



# REVELATION REVEALED?

## What is the Book of Revelation?

It's a type of imaginative writing called ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypsis*) meaning “uncovering”. It is a form of writing common in Jewish literature of the period 200 BC – 100AD. Others are the Apocalypse of Enoch, The Apocalypse of Weeks, the Book of Daniel, the Apocalypse of Abraham. They are mysterious writings, described by scholars as disclosing (uncovering) a transcendent reality by means of a narrative framework characterised by imagination, spiritual inspiration, mysticism and prophecy. The Book of Revelation can be described as an *apocalypsis* in that John of Patmos visits another heavenly world beyond this one and he writes a letter to us, the readers, (at times “the churches”) telling us what he experiences. It is a “mixed” text, of different literary forms and as such we should expect it to be inconsistent. It contains prophecy, poetry, letters, story.

So what can we say? **a)** John (maybe John the son of Zebedee) takes the event of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection utterly seriously **b)** God’s activity will forever seem paradoxical, almost impossible to understand, for humans **c)** Rome (“Babylon”) will fall, oppression will end, redemption will be achieved in history.

*Revelation in no way suggests that God will wave a magic wand and transform our vale of tears into a garden of Eden. The struggle between good and evil is a dirty, bloody affair”. Sacra Pagina commentary*

# WEEK ONE

# THE COSMIC CHRIST

## CHAPTERS 1 AND 4

### **Read Scripture with your heart**

What feelings came to you as you listened? What reactions are you having to what you hear? How are you experiencing the scenes, people, being described? Stay with how you feel, not what you think!

### **Read Scripture with your head**

Scholars believe it was written in the time of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96AD). Revelation talks a lot about “tribulation”, taken to mean the persecution of Christians under Domitian. Much is said about “true” worship of God and his Christ versus the “false” worship of the beast. This is a reference to the cult of the emperor: Domitian was the emperor who encouraged the use of the imperial title “dominus et deus”; Lord and God. John uses hostile and negative rhetoric against Roman imperial power, then arguing that if you oppose totalitarian political power, persecution inevitably follows. This committed Christian, John, identifies that there is something rotten at the heart of Rome and he adopts a radical stance (not shared by all contemporary Christians) that everything Roman is evil and must be opposed if Christ’s authority and way of living is true for you personally.

Verse 5 introduces Christ as a) “faithful witness”, b) “firstborn of the dead”, c) “ruler of kings of the earth”. John is saying that in “tribulation”, Christ is the source of hope as a) one who shows us how to live close to God, b) one who has transformed what we think is the end of human life, and c) who embodies a fundamental challenge to Caesar and all worldly domination. For people suffering persecution, this is hope to live by. The focus of the writing is totally on Christ, who is the only enduring, indestructible presence at the centre of Creation.

Verse 7 introduces the picture of humanity realising the rotten core of worldly power domination systems, and the “crisis” that they are in. They are wailing, as the truth of God’s presence becomes clearer (“coming with the clouds”).

Verses 9-20 Vision of “One Like a Son of Man”, echoing the Book of Daniel. His only weapon is the “sword of his mouth” (ch 19) – the word. The heavenly Christ is present (1.20) among the churches, not the absentee landlord of many of Jesus’s parables. In this vision of terrifying awesome presence, the word that is spoken is “Do not be afraid” (v17).

#### **Chapter 4 Liturgy of heavenly worship**



Heaven is open! The sounds and sights are radiant, beautiful, alarming. But John uses worldly terms such as “throne” to emphasise that there are choices between whose authority the hearers acknowledge: God’s or Caesar’s. Details of the vision are heavily drawn from Jewish traditions; 24 elders may be the 24 classes of priest in 1 Chronicles, the 7 lamps echo the vision of Zechariah 4.10, the sea of glass echoes Genesis 1.7 (later, in the new heaven, “the sea was no more”). John simplifies the complex imagery of Ezekiel by giving the cherubim four faces: lion, ox, human, eagle. In verse 9, *thanks* are given by the living creatures – the word used is *eucharistia*. In verse 10, 24 elders cast

*their crowns* again emphasising the universe is underpinned only by the divine authority and the choices that Christians have.

And in Chapter 5, John introduces “the Lamb”, making the point that Christians account for the nature of God, ie what God is like, only through what happened to Jesus in crucifixion and resurrection.

## **Read Scripture with your feet**

This Book is almost like a combination of a prequel and sequel to Jesus of Nazareth’s life of 33 years. This week, see if you can notice.....

Where and when do you experience this “otherness” of a presence you can’t explain, and the wonder of living? In the night sky? Looking out to sea? In nature? In silence? In art? Looking down a microscope?

The choice John of Patmos puts before you: between worldly dominant political authority and the “rule” of Christ?

What importance does “liturgy” or “worship” have in your own practice? John is indicating that it is central, because it is our joining in the pre-existing worship of all Creation towards the Creator.

Notice how much of Revelation’s words appear in our Eucharist. Do you sense you are joining the songs of the angels and the “living creatures”?





# REVELATION REVEALED?

## What are the themes of the Book of Revelation?

Revelation is a type of imaginative writing called ἀποκάλυψις (*apocalypsis*) meaning “uncovering”. The main themes are

a) John takes the event of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection **utterly seriously**. *Christ* is Jesus’s **title**, the description of who he is: **the anointed**.

b) God’s life and activity will forever seem **paradoxical**, almost impossible to understand, for human beings.

c) Rome (“Babylon”) will fall, oppression will end, **redemption** is promised, not just as a personal or mystical event, but **in history**.

## WEEK TWO THE LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

### Chapters 2 and 3

### Read Scripture with your heart

What’s your initial gut feeling about these chapters read aloud? What strikes you and how do you react?

How do you receive the charges laid against the churches? “I know your works; you “have abandoned the love you had at first”? “you have a name of being alive but you are dead”? “you are neither hot nor cold, you are lukewarm”? Do any of these get under your skin?

## Read Scripture with your head



Each letter begins with “I know your works” or “I know where you are living”. Each church hears a verdict based on their own precise circumstances and challenges.

**Ephesus** is the most important city in Asia. It houses one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Artemesium, the Temple of Diana. The Christians there are praised for their “toil and endurance”. But they have “lost the love you had at first. Be mindful”.

**Smyrna**, 35 miles north of Ephesus, is one of the most prosperous cities in Asia, at the head of a grand harbour. John encourages the Christians there not to fear prison or execution, which he says is coming. As Christian communities became increasingly Gentile, they incurred the wrath of ethnic Jews, especially when Christians claimed to be the “new Israel” as Paul did (Romans 9.8). There is quite a note of arrogance in this letter from John, judging the attenders at the

synagogue to be false not true. The “second death” seems to mean annihilation – it occurs as an idea later in Revelation too – perhaps a polemical device to indicate the totality of Babylon’s destruction.

**Pergamum** Christians seem to be in a particularly difficult situation, perhaps a particularly fervent cult of the emperor. John is especially concerned with the group called the Nicolaitans, who seem to be compromising too far; teaching that it is permissible to eat food sacrificed to pagan idols. “Fornication” is a common Hebrew way of talking about idolatry which John employs. John is more critical of the internal betrayal he sees than of the challenge the church faces externally.

**Thyatira** is the least known, arguably least important of the cities John addresses. It gets the longest and most complex letter. It’s a city known for its vibrant trade guilds who held feasts using meat that had been offered in pagan temples. Paul had to deal with this in Corinth (1 Corinthians 8.1-13). John is very uncompromising about this issue. The hatred that he exhibits is elsewhere in the New Testament, but contested: for example in 1 John 2.18-19 when new Christian communities are attempting to define themselves in a complex society and religious landscape. Not all New Testament Christians agree about the degree of assimilation and compromise that is right.

**Sardis** This is a lamentable community according to John. They are living half heartedly, neglecting their faith. They are urged to “be mindful”. Christ alone can restore life to a dead church. John thinks that this church is either dead or asleep.

**Philadelphia** Of the 7 churches, only Philadelphia escapes criticism; “I know you have little power, and yet you have kept my word”. They are suffering Jewish hostility, but actually John counters this with more hate speech, trying to encourage Philadelphians by promising them victory.

**Laodicea** is full of Christians saying “I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing.” It was a centre of banking, clothing manufacturers and carpets of the native glossy black wool. A famous medical school was there too. It suffered a terrible earthquake in 60BC but became prosperous again without an imperial grant. Christians there come in for serious criticism from John, as he paints the powerful picture of Christ standing at the door knocking. It is all about churches having “ears” and “listening” for the voice that they know is Christ’s, ignoring other siren voices.

The detailed knowledge John has of each of these communities guides him in delivering what he is communicating as the cosmic Christ’s assessment and judgement of them.

It may or may not be totally “fair”; they were in so many ways, just like us, doing their best. But John’s filter is certainly uncompromising, and his characterisation of “Jezebel” and “synagogues of satan” are couched in language and images that are completely unpalatable to modern ears. But his central message is one of comfort and encouragement to those who are suffering “tribulation”. And profoundly challenging to those who are materially comfortable or too ready to compromise the demands of love, justice and forgiveness found in the gospel.

## **Read Scripture with your feet**

We are urban Christians, just like the urban communities addressed in Revelation. What is it that you hear from Revelation that we need to hear about our own life in this city today? What comfort and encouragement do we need? What challenge do you discern? How do we “listen for what the Spirit is saying?” and how then can we practically live that?