

Bible Study Revelation 1-2
By Fr. John Brown

The book of Revelation was written by the Apostle and Evangelist John while exiled to Patmos, a Greek island located in the Eastern Aegean Sea.



That island remains today as a place of pilgrimage. There is a Greek Orthodox monastery on Patmos that contains the cave where St. John received visions from Christ. John recorded these visions which resulted in the book of Revelation.



The Greek word translated into English as “Revelation” is “Apokalypsis” (Ἀποκάλυψις). It expresses the idea of revealing what had been previously hidden. The ancient writer Plutarch used this word to describe a dead body that been in a shallow grave, but had been uncovered by soil erosion. The biblical book of Revelation has become so famous that its original Greek title (“Apokalypsis”) has been anglicized to become “Apocalypse,” meaning

the end of the world. “Apocalypse” is also a common synonym for the book of Revelation itself.

The book consists of a series of prophetic visions. These visions depict the majesty of the resurrected and ascended Christ, the depravity of the fallen world as contrasted with the sublime glory of heaven, the conflict between good and evil on earth, and the ultimate victory of Christ over all evil.

These visions are played out in three time periods. The first time period is the late first century, the original audience of the book. It had a message for the generation of people who first read it. The second time period addressed by Revelation is the entire Church age – from Pentecost to the Day of Judgement. In this way, Revelation has a message for every generation, including ours. The third time period of Revelation focuses on the climactic end of the Church age.

This message will be received and best understood by the last generation of Christians. Many of the messages of Revelation will be clearer to them than to us. For example, Christ once prophesied,

“Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, ‘standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand),’ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. ¹⁸ And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath” (Matthew 24:15-20).

Approximately 37 years later, when the Roman armies were surrounding Jerusalem to besiege and destroy it, the Christians in the city remembered Christ’s warnings and fled.

“From there it took its beginning after the exodus from Jerusalem when all the disciples went to live in Pella because Christ had told them to leave Jerusalem and to go away since it would undergo a siege. Because of this advice they lived in Perea after having moved to that place, as I said” (Epiphanius, 4th century)

“To it those who believed on Christ traveled from Jerusalem, so that when holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judaea” (Eusebius, 4th century).

Christ’s warnings were not completely understood by his followers when spoke these words, but they were understood when they were being fulfilled. We can infer that many of the verses and symbols in the book of Revelation are not clear to us today, but they will be Christians when the prophetic events are fulfilled.

More than any other book in the Bible, the book of Revelation is filled with symbols and allegory. The abundance of symbols and allegory causes a major challenge to correct interpretation. So many of these symbols and allegories can be interpreted in multiple ways. The Eastern Church has always been hesitant to accept the book of Revelation

fearing that its many symbols and possible interpretations can lead to interpretational chaos. In fact, the book of Revelation barely made it into the New Testament.

In the fourth century, the Church was deciding which books would be included in the New Testament. The Christian East originally rejected Revelation because so many of its symbols were difficult to understand. However, the Christian West heartily supported the Revelation, largely because it portrayed the recent persecutions in the city of Rome. At the same time, the West resisted the book of Hebrews because its authorship was unclear. The East supported Hebrews because its prose was so masterful, more so than any other accepted book. In the end, the West and the East compromised; the West accepted Hebrews while the East accepted Revelation into the New Testament canon. However, the East's hesitation of Revelation remained, and the book is not included in any of the Church's official cycle of readings. Nevertheless, the book of Revelation is a part of the Christian Bible. God guided the Church to put it there. Therefore, it has much to teach us, and we have an obligation to learn from it.

The East's concern about interpretational chaos has been born out over the past 2,000 years. Countless self-appointed commentators have read the symbols in the book of Revelation and have created misinterpretations. Those misinterpretations have ranged from misguided to blasphemous. For example, the book of Revelation describes Seven Seals of judgement on the earth, and the Lamb of God who opens the seven seals. In the 1990's, cult leader David Koresh decided that the Seven Seals of Revelation referred to the upcoming violent clash between his cult and the US government. He also decided that he – David Koresh – was the Lamb who opened the seven seals according to Revelation.

For Orthodox Christians to study Revelation, it is vital for us to be humble. We should not attempt to interpret the book's many symbols according to our imaginations. Nor should we accept the interpretations of recent Protestant "discoveries" as to what the symbols mean. Instead, we must be guided by the wisdom of Holy Tradition, and the collective wisdom of 2,000 years of interpretation by scholars whose knowledge and wisdom and holiness far exceeds our own.

⁹ I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

"History notes that John had been banished to this island by the Emperor Domitian on account of the Gospel, and that he was, appropriately, allowed to penetrate the secrets of heaven while at the same time prohibited from leaving a small space of the earth" (Church historian Bede from the 6th century).

¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day..."

It is fitting that God's revelation to John would begin on "the Lord's Day" – Sunday. The term "Sunday" in Greek is still literally "the Lord's Day" (Kyriaki). This was the custom of John and all the Apostles from the beginning, and continued into the early Church:

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“But every Lord’s Day gather yourselves together and break bread, and give thanksgiving after having confessed your transgressions, so that your sacrifice may be pure” (Didache, late first century, about the same time as the writing of Revelation).

“No longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord’s Day” (Ignatius, about 105 AD).

“And on that day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or the country, gather in one place... Sunday is the day in which we hold our common assembly... Jesus Christ rose from the dead on that day” (Justin Martyr, about 160).

It was on this day of gathering, celebrating the Liturgy, and partaking of the Holy Mysteries, that John begin to receive God’s revelation. Even if John was alone on that day, he was not alone. He was joining with rest of the worldwide Church, with Christ, and with the angels. Today, if we wish to receive a revelation from Christ, that is still the best setting to seek it.

John’s first vision now begins. He encounters Christ, whom he had known for three years. John had mostly seen our Lord in His humanity - as the ultimate preacher, teacher, miracle worker, and dearest friend. John felt so close to Jesus that at the last supper he laid his head on Christ’s chest (John 13:33). In his writings, John often called himself the one “whom Jesus loved.” John had seen Christ as the suffering servant on the Cross. John had seen Christ as the risen and death-conquering Savior, still visibly human. But now, and but Christ’s appearance is very different. Now John sees Christ, no longer in His humble humanity, but in His heavenly glory. This happened once before to John when he saw Christ at the Transfiguration: *“Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17).*

“...and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, ¹¹ saying, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,’ and, ‘What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.’ ¹² Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man...”

“...clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.

Christ was wearing the clothing of a Jewish priest:



It is appropriate that, in His heavenly glory, Christ would be wearing priestly vestments. He is always functioning as our High Priest:

“...We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ² a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man” (Hebrews 8:1-2).

Although John saw Christ as a priest in heaven. He is far more than a mere priest. John describes Him in the most glorious, and somewhat frightening, terms:

“¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”



In the Holy Place of the Jewish temple was a holy lampstand, which the Jews called the menorah. As a Jew, John was certainly aware of it, although he was not priest and therefore had never seen it. But now he saw Christ among not just one menorah, but seven menorahs. His vision was from the Holy Place of heaven.

The sword emerging from Christ's mouth symbolizes Christ's authority to carry out judgement. In the Roman government, civil officials who had the authority to give the death penalty wore a sword. It was a warning that they had the power to use that sword on any law-breaker. St. Paul mentioned this:

"For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil" (Romans 13:14).

Christ Himself spoke of bearing a sword on Judgement Day:

"³³ But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. ³⁴ "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10).

"But now the sword comes from the mouth, the image showing that those who are disobedient to the Gospel commandments will have a threat to their souls to be cut in two by the sword" (Oecumenius, tenth century).

The vision of Christ with a sword coming from His mouth symbolizes He could also condemn criminals by the mere spoken word.

“²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.”

“He calls them lampstands since they carry in themselves the ‘illumination’ of the glory of Christ. He did not call them ‘lamps’ but lampstands for a lampstand does not possess the capacity to shine, but it bears that which is capable of illumination. Likewise, Christ spiritually ‘illuminates’ His churches... the lampstand does not possess light, but it is receptive to that light which comes to it, so also here the evangelist saw the churches as lampstands but not lights” (Oecumenius, 10th century).

“Come and receive the light, that is of the light, that is never overcome by darkness!”

