

Author

Four times the author identifies himself as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8). From as early as Justin Martyr in the second century A.D. it has been held that this John was the apostle, the son of Zebedee (see Mt 10:2). The book itself reveals that the author was a Jew, well versed in Scripture, a church leader who was well known to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and a deeply religious person fully convinced that the Christian faith would soon triumph over the demonic forces at work in the world.

In the third century, however, an African bishop named Dionysius compared the language, style and thought of the Apocalypse (Revelation) with that of the other writings of John and decided that the book could not have been written by the apostle John. He suggested that the author was a certain John the Presbyter, whose name appears elsewhere in ancient writings. Although many today follow Dionysius in his view of authorship, the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view.



Date

Revelation was written when Christians were entering a time of persecution. The two periods most often mentioned are the latter part of Nero's reign (A.D 54-68) and the latter part of Domitian's reign (81-96). Most interpreters date the book c. 95. (A few suggest a date during the reign of Vespasian: 69-79.)

Context

Since Roman authorities at this time were beginning to enforce emperor worship, Christians -- who held that Christ, not Caesar, was Lord -- were facing increasing hostility. The believers at Smyrna are warned against coming opposition (2:10), and the church at Philadelphia is told of an hour of trial coming on the world (3:10). Antipas has already given his life (2:13) along with others (6:9). John has been exiled to the island of Patmos (probably the site of a Roman penal colony) for his activities as a Christian missionary (1:9). Some within the church are advocating a policy of compromise (2:14-15,20), which has to be corrected before its subtle influence can undermine the determination of believers to stand fast in the perilous days that lie ahead.

Why was it written?

John writes to encourage the faithful to resist staunchly the demands of emperor worship. He informs his readers that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. Satan will increase his persecution of believers, but they must stand fast, even to death. They are sealed against any spiritual harm and will soon be vindicated when Christ returns, when the wicked are forever destroyed, and when God's people enter an eternity of glory and blessedness.

Literary Form

For an adequate understanding of Revelation, the reader must recognize that it is a distinct kind of literature. Revelation is apocalyptic, a kind of writing that is highly symbolic. Although its visions often seem bizarre to the Western reader, fortunately the book provides a number of clues for its own interpretation (e.g., stars are angels, lampstands are churches, 1:20; "the great prostitute," 17:1, is "Babylon" [Rome?], 17:5,18; and the heavenly Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb, 21:9-10).

Distinctive Feature

A distinctive feature is the frequent use of the number seven (52 times). There are seven beatitudes (see note on 1:3), seven churches (1:4,11), seven spirits (1:4), seven golden lampstands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1), seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), seven trumpets (8:2), seven thunders (10:3), seven signs (12:1,3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20), seven crowns (12:3), seven plagues (15:6), seven golden bowls (15:7), seven hills (17:9) and seven kings (17:10), as well as other sevens. Symbolically, the number seven stands for completeness.

Interpretation

Interpreters of Revelation normally fall into four groups:

Preterists understand the book exclusively in terms of its first-century setting, claiming that most of its events have already taken place.

Historicists take it as describing the long chain of events from Patmos to the end of history.

Futurists place the book primarily in the end times.

Idealists view it as symbolic pictures of such timeless truths as the victory of good over evil.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- 1. Introduction (1:1-20)*
- 2. Messages to Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)*
- 3. Seals to reveal (4:1-8:6)*
- 4. Trumpets to warn (8:7-11:19)*
- 5. Spiritual Warfare (12:1-14:5)*
- 6. Bowls of Judgement & Babylon (14:6-18:24)*
- 7. Victory of the King of Kings (19:1-20:6)*
- 8. Final Judgement and Heaven (20:7-22:5)*
- 9. Conclusion & Faithfulness of Revelation (22:6-21)*