

The Book of Revelation – introduction and chapter 1

1. Today, we begin a wonderful and strange journey. And, to be fair, this book took the same journey. The Book of Revelation was not formally accepted into the canon of Scripture until 397AD at a conference in Carthage, North Africa. And not every group of Christians agreed that it should have been accepted even then.
2. In the 2nd century, most Christians rejected this book as scripture, mainly as a response against a heretical sect called the Montanists. The Montanists held most of the same doctrines as the wider Christian church, but they relied much more on personal prophecy and a very strict personal moral code. They have some similarities with the charismatic movement and Pentecostalism today.
3. The Montanists were never really kicked out of the church, but the church was nervous about their prophetic pronouncements and that their preaching might call down persecution on the church by the ruling political authorities. They relied on Revelation to bolster their prophecies and that made the church nervous enough to shelve this book as a dangerous mirror: you saw in it what you wanted to see at that moment. Both sides had a point: prophecy is real and continues, AND it is very easy, and very dangerous, to read Revelation as a code book written to you in your time, specifically.
4. In the 300s, a very powerful bishop named Gregory of Nazianzus believed it shouldn't be considered scripture because it was hard to understand, easy to misinterpret, and splinter groups formed around it.
5. Luther also rejected it for most of his life. John Calvin wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible but Revelation. He never taught from it, either. The Eastern Orthodox Church sets it aside, reading from every book of the New Testament in their liturgy but this one. They do not consider it evil; they just question its usefulness.
6. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that this book is written to every generation as a warning that any age could be the last age, so we should have our soul ready to meet God.

7. The Coptic Orthodox Church holds the book in high esteem but only reads from it on Bright Saturday (the day before Easter) when they read the whole thing out loud.
8. I could go on, for the battle over how to view this book (as scripture or not) continued all the way into the Protestant Reformation and beyond. Luther, Cardinal Cajetan, and Erasmus all rejected it as too obtuse, not useful, and strange. Luther said “I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it...[we] are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book, and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all. And there are many far better books available for us to keep.”
9. I spent so much time talking about the suspicion that great Christian leaders had about this book for one reason: read this, but don't divide over it. If we divide over our interpretations, we will have let the enemy win. Let us show the world that we can read this book, treasure it, consider it a gift from our God...and stay united in love.
10. Still, the book is here. It IS a strange book and people have misused it for the last 1800 years. Still, there is here something of God. There is here something of a veil pulled aside. And there is a very, very hard lesson in here that we need to hear, especially in an election year for this Book demands that we refuse to accommodate the State and that we are to give our loyalty to one God, our God, and not the State.
11. Before we approach the book, we need to deal with the questions one must ask before reading any book of the Bible. Remember, we are reading someone else's mail. Who wrote it? When? To whom? And why?
12. As for who wrote it, we do not know. Some in the 200s said they believed it was John the apostle, but almost no scholar believes that today. The words used and the way arguments and pictures are formed are starkly different: like comparing Nicolas Sparks with William Blake. Most scholars call the writer John of Patmos or John the Revelator. He was not in exile by the government, imprisoned on the island but, rather, was there precisely to receive this vision. He

seems to have had a call away from the mainland and its distractions so that he could be alone with God and the the court of heaven.

13. If I may interject a personal opinion here: I think this is best when you approach it as a whole, not in sections or pieces. Read it quickly, at least once. Feel free to scan it as you would a long email and then go back and read it at regular speed. Only then can we really begin to slow down and look at it passage by passage. We need to be intentional...but remember that it is a whole and should be treated that way.
14. The first chapter answers our questions and also limits what we can say about this book. **Revelation 1:1—3**. Note the word “soon” and do not play games with that word. This was written to people alive at that time who needed to hear it and deal with its truth, taking it to heart.
15. To whom was it written? **Revelation 1:4-11**. It could not be plainer. This was written to existing churches that existed in a place and time, surrounded by real cultures and issues, and made up of real people.
16. **Revelation 1:12-20**. This is dramatic. And cool. And amazing. Did you notice that the description can only apply to Jesus? At the time this book was written – almost certainly between 80-96AD – people needed reassuring that Jesus was alive and that he was going to return. This would have been cool water on a hot day in the desert to them.
17. And did you notice something else? To Jesus, a church – a gathering of those who profess faith to Jesus – are stars! Lights! Candles in the dark! And each church has an angel. Have a look at it again and, this time, let’s stand as we read **Revelation 1:4-8, 12-20**.
18. And that phrase: “what is now and what will take place later”? Oh...more on that. For next week, read chapters 2 and 3.