting where Christians worshipped was "stable and

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<sup>7</sup> The Roman Empire did not legally distinguish Jews and Christians until Emperor Nerva (96-98), Schiffman.

beneficial to all who participated in its social and economic institutions” (Friesen, p. 145). While I will find myself on the side of Schüssler Fiorenza, the message of John is not lost either way. The point of Revelation is to enforce the necessity of Christians to turn away from Roman culture. If in colluding with the beast they are offered prosperity and safety, John says that they offer their allegiance to Rome rather than God.

That being said, I do believe there is evidence for a deprivation theory concerning Asia Minor. J. Nelson Kraybill discusses this in his description of the four horsemen (see figure 1) in Revelation who symbolize the brutality of Roman conquest, famine, civil wars, and Rome’s ability to execute its subjects, death (Kraybill, p. 102). There are four crises surrounding the writing of Revelation that are named in *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, namely increasing alienation between Christians and Jews in the cities of Asia, a mutual antipathy between Christians and Gentiles due to Christian reservations about mainstream culture, conflicts over wealth in western Asia Minor and in the churches, and the precarious legal situation of the churches in the late first century (Friesen, p. 144).

So, we see there are areas of social crisis, as well as dominance and hegemony that coincide with existing under Roman rule. Indeed, I would find it difficult to say that Roman subjects were not deprived in any way, as a great majority of them were conquered and sold into slavery. Apocalyptic texts often aim to resist the dominant social power, subverting images and symbols to reinstate God’s power over the power of empire. The book of Revelation does not encourage revolt but resists the economic and political beast of Rome. While the Gentile world was complicit with Rome’s conquests, the charge of Apocalyptic literature is that Jews and

Christians cannot do the same without prostituting themselves to “Babylon”<sup>14</sup>. To take part in the Roman economy and emperor worship is to aide in the growth of the beast. Allegiance is shown by what one partakes in, and where allegiance is, there also is the object of worship. Or as Jesus himself said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21 NRSV).

Central also to understanding the context of Revelation is Christianity’s relationship to Judaism in the first century and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE (see figure 5). Early Christianity was, in reality, a sect of Judaism. This sheds light on the plain use of Jewish theology and scripture in Revelation but also the use of the Jewish apocalyptic genre (though it was not yet called this). This text like others is in some ways a response to Rome’s horrific violence after the destruction of the Jewish temple<sup>17</sup>. For all intents and purposes, it is important to view the book of Revelation as theologically and historically Jewish (though also Christian) to understand its context and purpose.

### **Apocalyptic Elements**

Revelation lies soundly in the Apocalyptic genre; it is the first book (or letter rather) in the genre and the one that gives it its title<sup>18</sup>. A key part to any apocalyptic work is a mediator to *reveal* heavenly wisdom. Apocalyptic texts are based on the dichotomy of heaven and earth, and what asserting heaven’s reality and authority means for earthly events. The mediator in the case of the Apocalypse of John is Jesus himself, the Christian messiah. Already this text is distinctive from other Jewish texts by naming a messiah. Other texts refer to the coming messiah in a distant, ethereal way, but in Revelation the messiah has already come.

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<sup>14</sup> Rome is called “Babylon” in a number of other texts (2 Baruch & 4 Ezra) post the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD. This is an allusion to the enemy of Ancient Israel who destroyed the first temple and subsequently took the Jewish people into captivity and exile.

<sup>17</sup> The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple catalyzed the writing of various other Jewish Apocalyptic texts, e.g. 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra.

<sup>18</sup> The word apocalypse comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, meaning revelation. Hence the alternative title “Apocalypse of John”.

Eschatology, judgement, and resurrection are found throughout Revelation, signs of its relation to the genre. Its images however are perhaps the most integral and confused parts of the text. Some images in particular have been gravely misunderstood. I hope to clarify some and bring light to the true purpose of the text and what its symbols meant for its audience.

*A Harlot Drunk with Blood: Rome's Persecution and Idolatry*

The “harlot drunk with blood” appears in Revelation 17. This woman is described as sitting on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. She is called Babylon, reinforcing the connection of Rome to Ancient Babylon after the destruction of the temple. A graphic piece of this imagery is in verse 6: “And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus”. An image of a “harlot” portrays an element of adultery, a common allegory for idolatry in Israel. The entire book of Hosea for instance is a story of a prophet who takes back his adulterous wife, just as Yahweh takes back “adulterous” Israel. At the heart of this metaphor is disloyalty to Israel’s covenant with God. Much like marriage, God has united God’s self to Israel and the church, disobedience to this covenant is like unfaithfulness to a marriage.

The harlot herself represents Rome, but more specifically the goddess Roma (see figure 3), often used to personify the city of Rome and its military power (Kraybill, p. 117). Rome is described as a harlot because of its disobedience to the one, true god, Yahweh. Kraybill discusses the distinction between followers of Christ who are called virgins, as they have not been “whoring” with Roma (embracing her ideology). He explains that this is not related to a “puritanical aversion to sex” and is intimately connected to imagery in the Hebrew Bible of sexual infidelity in marriage as a metaphor for the spiritual unfaithfulness of Israel (Kraybill., p. 117). Compromising with Roma (the empire) is described by John as fornication. John critiques



Rome's tyrannical nature, but also its seductive nature, using language of sexual immorality, wealth and intoxication. Rome, in John's view, seduces the rest of the world into sin and deception (Tipvarakankoon, p.195).

*The Beast and its Mark: The Allegiance of God's People in Rome*

The beast first appears in chapter 13 and seems to be a conglomeration of all the beasts from the book of Daniel (see Daniel 7). It rises out of the sea, a symbol for chaos in the ancient world, and is given authority by the dragon, or Satan. The beast blasphemes against God and has authority over the whole world<sup>24</sup>. Verse 15 says that the beast is allowed to "give breath to the image of the beast" and cause those who do not worship the image of the beast to be slain. John gives us a clue in Revelation 17 as to the identity of the beast, which will come as no surprise. John interprets his vision for us: the seven heads represent seven hills. This can point only to Rome, famous for being founded upon seven hills.

Finally, the violent and disturbing demise of the harlot (she is said to be made "desolate and naked" devoured by the horns and the beast and burnt up by fire) reflects the typical termination of an empire. Rome cannot survive without its clients buying into its ideology, and this will end as soon as the empire weakens and can no longer provide for its constituents. Though this took longer than John may have imagined, Rome's own clients eventually turn against it, sacking the city in 410 CE (Kraybill, p. 130).

Giving breath to the image of the beast alludes more specifically to the practice of emperor worship, as discussed previously. The mark of the beast is described as being placed on the right hand and forehead of "all", so that they cannot buy or sell unless they have the mark. What escapes our notice here would have been obvious to John's original audience. This is

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<sup>24</sup> Or the Roman Empire, the whole world as perceived by the audience.

meant to directly contradict the *Shema* (meaning ‘hear’), a section of scripture from Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”. Verse 9 says to, “bind [these words] on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead”. Jews, even some to this day, would literally bind these words to their hands and on their foreheads in boxes called phylacteries (Kraybill, p. 68, see figure 4). This symbol of allegiance to God is juxtaposed with the mark of the beast, a symbol of allegiance to Rome. Allegiance to the Empire became so central to Roman society that it became impossible to “buy or sell” without also participating in beastly worship (Kraybill, p. 69).

The infamous number ‘666’ also points more concretely to a person of the first century, rather than a modern antagonist of Christians. This number is not an invitation from John to speculate the identity of an antichrist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but rather refers to the notorious Emperor Nero, a well-known persecutor of Christians. Using the system known as gematria<sup>28</sup>, Kraybill surmises that though the Greek form of Nero Caesar does not add to be ‘666’, it does in Hebrew, a language John assumes his audience will be familiar with (Kraybill, p. 67). Where some Christians had grown complicit with emperor worship under the relatively tolerant reign of Domitian, John uses Nero’s number to typify the still monstrous heart of the empire (Wilson).

#### *The New Jerusalem: A Symbol of Hope*

Towards the end of the book of Revelation we see a change in the tides, Satan and his accomplices are thrown into a lake of fire. A new heaven and earth are established, and John sees the holy city coming down from heaven prepared as a bride for her husband. The angel with John

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<sup>28</sup> A method of interpreting Hebrew scripture by calculating the numerical value of words, based on their constituent letters.

begins to measure the city, revealing it to be “twelve thousand stadia”, about fifteen hundred miles. Jerusalem appears gloriously restored, with no temple because the temple is the “Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb”. The measurements of the city give us some indication of the wider symbology of the city of Jerusalem, namely salvation and the global “church”. The measurement of the city is approximately the size of the entire Roman Empire, and, as far as John’s audience was concerned, of the entire world. The final vision John leaves us with is the salvation of God’s people reaching the entire world and fellowship with God being achieved. The new Jerusalem is accessible to everyone, only those who willfully reject God remain outside (Kraybill, p. 178).

This is not a future world either, but something that has already been accomplished through the work of Jesus. The “rapture”, a belief developed in recent decades from misinterpretation of a verse in Thessalonians, does not occur and take the followers of God up to heaven. The new Jerusalem instead exists as a beacon for the nations, a city on a hill. Jerusalem becomes a symbol of hope, where after the destruction of the temple it would’ve been seen as the apex of destruction. The question of if God still chooses to dwell in Jerusalem is answered. Not only is God still with God’s people, God also is bringing restoration and hope out of despair.

N.T. Wright writes in his book *How God Became King* that early Christian writers were setting forth an eschatology that had been “inaugurated, but not fully consummated”. Wright argues that it is not just a spiritual but instead a social, cultural, political, and even cosmic eschatology in Revelation. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate answer to the “problem of evil” (Wright, p. 159) presented by the Roman Empire for first century Christians, and for Christians today.

## **Purpose**

Ultimately the purpose of Revelation lies not in its obscure symbols and dualistic theology, but instead in its relation to the Roman Empire and its audience. The purpose, generally, is to subvert the power of the empire and instead assert the sovereignty of God. Revelation tells us that though it may seem as though Rome is in control, Rome will fall just like all other empires. God will remain. This is meant to both encourage and reprimand the churches. Encourage the ones that face persecution and even martyrdom by resisting Roman rule. Reprimand the ones who have conspired with Rome and contributed to the growth of the beast. John makes it clear; Christians cannot serve both Rome and God. Practically, John is asking the churches to no longer participate in emperor worship, to turn away from idolatry.

Starting in Revelation 2 there is a clear message of repentance. The churches giving into Rome are told to repent, return to God, and solidify their allegiance rather than being lukewarm. Philadelphia is the only church that Jesus has nothing “against”. This for John, is a timely warning, which has been wrongly interpreted as being about the end of the world. In reality the message of Revelation is about an end of *this* time rather than the end of *all* time. Rome will fall, just as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and so on. God’s judgement is coming for Rome, and Christians will be including in that judgement if they do not separate themselves from the beast.

As the purpose is for the seven churches and not for us in modern times, where does the application of Revelation fall for the church now? Is it just an empty book that shouldn’t have ever made it into the canon at all? Certainly not. While Revelation is not written *for* us, it still holds key messages about the theology of early Christians that can influence our thinking as well as give us empathy for those in the present day who are under systems of oppression.

A core element of apocalyptic texts is the justice of God and problem of evil. How can it be that God is just, yet the churches are experiencing domination from Rome, the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed, and resisting Rome means persecution, poverty, or even death? In a time where prophecy has lost some of its credibility, Apocalyptic literature takes a higher, revelatory perspective. The struggles early Christianity faces under the Romans is placed in the context of a God whom angels praise day and night, who is the Lord of Lords, who can bring evil to an end with just a word.

The enemy of the book of Revelation is not “sinners”. The blame is put almost entirely on Satan. Kings of the empires, once they repent, are welcomed into the new Jerusalem. The enemy is Satan, the embodiment of evil, the absence of love, justice, and peace. In this evil being abolished, so is the nature that keeps humans out of communion with God. The enemy is the empire, not those who are within it, or even at its head. Behind those who arrogantly dismiss God, another greater evil is orchestrating their steps.

But Jesus has begun the end to this evil, making Revelation significantly different from other Jewish apocalyptic texts. Revelation put the present evil in the context of Jesus holding the key to Death and Hades (see figure 6); Christians have already achieved a spiritual victory over the enemy of evil. They can live without fear of death or of the empire, because Jesus has proven that his own love will triumph not just over Rome, but evil itself.

## Image Glossary



Figure 1: *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* by Viktor Vasnetsov.



Figure 2: *Temple to Trajan at Pergamum*.



Figure 3: *The Goddess Roma*.



Figure 4 Phylacteries.



Figure 5 Arch of Titus: the spoils of Jerusalem.



Figure 6 Hades and Persephone..



Figure 7 The Temple of Domitian at Ephesus.



Figure 8 Map of Asia Minor in the 1st Century, found [here](#).



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