

# THE BOOK OF REVELATION

This last book of the Bible was penned by the Apostle John, probably towards the end of the First Century. He writes in a time of persecution, when he has been sent into exile by the Roman authorities, marooned in the island of **Patmos** “*on account of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus*” (Revelation 1:9). Patmos is a tiny island off the coast of Turkey, about 13 square miles (34 square kilometres) in area.

The Revelation is the record of a series of inspired visions in which John sees and hears his Master Jesus talking to him, passing on a message for the Christian brothers and sisters. The opening verse is important - “*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.*” The vision was to show John things that must take place. So it was a prophecy, like the prophecies of Isaiah or Jeremiah. It predicted the course of events far into the future, so that God’s servants would be prepared and strengthened in times of persecution, knowing that world events are in God’s hands, and moving steadily towards the goal of his Kingdom.

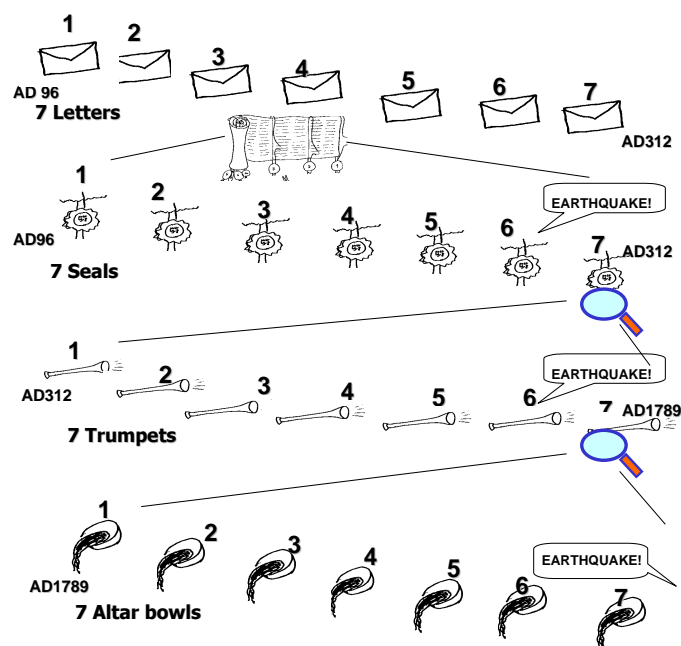
To appreciate the book of Revelation we need to have read the rest of the Bible first, because it is shot through with links and allusions to the earlier writings. Practically every phrase and theme has been plucked from the Old Testament (in some cases the New Testament), and applied to a new but similar situation. We will find strong links to the visions of the prophet Daniel, who saw four amazing beasts with attributes that foretold the course of history from his day up to the First Century. John’s visions take over where Daniel’s left off, and we shall meet Daniel’s beasts in a new guise, used this time to predict the events of European history through many centuries.

A key idea in the Revelation is the number **seven**. Seven is the perfect number, the

cycle of days that completes a week and then starts again. The book is divided into groups of sevens – seven **lampstands** and seven **letters**, seven **wax seals** on a scroll, seven **trumpets** that blow in turn, and seven **altar bowls** poured out on the earth. There is another twist – seven in seven. This concept comes from the conquest of Jericho by Joshua. The soldiers of Israel marched round the city of Jericho once a day for six days. But on the seventh day they marched round seven times, and on the 49th circuit, the walls collapsed and the city fell. So in the Revelation there are six seals, but when the seventh is cut through it is found to enclose the seven trumpets, and when the seventh trumpet begins to blow it conceals the seven bowls. Only when we reach the seventh bowl does the Kingdom of God finally arrive in all its glory.

## Diagram of the layout of the Book of Revelation

Here is a schematic diagram which illustrates the way the book of Revelation is laid out in sets of sevens:



In the opening chapter John sees his master, the Lord Jesus, in heavenly glory. Jesus is walking amongst seven golden lampstands, which John is told represent seven Christian congregations in the province of Asia. Each

in turn is given a written report, dictated to John, outlining their successes and their weak points, just like the traditional end-of-term report at school. Each letter ends with a beautiful promise, held out to “*him who conquers*”. It is a surprise to find seven churches in the same area with such a variation in their spiritual health, from Ephesus, patiently enduring and bearing up for Jesus’ sake, to Laodicea, smug and complacent but in Jesus’ view close to death (see Revelation 1:11 to 3:22).

At this point John is invited to come up into heaven so that he can watch history unfold before his eyes. Unlike the Seven Letters, which were sent to his contemporaries, the rest of Revelation relates to events after John’s lifetime. To understand the setting from this point onwards, we need to imagine a drama, a historical pageant acted out as a series of scenes on the stage of a theatre. John the observer is invited up into the royal box for the performance. Looking down, he sees the earth and the sea below him. As each act is announced, the characters come and go, accompanied by appropriate sound effects. As an added refinement, the ‘royal box’ is defined in chapter four as the Temple from the Old Testament, complete with an Ark (the ‘throne’ on which God’s angel once sat as his representative), an incense altar, an altar for sacrifices, a great reservoir or ‘sea’ for water, a lampstand, and four cherubims or ‘living creatures’. He also sees in the foreground 24 elders who serve the Lord, as did the 24 orders of Levites in the Temple of Solomon.

In the opening scene, John sees the Lord God, seated on the throne, holding a scroll in his hand. It is made up of seven sections, each separately sealed with a string and a wax pendant. Nobody could read the scroll until the strings were cut. John sees a wounded Lamb approach the throne. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, and he is given the right to open the scroll.

He cuts the first string, and as the scroll flies open a white horse gallops across the stage with a warrior on his back. The next seal introduces a red horse ridden by a man with a dagger. The third horse is black. His jockey carries scales for weighing out daily food rations. The fourth is the colour of a corpse, and the skeleton on his back is accompanied by a symbolic grave, shovelling up the dead over a quarter of the earth.

The four coloured horses are taken from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. It is not difficult to line up the four seals with the history of the Roman Empire after John was dead – an initial period of prosperity and peace, followed by civil war, then famine and pestilence, especially in the Italian division of the Empire, which was divided into four quarters at this time. The time period covers AD 100 to AD 270. The next Seal introduces an altar splashed with blood, and the blood is said to represent the lives of Christian believers. Many of them were indeed martyred for their faith by the pagan (idol worshipping) Emperor Diocletian around 300AD. The Sixth Seal opens with dramatic sound-effects – an earthquake, and the removal of the sun, moon and stars – a traditional Bible symbol for a change of rulership. This links with the revolutionary change that took place when Constantine battled successfully for control of the Empire. Pagan Rome became Christian Rome, as he removed, once and for all, the persecution of those who refused to worship the ancient gods. Constantine came to the throne in AD 312.

During the quiet time that followed, John sees in chapter seven 144,000 people, marked in the forehead by an angelic messenger, like those faithful men Ezekiel saw set aside for God before the fall of Jerusalem in his vision (Ezekiel 9:4). They come from the 12 tribes of Israel, but Dan is omitted from the list, for these are not literally Jews, but a harvest of believers, reaped under the new and favourable

regime, in the lull before the destruction of the Empire by the barbarian tribes. They form part of a huge multitude, from all nations under heaven, that John now hears praising God, in a comforting vision of the Kingdom of God. But before that reward can be given, there are others who must be called out to join them, and so Seal number seven introduces the seven trumpets – the next phase of *“those things that must soon take place”*.

During the sealing period, a storm of winds had been held back from devastating the earth down below the Apostle. These represented the barbarian invasions that were going to sweep the Empire and snuff out the political power of Rome in the West. Now, as the First Trumpet sounds, hail and fire (taken from Moses’ plagues upon Egypt) smite one-third of the earth as the Goths sweep into Italy. With the Second Trumpet, a burning mountain falls into the Sea – the navy of the Vandals sinks the Romans from the Mediterranean. The Third Trumpet sees a meteor strike the region of rivers and streams, as Attila and the Huns crash into the Alpine region. The Fourth deletes the sun, moon and stars, which corresponds to Odoacer king of the Goths removing the last Emperor in the city of Rome, and crowning himself as king. The Empire had three divisions in this period, and the Western third had now ceased to exist.

The Eastern side of the Empire, ruled from Constantinople, was not to escape the judgement of God. The Fifth Trumpet blared, and a swarm of locusts emerged like smoke from a pit (this motif links with Abraham’s cliff-edge view of the destruction of Sodom) and covered the face of the earth. The star that led them was Mahomet, and his followers were to subjugate the Mediterranean basin for three hundred years. Trumpet Six sees a huge force of cavalry race across the earth, as the Turks in turn subdue the eastern empire. In

May 1453 they take Constantinople, and the Roman Empire comes to an end.

The sixth trumpet continues to reverberate for some time. The tenth chapter has a vision that was kept sealed up, but in the eleventh chapter John sees two Witnesses speak out against the evils of their time. These men are linked with Moses and Elijah, the two great prophets from the Old Testament. By this time the Christian church itself had become corrupt, and those who protested risked their lives. They continued to preach for 1260 days (in Bible chronology a day stands for a year) but were eventually extinguished. The darkness that fell upon Europe after the historic Massacre of St Bartholomew in AD 1572 was only relieved by another great earthquake, in which once more John sees a drastic change of rulership. This lines up with the French Revolution in AD 1759, which restored freedom of speech, and overthrew the stifling control of the Church and kings over men’s lives, first in France and then spreading to the rest of the world.

We eventually come to the Seventh Trumpet, (Revelation 11:15), and as it begins to blow, the Kingdom of God is announced. But the end has not yet quite come, for there is more history to come to pass before the last saint (believer set aside for God) has been called out from the nations of the earth. In fact, at this point the narrative of the drama goes back in time, like a novel, to look at what has been happening on the religious front while all these political changes have come and gone. In chapter twelve, we catch up with events inside the church. And the picture is not encouraging. As chapter 12 opens John sees a pregnant woman in heaven. She gives birth to a son, who fights, and throws out of heaven, a large red dragon that was dragging one third of the stars behind his tail. This strange imagery is based on the first prophecy in the Bible – the promise to Adam and Eve that a descendant of the woman would destroy the Serpent that had

brought sin into the world (Genesis 3:15). That promise we saw fulfilled in the Lord Jesus – son of the virgin Mary, hence seed of the Woman, and defeating the power of Sin in his death and resurrection. But that was three hundred years ago. The Revelation uses this Old Testament language to describe the fourth century battle between Constantine and the pagan emperor (Licinius) who ruled over the eastern third of the Empire and opposed him. With the overthrow of paganism, the Christians could rejoice that they could worship in peace. For them, it was a foreshadowing of the peace of the Kingdom.

But shadows lay ahead. The woman represented the Church. She was no longer a virgin, pure and separate from the world, awaiting the return of the Lord to whom she was betrothed (see 2 Corinthians 11:2). She was pregnant. She had been unfaithful to him. She was in a position of power as a partner of emperors and princes. That is why in the vision she is seen sitting in heaven, the ruling place, and crowned with the sun and stars. The true gospel of the First Century church had, as the apostles foresaw, become corrupt and defiled. New doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul, and the concept that Jesus was God, had crept in from Greek philosophy. A hierarchy of priests, bishops and archbishops had replaced the simplicity of the early church. Christians who once refused to fight in the Roman army, were now absorbed into the ranks.

There were some, though, who protested against the apostasy. A tiny minority, they nevertheless championed the Truth revealed through the apostles. And they suffered in consequence. There is no intolerance like religious intolerance. As the centuries crept by, they faced exclusion, imprisonment and death.

In chapter 12 the ousted pagan dragon had seven heads. In the next chapter he is replaced by another composite beast, similar

to those which Daniel saw, but also with seven heads. This time one of the heads had been given a mortal wound, but it revived and came back to life. This beast

*“was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain ..... If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints”* (Revelation 13:7-10).

As this beast lumbers off the stage another beast appears. This one has two horns, and makes an image of the previous beast (like Nebuchadnezzar) and forces people to worship it. It has the number 666.

What is all this about? The seven heads are identified for us in chapter 17, when we come to consider the last phase of the beast - a red beast ridden by a harlot. The red beast still has the seven heads, and they are linked in verses 9 and 18 with a city of seven hills, ruling over the earth. This city is clearly Rome. But John dare not attack Rome by name in his writings, because it was Rome that had sent him into exile and was persecuting the readers of his letter. So he uses this simple code that the Christians would recognise. It was Rome that killed God's saints when the pagan emperors reigned. And when they were gone, another Rome, a Roman Catholic Rome, rose from the ashes of the imperial city to become a new head of religion, opposing to the death those who protested against her.

The next two chapters, 14 and 15, comfort the saints with a picture of the Day of Judgment, when their innocent blood would be avenged. But as we near the end of the story, the spotlight swings back to the secular world of politics, to see how this

would be accomplished. In chapter 16, the Seven Bowls are now poured in sequence onto the world, a series of judgments on a Christian Roman empire that had shed the blood of God's saints for too long. We left off with the French Revolution. That was followed by the rise of Napoleon, who brought destruction to the rulers and the Church, freeing Europe from their grip. The Sixth Bowl saw the drying up of the River Euphrates (representing the Turkish Empire) at the end of the 19th century, to prepare the way for Christ's coming, and setting the land of Israel free for her people to return. And then, suddenly, Jesus comes! Like the thief in the night who catches us unprepared, he steals into the world (Revelation 16:15). His appearing initiates the War of Armageddon, the climactic confrontation that runs through all the scriptures, when the united forces of man set themselves against God and his Son. The outcome is clear. A third earthquake shatters the world, and the coalition is destroyed by giant hailstones, like the enemies of Israel in the battle of Gibeon (see Joshua 10:11).

All that remains is one last glimpse of the religious world. The two women – the loyal virgin bride and the adulterous Roman harlot, have been battling it out for centuries.

What is the outcome of the struggle? In chapter 17 John sees the red beast ridden by the harlot, who gathers the nations against the Lord Jesus Christ. He wins. She is cast down into a fiery and fatal destruction, and Jesus' faithful fiancée prepares herself for the marriage supper of the Lamb. John observes the resurrection of the dead, and the Day of Judgment, where the wicked are returned to a second death, but the faithful are to live and reign on the earth with their Lord. The last two chapters paint a wonderful picture of the new world, the Kingdom of God, where tears and suffering, all part of the Curse, are taken away. God dwells with men and women in his holy city Jerusalem, and living waters glide out of the capital city to bring healing and peace to all nations. The story has gone full circle. Genesis started with paradise on earth. It was lost through Adam's sin. Jesus' task has been to restore that harmony with God, through his own sacrifice, and our faith in him. In the symbolic words of the last chapter of this precious book, his followers are given the right to eat of the Tree of Life, and they live forever.

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