

Revelation

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See also my companion works on the gospels and the history of Israel.

Introduction

Author and Date

The work is attributed to a John, who recounts a vision. John was a common name of the day. It's very unlikely it was the same John after which the canonical gospel is named. There are far too many differences in style, content, and doctrine.

Some claim the author was the disciple John, based purely on tradition. Around 180 CE, Irenaeus said this John was the author of both Revelation and the fourth gospel. Only Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, said that Polycarp knew John personally. That's a very thin thread of testimony. I think Irenaeus's true objective was to claim apostolic succession for himself, through Polycarp, to John. Irenaeus was the first to use apostolic succession as an argument for authority. We can't follow the money, but we can follow the power. He became the second bishop of Lyon.

Revelation was most likely written around 90-95 CE. Early church tradition has it written during the reign of Domitian. These dates in power are relevant:

54-68 CE	Nero
69-79 CE	Vespasian
81-96 CE	Domitian

The language is the classical Greek of the day, by a well-educated and literate author, though of significantly less quality than the gospel of John. Greek was the original language of writing. It's not a translation from some other language.

Apocalypticism

Judaism began with the Covenantal worldview. If Israel worshiped and obeyed YHWH alone, he would be their god, and they would be his people. He didn't claim to be the only god, just the god of Israel. It was monolatrous (henotheistic), but that meant worshiping only one god, not that there was only one god.

People wondered why they were defeated by their enemies. That opened the way to the Prophetic worldview. You get defeated if you don't obey. If you got defeated, you must not have obeyed. People eventually noticed that even when they obeyed, they often got defeated anyway.

That led to the decline of the Prophetic worldview, and the rise of the Apocalyptic worldview,

Apocalypticism. It incorporated dualism, and explained away the defeats as a conflict between the cosmic powers of good and of evil. It tried to give hope and consolation by saying that someday, evil will be defeated. Apocalyptic literature expressed that worldview by telling stories showing that in the end, evil is defeated and punished, and good prevails. An apocalyptic text isn't really trying to predict the future, only that eventually good prevails. Apocalyptic language is even more wild and dramatic than prophetic language. It's full of symbolic images. Sometimes we can figure out what they were thinking with a particular symbol. Sometimes we can't. I don't think anyone in that era considered any of it to be detailed, actual predictions of the future. The literature was written for consolation (evil people punished, good rewarded) and entertainment. Perhaps that's why we don't see later biblical texts referring to these details. Some might be significant, like perhaps the 70 weeks of Daniel. Modern attempts to 'interpret' these details seem as a bunch of children looking up at the clouds and telling each other what they see.

Both of these genres were efforts to defend their Covenantal worldview, the Mosaic Covenant. That has always been the foundation of Jewish religious philosophy.

There were plenty of apocalypses besides the Apocalypse of John ("Revelation") in the early first century, as well as the previous couple of centuries. By the end of the first century, nearly everyone recognized and admitted that the apocalypse didn't happen. Then they spiritualized it in various ways. Thus it's a little surprising that a sect of the Johannine community was still promoting the apocalyptic worldview. But not too surprising. Many Christians still hold that worldview today.

Christianity incorporated that apocalyptic worldview, which predated Christianity by centuries. This author seems to concede that some Jews (144,000 over the course of history) qualified to be good, worthy of reward rather than punishment. Since the text, like all apocalyptic writing before the second century, portrays the apocalypse as happening on earth, it shows these good Jews as being brought back from the place of the dead and brought back to life on earth, along with martyred Christians, to receive their reward.

The book also contains a lot of imagery from **Titanomachy, War of the Titans**, of Greek mythology.

Revelation

The book itself is an anomaly. It's a collection of epistles with an apocalypse tacked on to the end. The chain of custody is anomalous. In the prophecy genre, the message is generally given by God to the prophet, with instructions to tell it to the people. Someone else writes the account. In this case, from God to Jesus to an angel (messenger) to a John, who was also to do the writing.

The scene of the story is the ancient three-level universe. The revelation happens in the realm above, the place of the gods. The apocalyptic action happens on the surface of the earth, the earthly realm. The dead are removed from the realm below, the place of the dead. Some of the scene changes seem ambiguous to us, though the direct audience, steeped in the apocalyptic worldview, would have no trouble figuring out where things were happening.

Why 7 churches? As we will see, this author is obsessed with sevens, considered a number of completeness. Why just **Asia Minor**? Perhaps that was the scope of his following. Indeed, Asia Minor was the geographic scope of the Johannine Community, as well as a major center of **Gnostic** philosophy. Palestine is conspicuously absent. The message is only to these assemblies (churches), not to any others. His audience was expected to know the meanings of the arcane [to us] allusions. For example, the seven stars of 1:16 would be the seven stars of the Gnostic Ogdoad (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the moon). Each archon (angel) presided over one of the seven stars. He sees one of those as assigned to each church. These archons are likely the principalities and powers (KJV) or rulers and authorities or rulers and powers that Paul talks about. They are the lowest emanations of the Godhead, responsible for physical creation, which most Gnostics considered evil and inferior.

The Nicolaitans of Rev 3 are most likely a Gnostic sect the author didn't like. The other suggestions of who they were are scant and tortuous. This article expresses some interesting ideas. <http://www.renner.org/false-doctrine/who-were-nicolaitans-what-was-doctrine-deeds/> Nicolas seemed to be a thinker. He converted from polytheism to Judaism to Christianity, but may then have flitted onto something else.

This author hijacks Jewish Apocalypticism and applies it to Christianity, but still preserves its assignment of good Jews to the good side of the apocalypse.

Rev 1:10, "I was in the spirit," could be a generic description of a dream or vision. For the author and his demographic, it's more likely a statement about a specific impartation of Gnostic special knowledge from God to a specific person. In this case, someone referred to as John.

Rev 4 reminds us that they liked numbers. The 24 elders might allude to the 24 orders of priests (1 Chronicles 24:7-19) or maybe the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel plus the 12 apostles of Christianity. 4:10 is the image from Titanomachy of the Olympians kneeling before Zeus and setting their crowns to the ground.

Rev 5 no one worthy to open the seals of the scroll. This may be the author's explanation for why his (original) ideas were unknown before now. The sealed document might allude to Daniel 12:9 (thus reminiscent of Antiochus IV Epiphanes of 167-164 BCE), and might remind the reader of a Roman will or deed. Perhaps the author of Revelation is suggesting that things will unfold in a way similar to how they did under Antiochus.

The appearance of the lamb in Revelation 5, and the prominence of that symbol going forward, would be unpopular with at least some Gnostic Christians. They believed in the forgiveness of sins but not that Jesus was a vicarious sacrifice for sin. Yet the gospel of John (1:29, 36) refers to Jesus as the lamb of God. This is still plausible, since Gnosticism is a broad umbrella term covering a wide range of ideas.

The prayers of the saints (5:1 and 8:3) refer to a practice which began with Israel in Babylonian

Diaspora. They began to consider their Torah readings and their prayers in the synagogues as a substitute for the sacrifices they could no longer offer, since they no longer had a temple. Torah very often describes food offerings (especially burnt offerings) as a pleasing aroma to Yahweh (KJV sweet savor).

Rev 7 is not as clear as we would like. Who are the groups of people considered by the author to be good people, therefore on the good side of the apocalypse? Clearly some are Jews considered by this author to be servants of God. By comparison, the next group seems to be Gentile. At the time of writing, there wasn't a backlog of dead Christians. Only verse 14 indicates these might be Christians.

The half-hour silence of 8:1 reminded me of a conductor directing a great chorus and orchestra. He begins by raising his baton. Silence is observed by everyone. The image is that the conductor is in control.

Each devastation of Revelation 8 is applied to a third of the earth. This was the decimation practice of the Roman army, but carried to an even greater extreme. It's even more extreme than Rev 6, where it's a fourth of the earth. Decimation was applied to a large unit of the Roman army guilty of a capital offense like mutiny or desertion. From Wikipedia,

“A cohort (roughly 480 soldiers) selected for punishment by decimation was divided into groups of ten. Each group drew lots (sortition), and the soldier on whom the lot fell was executed by his nine comrades, often by stoning or clubbing. The remaining soldiers were often given rations of barley instead of wheat (the latter being the standard soldier's diet) for a few days, and required to camp outside the fortified security of the camp.

As the punishment fell by lot, all soldiers in a group sentenced to decimation were potentially liable for execution, regardless of individual degrees of fault, rank, or distinction.”

Did Rev 8:8 refer to Vesuvius? Its big eruption was in 79 CE.

Rev 9:20 describes a mixed bucket of bad guys being punished, yet refusing to repent. It's bad deeds, polytheism, sorcery, sexual immorality, or theft.

Steve Noble says Rev 10:1 – 11:13 are a parenthetical expression.

Rev 10:4 applies another literary method. The rest has been badness described in nasty gory detail. Here, the author tells his audience to use their imagination. 10:9 might be the origin of the term **bittersweet**. The good news is that the bad people will be punished. The bad news is that even the good people will suffer some collateral damage.

Rev 11 Why would there be a temple? If this was Christianity, there were no more sacrifices. I think this text was written to appeal to both Jewish and Christian apocalypticists.

Steve Noble says Rev 12-15 is another interlude. The symbolic references to the sun, moon, and crown of 12 stars likely echo the vision of Joseph in Genesis 37:9, suggesting the woman represents Israel.

Some suggest the beast of Rev 13 is a composite of the beasts [empires] of Daniel 7 (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece / Seleucid) updated to modern times (Rome). Other compare the three (dragon and two beasts) to the trinity, calling them an evil trinity. I think that's a stretch.

Rev 13:3 may be an allusion to the http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero_Redivivus_legend (that Nero would return after his death). "The belief was either the result or cause of several pretenders who posed as Nero leading rebellions."

The prominence of **ΠΟΙΕΩ** in Rev 13 is an action verb (to do, make, continue, force). In modern culture, we might call the two beasts executive officers. "It is important to remember that virtually all the main verbs in verses 12-18 are present tense. This is obscured to some extent in the NIV, which seems to take them as "historical" present tenses, governed by the past tense, "I saw," in verse 11. They come through in the NIV, therefore, as past tenses: he exercised (v. 12), he performed (v. 13), he deceived (v. 14), he forced (v. 16). This is legitimate, but it should not cloud the fact that what John sees is something going on even as he watches. Literally, the second beast "is exercising" the first beast's authority and "is making" the earth's inhabitants worship the beast (v. 12). ... All this could simply be the style of prophetic narrative. It is, however, more likely that John is suggesting that what he saw was in some sense going on in the Roman Empire even as he wrote. John's purpose is not to construct a scenario for a specific series of events in the distant future, but to interpret (not literally, but very imaginatively) certain developments in his own day. Once we stop looking for a blueprint of the future, we can gain insight from the picture he paints into the conflict between good and evil in every generation--including our own."

(<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Rev/Beast-Earth>)

The theme firms up in Rev 14. Numerous parallels show that the 144,000 mentioned here are the same as those of Rev 7. It seems unlikely that "It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins." means men who never had sex. But it definitely means just men. While women were just beginning to gain some rights of their own, these were still strongly male-dominated societies. Even in Torah, men were the ones who counted. Sometimes, as an afterthought, "... plus women and children." These 144,000 are called firstfruits. Since Christianity syncretized Jewish Apocalypticism, and considered their god to be identical with the God of Israel, it makes sense for them to consider acceptable to God those whom God considered acceptable according to the terms of Torah. They may not have had later Christian doctrines, or doctrines from other branches of Christianity, to channel their thinking. It's why they could consider some Jews to be on the good side of the apocalypse without forcing them into a proto-orthodox Christian mold. This Gnostic community of Asia Minor might be unfamiliar with many of the ideas of Paul. Or they might consider some of Paul's ideas wrong, just as Paul considered many other ideas wrong.

The picture emerges of the demographics on the good side of the apocalypse. 144,000 good Jews. A multitude of good Christians. No polytheists. No bad people.

Babylon

Rev 17 talks about a place of 7 mountains with a “great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.” Hmmm. I wonder what that might be. Rev 17 sets the scene, and 17:9 removes any doubt. “the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated.” Rome has always known as the city on seven hills. Babylon was an empire, one of many to conquer Israel. Which empire currently rules Israel? Rome! This analogy is a literary tool to say that this author thinks of the Roman Empire the same way Israel thought about the Babylonian Empire. By modern moral standards, it’s not nice to wish for very bad things to happen to people you like. The ancient apocalyptic worldview had no such moral qualms.

By imposing rule of law (Pax Romana), empire ends all the local wars. People can then focus on civilization. The scope of altruism increases as their definition of neighbor broadens. Life need not be a zero-sum game. Instead of killing each other, we can cooperate, trade, and practice division of labor. We can afford art, music, science, literature, architecture. Wealth can grow if it’s not continually being destroyed.

Yet some people insist on complaining about paradise if they think paradise is picking on them. They cling to conspiracy theories. Enjoying the prosperity resulting from empire, the people credit the benevolence of the gods for their prosperity. These Christians threaten that benevolence by refusing to offer to the gods the traditional sacrifices.

Rev 18 shows what the people were really upset about. 18:12-13 lists 28 things whose commerce will be destroyed. They are all luxuries. Who owns these things? The rich. The 1%. The people were upset about wealth inequity, not religious persecution. Does this sound familiar? But today, we don’t want the rich to be tortured and destroyed. Instead, we work to find ways to change our governance and social contract to make wealth distribution more equitable. It’s an age-old problem. But hopefully we are better equipped today to solve it by peaceful means.

Rev 18:16 shows Babylon clothed in linen, as well as 15:6 the angels with plagues. 7:9 shows the Gentile multitude clothed in white robes. Our categorical assignments for this clothing are too simplistic.

Rev 19 finally arrives with its brief description of good things for the good people.

Rev 20 After all the dead are resurrected for judgment, the place of the dead is empty. And since death is also destroyed, there is never again any need for the place of the dead. Might as well throw it away also. There is no indication that death is going to be tortured. Most likely the same for the people tossed into that lake of fire.

Rev 20 Some Preterists say the Gog-Magog of Tubal were the Seljuk Turks who conquered Judea in 1071 CE. I'm not sure selection of this event is anything more than selection bias because it happened 1000 years after 70 CE. See <http://revelationrevolution.org/revelation-20-a-preterist-commentary/>.

Rev 21:12 seems to say that the bride is the new Jerusalem, not the church.

Rev 22 healing of the nations. Context doesn't suggest that it's talking about Gentiles. I think it's just part of the Utopian vision. We won't need to worry about food or medicine. Both will be available. That phrase is used only here. 22:4 See his face, cf Moses.

Mark of the Beast

In Greek isopsephy and Hebrew gematria (both forms of numerology), the number of the beast is nearly always shown as referring to Nero. To say the least, Nero controlled commerce of the day. See Deuteronomy 6:8.

Some have claimed that the UPC (Universal Product Code) is the New Testament mark of the beast. The creator of the UPC categorically denies this. See www.laurerupc.com and <http://204.13.85.155/laurergj/upc/666quest.html>

Rev 22 gives the usual time frame of first century apocalypticism. "I am coming soon.", "for the time is near", "I am coming soon.", and "Surely I am coming soon." The only meaningful conclusion from the perspective of twenty centuries later is, "It didn't happen."

References

1. Ehrman, Bart D., History of the Bible (audiobook). The Teaching Company, 2005.