The Book of Revelation: An Introduction

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No other individual work has had as great an influence on the apocalyptic tradition as the book of Revelation. Its opening word, which can be translated either “apocalypse” or “revelation,” serves as a kind of self-designation. It originally described the content of the work but eventually became the name of a kind of writing and the ideas and themes associated with it. Although its key images have precedents in Jewish literature and analogies in other early Christian writings, it is from the book of Revelation that the popular images of “Armageddon,” the “tribulation,” the “millennium,” and the “New Jerusalem” come. In this lecture I will place the book in its historical, social, and cultural contexts and consider its message for those contexts.

The Author

The book of Revelation claims that the proximate mediator of the revelation it contains is a man by the name of “John.”[[1]](#footnote--1) Since this name was not uncommon among Jews and followers of Jesus at the time, we may not simply assume that this John is John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, to whom the Gospel of John has also been attributed by Christian tradition.

The author of Revelation never refers to himself as an apostle or disciple of the Lord. Justin, surnamed Martyr, writing in the mid-second century, refers to the book and says that the author was John, one of the apostles of Christ.[[2]](#footnote-0) Irenaeus, in the latter half of the second century, refers to the author of Revelation as “John, the Lord’s disciple.”[[3]](#footnote-1) The reliability of this tradition is called into question by a combination of two other factors. One is the likelihood that the work was composed in the mid-nineties of the first century. The other is the tradition that John the son of Zebedee was killed because of his loyalty to Christ, apparently before A.D. 70.[[4]](#footnote-2) The attribution of the book of Revelation to John, the son of Zebedee, therefore, occurred either by mistake or as a way of increasing the authority of the work.

The most reasonable conclusion about the authorship of Revelation is that it was written by a man named John who is otherwise unknown to us.[[5]](#footnote-3) Although John never claims to be a prophet, he describes his work as a “prophecy.”[[6]](#footnote-4) Further, he comes very close to designating himself as a prophet when he attributes the following words to the revealing angel in 22:9, “I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets.”[[7]](#footnote-5) Thus, the author presented himself indirectly as a prophet, that is, as one whose task it was to mediate an intelligible message to his fellow Christians, a message that he claimed derived ultimately from God.

John the prophet’s intimate knowledge of Jewish scriptures and evidence that he knew Hebrew and Aramaic indicate that he was probably a Jew by birth and a native of Judea. The fact that he addressed several different communities suggests that he was an itinerant prophet, one who moved from place to place, prophesying in each of them. His presence in western Asia Minor and his attitude toward Rome may be explained by the hypothesis that he was a refugee from the first Jewish war with Rome, which erupted in 66 and climaxed with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70.

The Date

The earliest statement about the date of the book of Revelation is the remark of Irenaeus that the revelation was seen at the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian.[[8]](#footnote-6) There is no good reason to doubt this dating. Domitian ruled from A.D. 81 to 96.[[9]](#footnote-7)

The most important internal evidence for the date consists of references to a city called “Babylon” and prophecies of its destruction.[[10]](#footnote-8) It is unlikely that the author was referring to the city in Mesopotamia or the one in the delta of Egypt, both of which bore that name. The name is not literal but symbolic, as the statement in 17:5 shows, “and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.’” The explanation of the “mystery” or “secret” in 17:7-9 makes clear that the woman represents the city of Rome. She sits on a beast with seven heads; the heads represent seven hills on which the woman is seated. The image of the seven hills was widely used as a metaphor of the city of Rome by well known writers of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. Furthermore, the woman is identified as “the great city that has royal power over all the kings of the earth.”[[11]](#footnote-9) At the time John was writing such a city could only be Rome.

It is likely that John took over this symbolic name from Jewish tradition current in his time. In ancient Jewish sources, “Egypt,” “Kittim,” “Edom,” and “Bablyon” are all used as symbolic or code names for Rome. “Kittim,” a name that originally referred to the island of Cyprus, is the most common symbolic name for Rome in the Dead Sea Scrolls. “Edom” is the most common one in rabbinic literature. Most of the uses of “Babylon” as a symbolic name occur in Jewish apocalyptic works. In each occurrence, the reason for this choice is made clear in the context. It is the fact that Rome’s forces, like those of Babylon at an earlier time, destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple.[[12]](#footnote-10)

The use of the name in Jewish tradition suggests that John used it not only to allude to the great power, wealth, arrogance, and decadence of Rome but also and most especially to call to mind the events of A.D. 70. This interpretation implies that the book of Revelation was written after A.D. 70, but not necessarily immediately afterward. The two great Jewish apocalypses that react to those events, *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, were not written immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem but around A.D. 100.

Summary of the Contents

The book of Revelation opens with a preface in the third person; that is, in it John does not speak but is spoken about.[[13]](#footnote-11) It is difficult to determine whether the preface was added later by someone else or whether John used the third person here as an adaptation of the conventional introduction to a prophetic work. In any case, the style and content of the preface are very similar to those of the rest of the work.

The preface refers to the work as an “apocalypse” or “revelation” that was given by God to Jesus Christ to show his servants what must soon take place. This emphasis on the imminence of significant events is repeated at the end of the preface with the words, “for the time is near.” The revelation was mediated in a series of steps: from God to Jesus Christ to an angel to John to the servants of God. This mediated character is different from traditional Israelite prophecy, in which God speaks directly to the prophet, and the prophet delivers God’s words to the people with the phrase, “Thus says the Lord.”

The book of Revelation, however, is also called “words of prophecy” and a blessing is pronounced on the one who reads it aloud (in a communal setting) and on those who keep or observe the things written in it. Clearly this work represents a distinct type of prophecy in which the revelation is mediated rather than direct and in which the prophet writes to the people rather than (or in addition to) addressing them orally.

Apart from the preface, the book has the framework of an ancient letter.[[14]](#footnote-12) In this part of the work, John speaks in the first person and also quotes other speakers. It begins with the typical opening elements of an ancient letter. The salutation names the sender and the addressees.[[15]](#footnote-13) The greeting, in this case the wish that God and Christ grant favor and peace to the addressees, follows.[[16]](#footnote-14) Then comes a doxology, which takes the place of the thanksgiving that typically occurs near the beginning of the letters of Paul.[[17]](#footnote-15) The work closes with a concluding blessing, typical of early Christian letters.[[18]](#footnote-16)

Attached to the epistolary prescript are two prophetic sayings, which hint already that this is not a typical letter.[[19]](#footnote-17) Similarly, a series of prophetic sayings precedes the epistolary conclusion.[[20]](#footnote-18) These sayings enclose what may be called the body of the work: 1:9–22:5. This main part is a description of the revelation received by John and an account of how and from whom he received it. The report falls into two main parts: an account of an appearance of the risen Christ to John in 1:9–3:22, and a description of visions and auditions of heavenly origin in 4:1–22:5. The second part begins with a vision of the heavenly court,[[21]](#footnote-19) which introduces a series of symbolic visions.[[22]](#footnote-20)

The Structure of the Book

It is clear that an organizing principle in the book of Revelation is the number seven. Seven messages, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are presented. Some interpreters argue that the number is based on the observance of the Sabbath. That hypothesis seems unlikely since the Sabbath is never mentioned in the work. John does refer to “the Lord’s day” in 1:10, which is probably Sunday.

It is more likely that the number has cosmic significance. According to late Pythagorean tradition and to the Jewish exegete and philosopher Philo of Alexandria, all reality is ordered and that order expresses itself in patterns of seven.[[23]](#footnote-21) Jewish writers argued that the observance of the Sabbath is thus in accordance with the cosmic order, but John does not make this point.

It is not so clear, however, how each of the series of seven relates to the others. They manifest parallels among themselves and some repetition. The similarities between the trumpets and the bowls are so close that the latter seem in large part to repeat the former. Some scholars think that this repetition results from the use of written sources. Others think that it is part of the author’s literary design. Within the latter group, some think that the literary design involves a linear sequence of events, whereas others argue that the same events are described repeatedly from different points of view.

The theory that the book of Revelation describes the same events from different points of view was adopted by the author of the oldest surviving commentary on the work, written about A.D. 300 by Victorinus of Pettau.[[24]](#footnote-22) He stated that both the trumpets and the bowls predict the eschatological punishment of unbelievers.[[25]](#footnote-23) Victorinus’ hermeneutical principle of recapitulation was taken up by Tyconius as an independent rule in his exegetical work *Three Books of Rules*, written around A.D. 382.[[26]](#footnote-24) Tyconius then applied this rule in his influential commentary on the book of Revelation, written about A.D. 385. This commentary has unfortunately been lost, but it survives in fragments and something of its nature can be known by its influence on others. The approach to Revelation pioneered by Victorinus has been called the recapitulation theory in modern scholarship.

The source-critical approach was first applied to the book of Revelation by Daniel Völter in 1882. An extreme source-critical analysis was proposed by Friedrich Spitta in 1889, who argued that the seals, trumpets, and bowls each reflect a source based on a sevenfold series.[[27]](#footnote-25) In the twentieth century, the source-critical approach was adopted by M. E. Boismard, J. Massyngberde Ford, and Ulrich B. Müller. The argument for the extensive use of sources has been undercut by the demonstration of the unity of style in the work as a whole.[[28]](#footnote-26)

R. H. Charles argued that the literary design of Revelation describes a linear sequence of events. He concluded that most of the events are given in strict chronological order, but there are significant exceptions. Chapter 12, the vision of the woman and the dragon, is a flashback intended to provide the background for chapter 13, the vision of the two beasts. Three “proleptic” or anticipatory visions interrupt the orderly unfolding of events in order to encourage the audience by flashing forward to some more distant point of the future. These are the vision of the innumerable multitude in the second part of chapter 7; the vision of the mighty angel in chapter 10 and the two witnesses in chapter 11; and the three visions of chapter 14. The adequacy of this theory was called into question both by these significant exceptions and by the hypothesis that the text had been thrown into disarray by an incompetent disciple of the author after his death.[[29]](#footnote-27)

The failure of the attempt to interpret the plan of the book as a linear sequence of events led to the revival of the recapitulation theory. Modern scholars had been reluctant to admit the validity of this approach because it had been used in connection with the premise that the book of Revelation prophesied history from the time of its composition to the time of the interpreter. But Günther Bornkamm was able to show that this theory is compatible with a historical-critical approach; that is, with an interpretation that understands the prophecies to refer to the past and present of the author and otherwise to the eschatological future.

Bornkamm pointed out the close parallel structure between two major parts of the body of the work.[[30]](#footnote-28) He argued that the seven seals, seven trumpets and related material describe the same series of events as the seven bowls and the related material that follows. The part beginning with the seals, however, describes those events in a mysterious, fragmentary, and proleptic manner.[[31]](#footnote-29)

Another way of retrieving the recapitulation theory is to argue that the book of Revelation consists of two great cycles of visions, one from 1:9 to the end of chapter 11 and the other from the vision of the woman clothed with the sun to the end of the account of the New Jerusalem. The first cycle is made of three series of seven: the messages, seals, and trumpets. The second is made up of a series of unnumbered visions, seven bowls, and another series of unnumbered visions. Beginning with the seven seals, each series expresses the message of the whole book in its own particular way. The constant elements of the message are persecution, punishment of the persecutors, and salvation of the persecuted. These themes are introduced in the first cycle in a way that seems deliberately veiled and fragmentary. The second cycle maintains the symbolic and mythic language of the first, but presents the message of the book in a fuller and more coherent manner. In particular, the second cycle is more explicit about the historical contexts of the visions. The first cycle makes clear that persecution is of major importance, but it is only in the second cycle that the identity of the persecutors is made explicit, namely, the Roman authorities.[[32]](#footnote-30)

Structural, thematic, and text-linguistic approaches have also been offered. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza discerned a pattern of inclusion or symmetry in the book of Revelation. She defines the introductory material, before the beginning of the account of the appearance of the risen Christ, as the first unit of the work. The last unit, most of the prophetic sayings that follow the end of the body of the work (22:10-21), forms the seventh and last unit. In her view, these two units are related as promise and fulfillment. The second unit is the account of the appearance of Christ, including the seven messages. The sixth unit includes the material from the coming of Christ on a white horse and some of the concluding prophetic sayings in chapter 22. These are related because they both contain an “inaugural” vision of Christ (the opening epiphany and the eschatological coming). The third unit begins with the throne vision and ends with the sixth trumpet. The fifth unit includes the bowls and the following related material. These two are related because both evolve out of the scroll with the seven seals. Only the trumpets, however, are explicitly connected with the scroll. That leaves the fourth unit, which consists of the visions of the mighty angel and the two witnesses, the seventh trumpet, the woman clothed with the sun, the two beasts, and the miscellaneous visions of chapter 14. She argues that this unit is the center and climax of the book.[[33]](#footnote-31)

In his text-linguistic study of Revelation, David Hellholm concluded that the level of communication most profoundly embedded in the work is the speech of God that follows the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven.[[34]](#footnote-32) This speech also occurs on the highest grade of the hierarchy of text sequences. He argued that this hierarchic embedment of divine speech enhances the authority of the message.[[35]](#footnote-33)

Social Setting and Purpose

The messages to the seven congregations in the seven cities reveal conflict among the followers of Jesus in this regions and rivalry among their leaders. Each message is addressed to “the angel” of the congregation in that particular city. Since angels were equivalent to stars in Jewish tradition and the angels of the congregations are identified with stars in 1:20, it is clear that John refers to angelic beings in 2:1 and the other messages, not to human messengers. This motif is a democratization of the Israelite and Jewish idea that each people or nation has an angel ruling over it, as representative and patron. At the same time, however, the address to the angel is a literary device through which the author can address the community as a whole, speaking in the name of Christ. It may be that the author employed this device in order to circumvent the institutional leaders of these communities (bishops or overseers, elders, and deacons) and to lessen their authority. The charismatic authority of the prophets may bypass the institutional authority of the local leaders.

The Christians in Ephesus are commended because they “cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false.”[[36]](#footnote-34) They are also praised for hating the works of the Nicolaitans, which Christ also hates.[[37]](#footnote-35) In the message to the followers of Jesus in Pergamum, the teaching of the Nicolaitans is equated with that of Balaam.[[38]](#footnote-36) According to Numbers 22–24, Balaam was a foreign priest and a diviner or seer, whom Balak, the king of Moab, paid to curse Israel. Moved by the power of the Lord, however, Balaam blessed Israel instead. But the book of Revelation seems to allude not to these mostly positive accounts about Balaam but to Num 31:16, which says that Balaam counseled the women of Midian to cause the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the matter of Peor. This text in turn alludes to the story in Num 25:1-18, according to which some of the men of Israel married women of Moab and Midian, who then persuaded them to worship their god, Baal of Peor. The teaching attributed to Balaam that some in Pergamum are accused of holding involves eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing immorality.[[39]](#footnote-37)

It is not entirely clear whether either or both of these activities are meant literally or metaphorically. The eating of food, probably meat, sacrificed to idols is an issue addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8–10. It could very well be meant literally here. Practicing (probably sexual) immorality could also be meant literally, but in some restricted sense regarding distinctions between permitted and forbidden types of marriage. If the terms are taken literally, the controversy here may be related to the so-called apostolic decree reported in Acts 15:29.

Another possibility is that both terms are meant to symbolize laxness in monotheistic devotion to the one true god. “Harlotry” is a term used frequently in the prophetic books of the Jewish scriptures for honor paid to other gods. In either case, the point at issue seems to be how to live as a servant of God and a follower of Jesus in a pluralistic society. In antiquity there was no concept of a secular state: religious, social, economic, and political aspects of life were closely intertwined. John evidently disagreed with some traveling and local teachers in Ephesus and Pergamum on this question.

The issue is even more explosive in the message to Thyatira. The Christians in that place are criticized for tolerating the woman “Jezebel.”[[40]](#footnote-38) As “Babylon” is a symbolic name for the city of Rome, so “Jezebel” is a code name for a female prophet active in Thyatira. According to the first book of Kings, Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon and a worshipper of Baal. Ahab, the king of Israel, married her, presumably to form an alliance with Sidon. Ahab then built a temple for Baal in Samaria.[[41]](#footnote-39) A struggle then followed between the devotees of Baal and those of Yahweh. In the end, Jezebel was thrown from a window and her body eaten by dogs.[[42]](#footnote-40)

John’s endowment of the otherwise anonymous prophet with the name “Jezebel” is already a harsh condemnation of her teaching. It is described in the same way as that of Balaam: practicing immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols.[[43]](#footnote-41) The words attributed to Christ hint that her teaching also involved “the deep things of Satan.”[[44]](#footnote-42) This phrase could be understood to mean that her teaching was similar to Gnostic speculation or that she was involved in the practice of magic. It could, however, simply mean that she taught apocalyptic “mysteries,” that is, secrets about heaven or the future. These could be revealed interpretations of texts that she associated with Satan or the evil angels associated with him. Such teaching is intelligible entirely within the context of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism. But we do not have sufficient information to be sure what this teaching was.

The messages also reflect a social setting in which followers of Jesus are in conflict with their Jewish neighbors. Although the movement that originated with the historical Jesus could still be defined as a type of Judaism at the time John was writing, it is likely that social differentiation had taken place. The use of the term ἐκκλησία (“assembly,” “congregation” or “church”) in the book of Revelation[[45]](#footnote-43) indicates that the followers of Jesus in each city had their own association, separate from the συναγωγή (“gathering” or “synagogue”), the assembly of the local Jewish community.

In the message to Smyrna, the speaker refers to “the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”[[46]](#footnote-44) “Those who say that they are Jews and are not” could be Jewish people or Christians following a Jewish way of life. They could, for example, be Gentiles by birth who argue that those who would share in the benefits of Christ must be circumcised and observe all or some commandments of the Torah. This line of interpretation seems unlikely, however, since John shows no interest in the theological principles dear to Paul, such as salvation by faith rather than by works of the law. Furthermore, the rhetorical force of the saying implies that “Jews” is a positive designation. The implication is that the ἐκκλησία, the association of followers of Jesus, is the synagogue of God, and that the local Jewish community, which does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, is the synagogue of Satan.

John’s polemic here is analogous to that of the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls against other Jews who have not joined them in their new covenant with the Lord and the proper interpretation of the Torah that has been revealed to them. For example, the *Community Rule* states, “They shall separate from the congregation of the men of falsehood and shall unite, with respect to the Law and possessions, under the authority of the sons of Zadok, the Priests who keep the covenant, and of the multitude of the men of the Community who hold fast to the covenant.”[[47]](#footnote-45) The men of falsehood are equivalent to the men of the lot of Belial (equivalent to Satan).[[48]](#footnote-46) The similarity is especially strong in a passage from the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, where the (probably Jewish) opponents of the Community are designated “a council of deceit and a congregation of Belial.”[[49]](#footnote-47)

Immediately following the reference to “the synagogue of Satan” in Rev 2:9, the author gives encouragement in the face of persecution. John uses the word “tribulation” to speak of the sporadic persecutions that have already happened and continue to occur[[50]](#footnote-48) and for the persecutions that he expects to happen in the future.[[51]](#footnote-49) In the message to Smyrna, the speaker says, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”[[52]](#footnote-50) These words imply expectation of official arrest and imprisonment, presumably to await trial.

At the time John was writing, and for more than a century afterward, Roman officials did not seek out Christians to arrest and interrogate them. They took action only when a citizen or resident with civil rights brought an official accusation or charge against Christians, in accordance with the normal legal process. The juxtaposition of the polemic against “the synagogue of Satan” and the encouragement in the face of persecution suggests that in Smyrna, conflict between Christians and Jews had led, or seemed about to lead, to the formal accusation of Christians by Jews before the Roman authorities. The charge could have been disturbing the peace or introducing a new (unlawful or subversive) cult. The message to the congregation in Philadelphia also mentions a “synagogue of Satan” and “those who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie.”[[53]](#footnote-51) The promise in this message that those who claim to be Jews will come and bow down before the feet of the congregation and know that Christ has loved them expresses the hope for a reversal of the present situation in which the Christian congregation has little or no status or power.

The need to endure and the need to avoid denying the name of Christ are prominent themes in the messages. These themes reflect a social situation in which it is difficult to maintain the identity of the group in light of the dominant symbolic system and lifestyle and in which there is active opposition to the Christian communities. The messages reveal tensions between Christians and non-Christian Jews. It is likely that there were tensions between Christians and non-Christian Gentiles as well. As I already noted in discussing the date of the book of Revelation, the work manifests great antipathy to Rome because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Another point of potential conflict was the imperial cult. This issue begins to emerge in chapter 12.

The revelatory report in chapter 12 consists of a vision with three scenes[[54]](#footnote-52) and an audition[[55]](#footnote-53) that interprets the second scene of the vision. The first and third scenes constitute a birth narrative in which a superhuman female figure gives birth to a son with a heroic or divine destiny. A great monster threatens mother and son, but the mother receives divine aid and the child is saved. This narrative has similarities with several types of ancient texts, but it is most similar to the group of stories about Leto, a Titan goddess, giving birth to Apollo, in spite of the pursuit of Python, a monster who rightly fears that Apollo will take his place as ruler of Delphi and its oracle. During the early period of the Roman Empire, Roman rule was likened to the golden age of Apollo, and various emperors were identified as Apollo manifest or incarnate. John co-opts this imperial propaganda to claim that the true golden age will come with the messianic reign of Christ.[[56]](#footnote-54)

Immediately following the vision of the mother and her child is a vision of a beast rising out of the sea.[[57]](#footnote-55) This vision is a rewriting and adaptation of the vision of the four beasts rising out of the sea in Daniel 7. At the end of the vision that precedes that of the beast, the monster who threatened the woman, a great dragon, is shown standing on the sand by the sea.[[58]](#footnote-56) It is implied that the dragon watches, or even summons, the beast rising from the sea.[[59]](#footnote-57) The implication is that the beast is the agent of the dragon. This impression is confirmed by the statement that the dragon gave the beast its power, its throne, and its great authority.[[60]](#footnote-58) Another statement in the vision of the beast reinforces the point: “People worshipped the dragon because he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying ‘Who is like the beast, and who is able to make war with it.’”[[61]](#footnote-59)

Since the dragon is identified with Satan in chapter 12, verse 9, the beast is presented as an ally or agent of Satan. In the original context of Daniel 7, the four beasts represented the Babylonian empire, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. The Jewish historian and client of the Flavian emperors, Josephus, provides evidence that the fourth beast was understood to be Rome in the first century A.D. That the beast of Revelation represents Rome is clear: “Authority was given to it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation.”[[62]](#footnote-60) Rather than describe four beasts, each more terrible than the last, John has combined the attributes of all four to create one overwhelmingly monstrous creature. The result is a reduction of attention to history and a focus on the terrors of the recent past and the present.

The vision of the beast from the sea makes clear what the dominant concerns of John are. Like the beasts of Daniel 7, this beast, that is Rome, is portrayed as rebelling against God and thus becoming an adversary of God. This theme is invoked by the very image of a sea monster.[[63]](#footnote-61) It is made explicit by the motif of the blasphemous names upon its head and the mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words.[[64]](#footnote-62) This theme reaches its climax in the statement that “it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.”[[65]](#footnote-63)

So far, the language of conflict is symbolic or mythic. But then it becomes clear that the conflict has a historical dimension: “Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.”[[66]](#footnote-64) This statement may be understood in two ways. It reflects the incidents of persecution that have already taken place, for example, the execution of Antipas in Pergamum.[[67]](#footnote-65) It also reflects the persecution that John expects to occur in the future.[[68]](#footnote-66) It probably also refers to the first Jewish war with Rome, which began during the reign of Nero. The Roman forces were at first under the command of the military leader Vespasian until he was proclaimed emperor. His son, Titus, then took over the command. It was he who led the siege of the Temple mount and under whose command the Temple was burned and the city largely destroyed. Later, he succeeded his father as emperor. Thus, the Romans made war on the saints and conquered them. Here “the saints” are the people of God. In Daniel 7, the “saints” or “holy ones” are angels, and the people are “the people of the saints of the Most High.”[[69]](#footnote-67)

The blasphemous names and haughty or blasphemous words evoke not only rebellion but also the imperial cult. Worship of the living emperor was not a typically Roman phenomenon, but it was popular in the East. In the cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was traditional to view the king or pharaoh as a deity manifest or incarnate. The Greeks had a tradition of honoring the special dead with hero cults and of honoring living benefactors with religious rituals. When Alexander the Great conquered the Near East, he accepted and apparently even encouraged the peoples he ruled to give him divine honors. His successors did the same. Various ruler cults appeared among the Greeks during the Hellenistic period. When Roman hegemony was established in the eastern Mediterranean area, various cities established cults in which divine honors were given to Roma and Augustus and then various other emperors, often while they were still alive.

It is clear that these cults had important social and political functions. They expressed gratitude to Rome for creating social and political stability, and were part of a system of benefaction and patronage. Simon Price has argued that the imperial cult in the Hellenistic cities resulted from the attempt by Greek subjects of the Roman Empire to relate their ruler to their own dominant symbolic system.[[70]](#footnote-68)

The imperial cult was a ubiquitous and impressive phenomenon in the Roman province of Asia in which the seven cities of Revelation were located. No resident could overlook it. The cult was celebrated not only in temples but also in the major civic centers, the meeting place of the council, the theater, the stadium, and the gymnasium.[[71]](#footnote-69) The emperor was regularly associated with the traditional gods and sometimes presented as a god himself. For example, gold was normally used only in statues of the gods, but it was also often used in those of emperors. Images of the emperors were often carried in processions.[[72]](#footnote-70) Finally, many of the coins in use carried the portrait of the emperor, often depicted as Zeus, Apollo, or Hercules.

John’s disapproval of the imperial cult is displayed in the statement that, “all who dwell on earth will worship [the beast], every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.”[[73]](#footnote-71) In the account of the last judgment, it is said, “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”[[74]](#footnote-72)

Conclusion

The book of Revelation is not a prediction of the timing of the end of the world. Rather, it is a work of religious poetry, inspired by the prophets of Israel and by the cosmic and political myths of the author’s time. The author, an early Christian prophet by the name of John, believed himself authorized by God and his Messiah to interpret the times for his contemporaries. His message was harsh and demanding, both for insiders and outsiders. Insiders were to avoid compromise with the corrupt and idolatrous culture of the cities of the province of Asia, no matter what the cost. John envisaged some chance for the repentance and conversion of outsiders.[[75]](#footnote-73) But, for the most part, outsiders were expected to continue doing evil and to be condemned to eternal torment, or perhaps annihilation, in the lake of fire.[[76]](#footnote-74)

The book of Revelation is also a work of religious rhetoric, intended to shape the beliefs and lifestyle of its audience. Historically speaking, it may have contributed to the survival of a Christian perspective that could not simply take its place as one ancient cult among many. Theologically and ethically speaking, it is a work that expresses the anguish of those who live on the margins. It expresses a vision of hope for the marginalized themselves and makes vivid and intelligible for the comfortable how the world of power relations looks from a perspective on the margins.

1. Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.11; 5.35.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. See the discussion by R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., ICC (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 1.xlv-xlvix. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 25-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Translation from the RSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 54-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Rev 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. Rev 17:18; my translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. *4 Ezra* = 2 Esdras 3:1-2, 28-31; *2 Baruch* 10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7; *Sibylline Oracles* 5.143, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Rev 1:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Rev 1:4–22:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Rev 1:4a. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Rev 1:4b-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Rev 1:5b-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Rev 22:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Rev 1:7, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. Rev 22:6-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Rev 4:1–5:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Rev 6:1–22:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 50 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 90-99, 122-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Roman Poetovium in the province of Pannonia; modern Ptuj in Slovenia (Pettau in German). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Johannes Haussleiter, ed., *Victorini Episcopi Petavionensis Opera*, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum 49 (Leipzig: Freytag, 1916), 84, line 14–86, line 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Kenneth B. Steinhauser, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of its Reception and Influence*, European University Studies, series 23, vol. 301 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 32, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. See the discussion in Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* rev. ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906; reprinted 1966), 109, 113-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Bousset, *Offenbarung*, 159-77; Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 1.lxxxviii-lxxxix. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 1.xxii-xxiii, l-lv, lix. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Rev 8:2–14:20 and 15:1–19:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. Günther Bornkamm, “Die Komposition der apokalyptischen Visionen in der Offenbarung Johannis,” *ZNW* 36 (1937): 132-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 32-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 170-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. Rev 21:5-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. David Hellholm, “The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 13-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. Rev 2:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. Rev 2:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. Rev 2:14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. Rev 2:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. Rev 2:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
41. 1 Kgs 16:31-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
42. 2 Kgs 9:30-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
43. Rev 2:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
44. Rev 2:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
45. Rev 1:4, 20; 2:1 etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
46. Rev 2:9. Cf. 3:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
47. 1QS 5:1-3; translation from Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. 4th ed. (London and New York: Penguin, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
48. 1QS 4:9-14 and especially 1:4-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
49. 1QH 2:22 in Vermes, which is 10:22 in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); my translation above. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
50. Rev 1:9; 2:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
51. Rev 2:10; 7:14. He uses the same term once for the punishment that may fall upon a false prophet (2:22). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
52. Rev 2:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
53. Rev 3:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
54. The three scenes are described in verses 1-6, 7-9, and 13-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
55. The audition is reported in verses 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
56. Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 57-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
57. Rev 13:1-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
58. Rev 12:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
59. Rev 13:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
60. Rev 13:2b. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
61. Rev 13:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
62. Rev 13:7b. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
63. Ps 74:12-17; 89: 10; Job 26:12-13; Isa 27:1; 51:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
64. Rev 13:1, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
65. Rev 13:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
66. Rev 13:7a. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
67. Rev 2:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
68. Rev 13:9-10; cf. 1:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
69. Dan 7:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
70. Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
71. Ibid., 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
72. Ibid., 186-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
73. Rev 13:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
74. Rev 20:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
75. Rev 11:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
76. Rev 20:15; 22:11. The idea that human beings deserving of punishment will be annihilated in the lake of fire is an inference from the description of that lake as “the second death” in 20:14; 21:8; cf. 2:11; 20:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)