

Introduction to Revelation

Dr. Paul Hoskins

(Associated reading: Revelation 1-3)

Sources: CM: D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Paul Hoskins, *The Book of Revelation: A Theological and Exegetical Commentary* (Charleston: Christodoulos, 2017).

I. Introduction to Revelation (CM, ch. 25; see also Hoskins, *Revelation*, introduction)

A. Author: John the Apostle

B. Date and place of writing: Probably toward the end of the reign of Domitian (Domitian's reign: A.D. 81-96) while on the island of Patmos (1:9).

C. Destinations: Seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor)

D. Genre: prophecy (1:3), letter (1:4), apocalyptic literature (1:1) (see CM, 713-6). In the previous edition of this introduction, Carson, Moo, and Morris describe Revelation as “a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in a letter form” (first edition, 479).

E. Interpretation: four basic approaches

1. Preterist approach: It interprets Revelation as if “the visions of John grow out of and describe events in John’s own day” (CM, 719). Thus Revelation describes events that are happening in John’s time and those that are about to happen.

2. Historical approach (or historicist): Revelation is a “sketch of history from the time of Christ to [our] own day” (CM, 720). Such an approach led the Reformers to identify the Pope as the Beast.

3. Idealist approach: This approach focuses particular attention on the theology of the book and directs attention away from seeing the book as a guide to future events (or the events of history or John’s own day).

4. Futurist approach: Though there is some variety in this approach, it stresses that a number of events described in the book of Revelation are events that will occur in “the very last days of human history” (CM, 720). For divisions of the futurist approach see Hoskins, *Revelation* (see overview of various views in the introduction to the commentary).

a. Amillennialist

b. Dispensational premillennialist

c. Historic premillennialist

5. Approach taken in my commentary (see Hoskins, *Revelation*, 35-36):

My commentary is intended to contribute to the clarification of the strengths (and weaknesses) of a historic premillennial approach to the book. I first came to embrace this position due to my exegetical work on certain passages, especially Revelation 12-13.

Favored approach of Carson and Moo:

“Along with several recent commentators, we find some truth in all four of these views. Yet it is the futurist approach that comes closest to doing justice to the nature and purposes of Revelation” (CM, 720).

F. Structure of the seven letters to the seven churches (see Hoskins, *Revelation*, 119-21)

The seven letters are basically set up in a chiastic structure with the Thyatira letter at the center of the chiasm. It is important to notice that the Thyatira letter is the central letter of the seven letters. For discussion of this structure and its implications for interpreting the letters, see the relevant section in my commentary.

G. Contributions:

1. It is the most significant work of Christian prophecy in the NT.
2. It provides a helpful perspective on the life of Christians in our world today.

II. Theology of Revelation: Chapters 1-3

A. Rev 1:1-4. How is the book of Revelation classified according to these verses? When are the events described going to take place?

B. Notice the titles in 1:4-8.

1. For instance, God is introduced as “the one who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4, 8). Why is this a significant title?

2. The church is identified as a “kingdom” and “priests” (1:6).

C. John introduces himself in 1:9. What two significant details does John provide about himself?

1.

2.

D. Vision of the Son of Man (1:11-20).

1. John is commissioned to write to the seven churches (1:11).

2. He then describes his vision of the Son of Man (1:12-20). Elements from this vision will appear throughout the book, but especially in the letters to the seven churches.
3. Notice the words of interpretation in 1:20. What are the seven stars and the seven lampstands?

E. Letters to the seven churches.

1. Each letter has several elements.
 - a. Destination: “To the angel of the church in _____”
 - b. Description of some feature of the Son of Man.
 - c. Description of the strengths and/or weaknesses of the church, often accompanied by words of warning or a promise of reward.
 - d. Invocation to hear: “He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
 - e. A promise to the “one who overcomes,” that is, the one who remains faithful to the end.
2. Letter to Thyatira (2:18-29). Look for the above elements in this letter.

3. Notice what is promised to the “one who overcomes.”
 - a. 2:7: “to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God”
 - b. 2:11: “will not be hurt by the second death”
 - c. 2:17: “some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it”
 - d. 2:26-28: “authority over the nations” and “the morning star”
 - e. 3:5: “clothed in white garments” and a sure place in the “book of life” and Christ will confess the person’s name before the Father and his angels.
 - f. 3:12: the one who overcomes will be a “pillar in the Temple of my God [the new Jerusalem]” and will not leave that Temple forevermore; also, he will receive “the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem” and “my new name.”
 - g. 3:21: will sit down with Christ on his throne
 - h. What are the two main themes that emerge from the above promises?

- F. What practical implication about the relationship of Christ to the church emerges from reading these seven letters?

III. The Seven Letters to the Seven Churches (Rev 2-3)

A. Letter 1: Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7)

1. Strengths (2:1-2, 6)

2. Weakness. What does it mean that they have left their first love? How does one figure out what this promise means?

a. Matt. 22:37-38, Rev. 2:19

b. John 14:15, 21-24; John 13:34-35

c. 1 John 4:19-5:3

3. Promise to the conquerors.

a. What is promised to the conquerors? What does this promise mean? Relate this promise to Revelation 22 and the New Jerusalem.

b. How does the promise relate to Genesis?

4. What significant point(s) did you notice in the letter to Ephesus? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life?

B. Letter 2: Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11)

1. As you read this letter, look for its major theme. What is it?

2. What does Jesus say about himself (2:8)? How do his words relate to the theme of the letter?

3. Revelation 2:9

a. In Rev 2:9, what does Jesus say about the church? What is their situation and what do they get from Jesus? (Compare 3:17.)

b. What does he say about their opponents? How are they related to Satan? Why does Jesus say that they are not truly Jews?

4. Revelation 2:9-11

a. What is the Devil about to do to the church at Smyrna (2:10)?

b. How might this relate to the slander of the Jews in Rev 2:9?

c. Read Rev 12:10-11. How are these verses related to Rev 2:10?

5. The promise to the conquerors. What is Jesus' promise to the conquerors? How does it relate to 2:7 and 2:8?

6. What significant point(s) did you notice in the Smyrna letter? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life?

C. Letter 3: Pergamum (Rev. 2:12-17)

1. Revelation 2:12

a. How does the sharp sword relate to the Pergamum letter (2:12, 2:16)?

b. The image comes from Revelation 1:16 (see Isa. 11:4 and 49:2). What is the sword according to Revelation 2:16 and Isaiah 49:2?

2. Revelation 2:13

a. What is the strength of the church at Pergamum? What is the special title given to Antipas? Who else is called faithful witness in Revelation (see 1:5)?

b. What is the throne of Satan? How does it relate to "where Satan dwells"?

c. How does Satan's throne and dwelling place relate to the persecution of Christians in Pergamum?

3. Revelation 2:14-15

a. What is the weakness of the church? How would this weakness help them to avoid persecution?

b. Read Numbers 25:1-5 and 31:16. What do you learn about Balaam and the sin of Israel from these verses? Notice the typology here. The sin of Israel provides a type or pattern for what Jesus sees in the church at Pergamum.

c. As a result of the Numbers connection and Revelation 17, what does the language of sexual immorality (or harlotry) mean in Revelation 2:14? What is the sin here? How does “eat things sacrificed to idols” relate to your answer?

d. Note that Revelation 2:15 is probably indicating that Nicolaitan teachers are the ones who are teaching that the road of compromise is acceptable for Christians.

4. Revelation 2:17. The hidden manna, the white stone, and the new name.

a. These are all three things that are now hidden, but will be revealed in the New Jerusalem.

b. What gift might the “hidden manna” be associated with (John 6:58)?

c. Whose name is the “new name” on the stone (2:12, 19:12)? How does the “new name” relate to that which is now hidden, but will be revealed?

5. What significant point(s) did you notice in the Pergamum letter? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life?

C. Letter 4: Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29)

1. Pergamum was the major city near Thyatira and Thyatira tried to associate herself with her powerful neighbor. So, it is not surprising that their letters are related.

2. Revelation 2:18

a. Compare Revelation 2:18 to Revelation 1:14-15. How would the fire associated with the Son of God's eyes and feet relate to the central emphasis of the Thyatira letter?

b. Son of God. What does the Son of God do according to Revelation 12:5? How does this relate to the Thyatira letter?

3. Revelation 2:19. What are the strengths of the Thyatira church?

4. Revelation 2:20-23

a. Jezebel of the Old Testament (OT). Read 1 Kings 16:31, 18:4, 21:25 and 2 Kings 9:22. What do you learn about Jezebel from these verses? What are Jezebel's "harlotries" and "sorceries" (2 Kings 9:22)?

b. The Jezebel of Thyatira is a woman who has earned that name by her actions. She is related to the Jezebel of the OT. If so, then what is likely to be the nature of her "sexual immorality" (or "harlotry") and her adultery (2:20-22)? How does her "harlotry" and adultery relate to idolatry?

c. Why would the sin of Jezebel and her followers be attractive to Christians of Thyatira and Pergamum (and to the other seven churches)?

d. How does her sin relate to one of the main themes of the book of Revelation (see Rev. 9:20, 13:8, for example)? What does the OT have to say about this sin?

5. Revelation 2:24. The teaching of Jezebel and her followers is labeled as “the deep things of Satan.” Their teaching is probably the same as the teaching of the Nicolaitans (2:15). What do Jezebel and her followers probably call them? Revelation 2:9 provides an analogy.

6. The Son of God’s Promises (Revelation 2:25-28). Jesus promises two things to those who persevere.

a. Authority over the nations. Jesus talks about their authority over the nations using a long allusion to Psalm 2:9.

1. Read Revelation 19:15, 21. How does Jesus shepherd the nations with his iron rod?

2. If so, then how do Christians shepherd the nations with Jesus?

b. The morning star of Revelation 2:28.

1. Read Revelation 22:16. Who is the star in that verse?

2. Who predicted the coming of a star in Numbers 24:17? Notice how this relates to Revelation 2:14.

3. So, what does Jesus promise of the “morning star” mean?

7. What significant point(s) did you notice in the Thyatira letter? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life?

D. Letter 5: Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6)

1. Revelation 3:1

a. For the seven stars and seven spirits of God, see 1:16, 20 and 5:6. In light of these verses, how might the fact that Jesus has the seven stars and the seven spirits relate to the Sardis letter? Hint: It will be easier to answer this question after you answer the questions below.

b. What name (reputation) does the Sardis church have? What does Jesus know about them (the reality)?

2. Revelation 3:2. What does the Sardis church need to do? What is deficient about their works?

3. Revelation 3:3

a. What three things does the Sardis church need to do?

b. What will be the consequence if they do not do these three things?

c. Read Matthew 24:42-44 and Revelation 16:15. How do these verses relate to Revelation 3:2-3? What coming of Jesus is referred to here? Therefore, what is the Sardis church not prepared for? Why is this important?

4. Revelation 3:4.

a. "You are also having a few names in Sardis." Notice the word "names" here. Name or names is a key word that ties this letter together.

b. How do you suppose that a person defiles their garments? Note the figurative language (related to the Old Testament). Are their clothes really their problem?

c. Who, then, are those whose garments are not defiled, who will walk with Jesus in white, and who are worthy? What theme of the seven letters does this relate to?

5. Revelation 3:5. Promise to the conquerors.

a. Read Revelation 7:14, 21:27, 22:14. What is the hope that Christ places before the Sardis believers? Why should believers want white garments?

b. What promise does Jesus make concerning the book of life? In light of Revelation 13:8 (and 17:8), why do some interpreters think that there is a theological problem here? How should we interpret Jesus' words about the book of life?

c. What promise does Jesus make concerning the name of the conquerors? Why is this good news? Notice the final occurrence of name.

6. What significant point(s) did you notice in the letter to Sardis? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life? What kind of name (reputation) do you have with others? How would you know what kind of name you have in the eyes of Christ?

E. Letter 6: Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13)

1. Like the church at Smyrna, the Philadelphia church is facing opposition from the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 3:9). This title refers to Jews of Philadelphia who are persecuting Christians. This is important to notice. In the Philadelphia letter, Jesus counters the false claims that the synagogue is making about Jesus and about the believers at Smyrna. For instance, Jesus is truly God and his followers are truly part of the people of God.

2. Revelation 3:7 and 6:10. Who is called “holy” and “true” in these verses? Therefore, what does Jesus' use of these titles tell us about Jesus? Who is he? Would the synagogue agree with this claim?

3. Revelation 3:7-8 and Isaiah 22:22. The key of David should be related to Jesus' identity as Messiah. As the Messiah, he has the authority and responsibility (represented by the key) to rule over David's house, over Israel (Luke 1:33), and over God's kingdom (Rev. 3:21, 11:15).

a. What does Jesus do with the key?

b. How does this promise relate to Revelation 3:12? See Rev. 21:25. Note: The New Jerusalem is his city and his temple, according to Revelation 21-22.

4. Revelation 3:8. What are the strengths of the church?

5. Revelation 3:9

a. What does Jesus promise about the synagogue of Satan?

b. This verse appears to allude to Isaiah 60:14.

1. If this is correct, then what does the allusion suggest about the identity of Jesus' followers? Do they belong to the people of God? Will they experience the fulfillment of Isaiah 60:14?

2. How does Jesus' view of the identity of his people differ from the view of the "synagogue of Satan"? How would they understand Isaiah 60:14?

6. Revelation 3:9b-10

a. "I have loved you." According to John 15:10, the love that Jesus has for his people is closely related to _____ . How does this relate to Revelation 3:10a?

b. What does Jesus promise to his faithful people according to Revelation 3:10? Read along with Rev. 7:1-3.

7. Revelation 3:11. Jesus promises that he is coming soon (Rev. 22:20). In light of his coming, what exhortation does Jesus give to the church?

8. Revelation 3:12

a. In 3:12a, what does Jesus promise regarding the temple of God?

1. How can this be true in light of Revelation 21:22? How might verses like Revelation 21:16 help you to solve this problem? Hint: The New Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22 is more than just a city; it is a temple-city.

2. What does the pillar image communicate? Note: This is a good example of a metaphor.

b. What does Jesus promise to write upon the conquerors? See Rev. 22:4 and 2:17. What do the names written upon tell us about them? Who are they?

9. What significant point(s) did you notice in the letter to Philadelphia? How would you relate it to Christians and the Christian life? What kind of name (reputation) do you have with others? How would you know what kind of name you have in the eyes of Christ?

F. Letter 7: Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-22)

1. Revelation 3:14: The titles of Jesus.

a. Amen, the faithful and true witness. These are related titles and should be interpreted together.

1. What do they affirm about Jesus?

2. Why will this reminder be important for the Laodiceans? Hint: They are about to receive some harsh words of correction from Jesus.

b. “the origin of God’s creation.” Jesus is the divine creator, along with his Father. As the creator, he can provide for his people (Isa. 41:4, 17; 42:5-9). What kind of provision do the Laodiceans need?

2. Revelation 3:15-17. Their works.

a. How does Jesus evaluate their works in 3:15-16? How might being lukewarm versus hot or cold relate to common knowledge about beverages that are desirable?

b. Revelation 3:17

1. What do the Laodiceans think of themselves? What is their evaluation based upon?

2. How does Jesus evaluate them? Why is his assessment so different from theirs? See Hosea 12:8.

3. How does this assessment contrast with Jesus’ assessment of Smyrna (2:9)?

4. Why can wealth be dangerous according to Revelation 13:17 and 18:3 (and Revelation 17-18 generally)? What does Proverbs 8:18 say about wealth? Compare that to Proverbs 11:28 and 18:10-11. How might these verses relate to Revelation 3:17?

3. Revelation 3:18. What does Jesus advise the Laodiceans to do? In light of Revelation 16:15 (and 3:4-5), what is Jesus preparing them for? How would Jesus' advice relate to obedience to God's commandments? See also Matthew 6:20.

4. Revelation 3:19-20. What assurance does Jesus give to the church in Revelation 3:19-20? How does 3:20 relate to 3:15-16? Hint: What do these verses have in common?

5. Revelation 3:21.

a. What promise does Jesus make to the church? How does it relate to Revelation 2:26-27?

b. Why is this a fitting way to end this letter and to end the seven letters generally?

6. Application questions.

a. As it turns out, what is the most pressing need that the Laodicean church has?

b. What are possible remedies to blindness to one's spiritual poverty? How might we fall into such blindness?

c. For Jesus, the road to greatness (God's throne) led through suffering. By implication, what might the road to greatness (God's throne) look like for us? How do the seven letters affirm this point?

d. Why is the Laodicean letter so important for Christians to take seriously in our world today?