

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Introduction

Revelation: an Unsolved Puzzle

G. Campbell Morgan: "There is no book in the Bible which I have read so often, no book to which I have tried to give more patient and persistent attention. . . . There is no book in the Bible to which I turn more eagerly in hours of depression than this, with all its mystery, all the details of which I do not understand."
(Quoted by Smith)

The book of Revelation is a mysterious, enigmatic book. No one has ever claimed to have completely understood it and been taken seriously. It is unlike any other book in the Bible in its extensive use of strange symbols and other-worldly scenes.

But, perhaps partly because of its strangeness Christian people, down through these 20 centuries since it was written, have been intrigued with it probably more than any other book in the Bible.

I. Why study it?

1. If, as is probably true, we will not be able to completely understand it, why should we bother to study it at all?
 - Because there is much of it we can understand and apply to Christian living here and now. Also, the book promises a special blessing to those who read and study it: "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is at hand." (Rev. 1:3)
2. Since there is so much controversy about its meaning, shouldn't we refrain from studying it in a group?
 - Controversial issues do call for more self-restraint and a spirit of toleration. But we should not stay away from studying issues just because they are controversial, especially when God's Word is involved. Because there is so much discussion of Biblical prophecy these days it is imperative that each Christian should know what the Bible says about this vital doctrine of Christ's second coming and about the events which will accompany it.

II. What makes this book different from other scripture?

The book of Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature. The word 'apocalyptic' comes from the Greek word meaning 'revelation' and is the first word of the book of Revelation in the Greek New Testament. This type of literature in the Bible refers to writings which abound in symbolism, look for the setting up of God's kingdom and a new heaven and earth, and are revealed through angels and other heavenly beings. (There are other writings called 'apocalyptic' which are not contained in the canon of Holy Scripture, but these will not concern us.) Other examples of this type of literature in the Bible are portions of the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, and Zechariah. John seemed to be influenced

by this type of literature when he penned the Revelation. However John did not simply sit down and say, "I'm going to write some apocalyptic literature." For the most part John merely recorded what he had seen and heard (1:19). But he may have used this literary style to help interpret what he had witnessed. Nevertheless, it does help us to keep in mind that the book is highly symbolic.

III. Who wrote it?

We believe that John the apostle wrote it, because:

1. The book claims John as its author (1:1, 1:4, 1:9, 21:2, 22:8).
2. He claimed to be the John who wrote the Gospel of John (1:2).
3. The language of the book, though different in some respects (mainly because of its unusual subject matter), uses many Johannine expressions, such as "Word of God," referring to Christ, Christ depicted as a Lamb, the expressions "that which is true," "he that overcometh," and "to tabernacle." These words and expressions are also characteristic of the other Johannine writings, but they are infrequently found in other New Testament writings. (Smith)
4. The circumstances of writing (that is, the date of writing, exile of the author on Patmos, the conditions in the churches and in the Empire, etc.) are not inconsistent with what we know about the life of John the apostle.

IV. Why did he write it?

God revealed it to him through Christ "to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass . . ." (1:1). The book of Revelation is foremost of all a book of prophecy. It was written in a period in which the church was being persecuted, to show that, while evil may seem to triumph for a time, in the end "the Kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign fo r ever and ever." (11:15).

V. When was it written?

Probably around the end of the first century, about 95 A.D., during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who commanded his subjects to worship him and instituted widespread persecutions upon those who defied his wicked decrees.

VI. To whom was it written?

The seven churches in Asia (1:4, chapters 2 and 3). (See map, figure 1.) But the book was probably also intended to be circulated among all the churches. The seven churches of Asia may have been selected as churches representative of all the churches. The message of the book is universal and all who read and study it will profit (1:3).

VII. From where was it written?

Patmos (1:9), a tiny island (about 22 square miles) in the Aegean Sea, about 30 miles off the coast of Asia Minor (see map, figure 1). John was banished there, evidently as punishment and restriction imposed for preaching "the word of God" and "the testimony of Jesus"

(1:9). His exile may have included hard labor in quarries. (Morris)

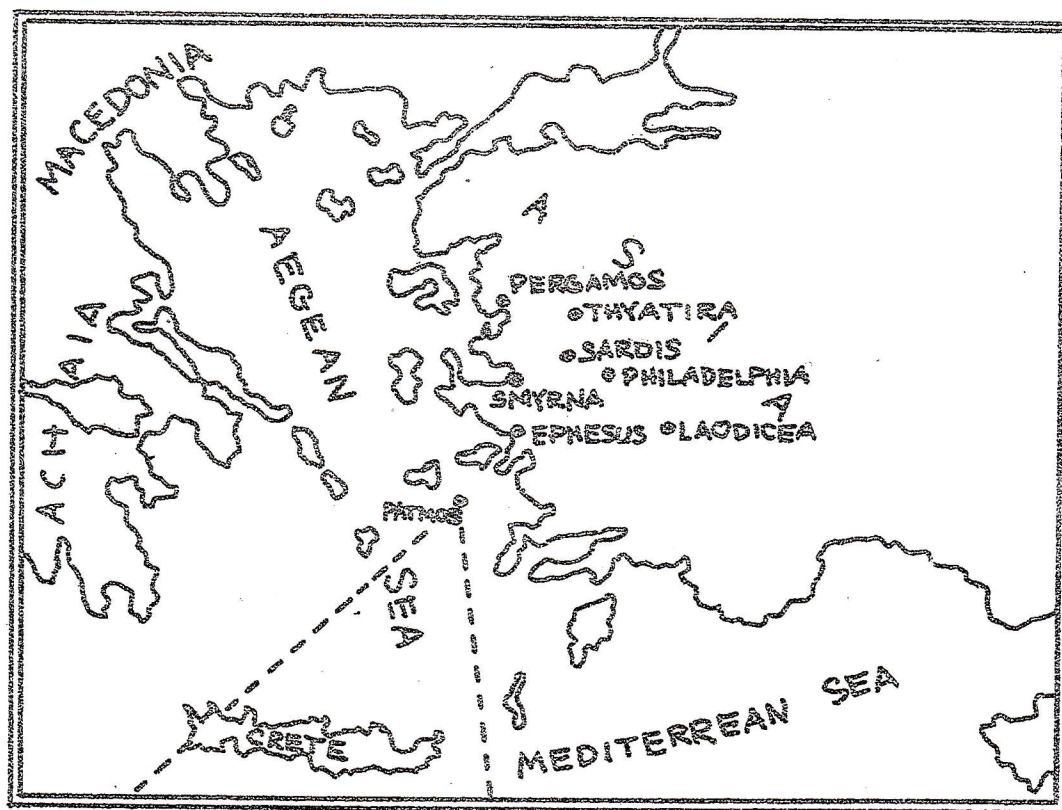
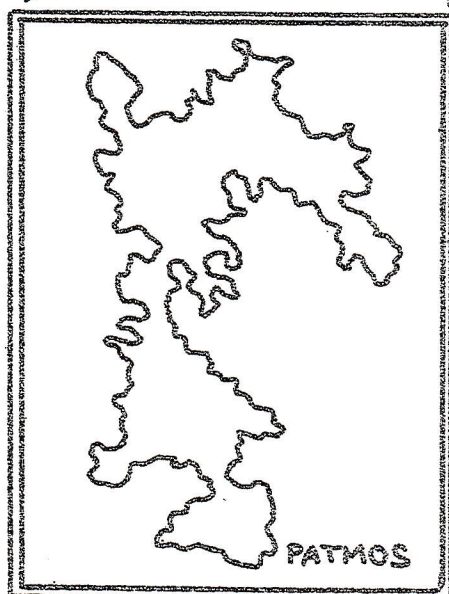


Figure 1

The Seven Churches of Asia (above), The Isle of Patmos (inset, left).



VIII. How should Revelation be interpreted?

There are four main views of interpreting the book:

1. The Preterist View maintains that all of Revelation has been fulfilled in the past, in John's day.
2. The Historical View sees the book of Revelation as "an inspired

forecast of the whole of human history." (Morris)

3. The Idealist View holds that the entire book is concerned with ideas and principles, not history, either past or prophetic.
4. The Futurist View sees the book as primarily prophetic and yet future, especially from the fourth chapter on.

IX. What are the major themes of the book?

It is the only predominantly prophetic book in the New Testament, so we should expect to find prophetic themes. McGee lists ten subjects of prophecy which find their consummation in Revelation:

1. The Lord Jesus Christ (Gen. 3:15)
2. The Church (Matt. 16:18)
3. The Resurrection and Translation of Saints (I Thes. 4:13-18; I Cor. 15:51,52)
4. The Great Tribulation (Deut. 4:30,31)
5. Satan and Evil (Ezk. 28:11-18)
6. The "Man of Sin" (Ezk. 28:1-10)
7. The Course and End of Apostate Christendom (Dan. 2:31-45; Matt. 13)
8. The Beginning, Course, and End of the "Times of the Gentiles" (Dan. 2:37; Luke 21:24)
9. The Second Coming of Christ (Jude 14,15)
10. Israel's Covenants (Gen. 12:1-3), five things promised Israel.

Books Referred to

- J. Vernon McGee, Reveling through Revelation.
 Leon Morris, The Revelation of St. John (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).
 Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos, The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands.
 Wilbur M. Smith, "Revelation," Wycliffe Bible Commentary.
 Merrill C. Tenny, "Revelation, Book of the," Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible.