

**The Deep Things of God:
An Insider's Guide to the Book of Revelation**

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Introduction

You are vacationing on a lovely island. One day you are walking along the edge of a cliff, occasionally stopping to peer over the edge at the waves crashing against the rocks below. The combination of wind, waves and noise is exhilarating. Suddenly you stumble upon a very old man sitting on a flat spot near the top of the cliff with a great view of the coastline and the sea. He doesn't seem to notice you. His gaze is fixed far out to sea.

"What are you looking at, sir?" you ask, "Are you waiting for a ship to come in?"

He doesn't answer.

You move closer, yet he still doesn't seem aware of your presence. Although his eyes are open, you get the impression that he is not really there with you, his eyes are not focused on anything you can see.

"What are you looking at, sir?" you ask again.

Again, no response.

You move closer and wave your hand in front of the man's eyes.

Still no response.

You are torn between shaking the man, calling the police, and sitting down nearby to see what will happen next. You decide to sit down and see what will happen.

After a few minutes, the old man takes a deep breath, his eyes focus and he looks around and sees you. You move your feet a bit in case you need to get up and run in a hurry, but he smiles in a friendly way and says, "I suppose you are wondering what is going on."

You nod tentatively.

He smiles again and says, "You probably won't believe this, but I just had an encounter with Jesus Himself! And He told me all about the future and what the end of the world will be like. I can't wait to share the message with someone, would you be interested in hearing me out?"

Would you be interested? Or would you put him off as just another crank? When it comes to the book of Revelation what thoughts come to your mind? The number 666? The Four Horsemen? The Battle of Armageddon? The New Jerusalem? The book of Revelation has intrigued people for nearly two thousand years. It is an ambiguous, strange, and challenging book. And if you have been studying Revelation for any time at all, you have noticed that people have very strong opinions about it. You also know that those opinions usually don't agree. Someone has suggested that if you find twelve Christians interested in the book of Revelation, they will probably hold thirteen different opinions about the book.

Since the book of Revelation claims to tell readers about the future, however, it is very attractive to us no matter how difficult it may be to understand. To be curious about the future seems to be a basic human need. We all would like to know what is about to happen in our personal lives, our country and the world. The problem is that when we open the book of

Revelation the power of our curiosity can cause us to see what we want to see, rather than what is really there. Our passion to know can cloud our knowing.

Those who misread Revelation today are far from the first to do so. But history tells us that misreading Revelation is not ethically neutral. In the wrong hands the Apocalypse can be as dangerous as a terrorist attack. Sober and careful study of the Apocalypse is not just a game, it can be a life and death matter. For example, in 1534 AD there was a group of people who studied the book of Revelation and came to the conclusion that the city of Münster, Germany was the New Jerusalem. Many people were killed in the battles fought over the city. Many others starved to death in the siege that followed. Mistaken ideas about Revelation can be deadly. And not just in the distant past.

In 1993 the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco, Texas seized the attention of a nation. The Davidians at “Mount Carmel” were earnestly, sincerely, and honestly studying the book of Revelation. But in the process, they developed ideas that caused them to challenge the federal government of the United States in battle, ending up in the loss of nearly a hundred lives. Men, women, and even little children were sacrificed on the altar of someone’s unique interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Perhaps the wiser course, then, would be to stay away from this book! After all, why go looking for trouble? But I don’t think that’s the answer either. Revelation is far too influential in today’s world to ignore. The language of Revelation, from Armageddon to 666, is widely utilized in popular culture. The kinds of themes addressed in the book are the subject of influential and

popular movies such as *Terminator*, *The Lion King*, *The Matrix*, and *Independence Day*. So whether we like it or not, understanding the book of Revelation is important in today's world. The best course, therefore, seems to be learning **how to read** the book in a way that avoids the twin perils of fanaticism and indifference. Charting such a course is the purpose of this book.

Encouragement From Ellen White

An author that I've learned to appreciate, Ellen White, does not offer a detailed study of the book of Revelation, but she saw special value in such study. There are statements, in her writings, that strongly encouraged me in my study of this book. She comments, for example: "We do not understand the Word as we should. The book of Revelation opens with an injunction to us to understand the instruction that it contains. But we do not understand fully the lessons that it teaches notwithstanding the injunction we have to search and study it."¹ Even though there have been centuries of study, there is much more we need to learn about this book. The book continues to require serious and careful attention.

Ellen White goes on to say: "When we as a people understand what this book means to us, there will be seen among us a great revival."² The book of Revelation has the potential to create a great Christian revival. It has the possibility to open up a fresh and different experience. "When the books of Daniel and Revelation are better understood, believers will have an entirely different religious experience."³ What does that mean? "They will be given such glimpses of the open gates of Heaven that the heart and mind will be impressed with the

character that all must develop in order realize the blessedness which is to be the reward of the pure in heart.”⁴

The ultimate reason to study Revelation is that this strange book gives a glimpse of heaven that you can't get anywhere else. You could say the book offers heaven's secret intelligence about ultimate reality. Revelation takes us far beyond what we can see with a telescope. It opens up vistas that cannot be experienced with our eyes and ears. And when we understand the universe from God's perspective, we will have a much clearer picture of how to live successfully in that world which we *can* see, hear and touch.

Let me share one last sentence from Ellen White: “The Lord will bless all who will seek humbly and meekly to understand that which is revealed in the Revelation.”⁵ According to this statement, attitude is everything. If my motivation for studying this book is to be able to show how brilliant I am, or to defend my pet ideas about the universe, I won't get the benefits that come only when you read with a hungry heart.

The farther you progress in education the more equipped you are to solve problems and to master riddles. But a truly educated person is also aware of how little he or she knows. A truly educated person knows that there are an incredible variety of options in the process of learning. Although I have put several hours a day for the last thirty years into the study of this book, I have learned above all else that I have much more to learn. A humble and meek approach to Revelation is the only sensible attitude to take.

Exploring the Basic Questions

When a news reporter investigates a new best-seller, he or she examines the kind of person who wrote the book, when and where it was written, and how the author came up with the information presented. This kind of basic information is often crucial to understanding the book's goal and its message.

The Author of Revelation

From what the book itself tells us, the author of Revelation is a man named John (Rev 1:9). This John writes to the Christian churches of Asia Minor, which were located in the western part of what we call Turkey today. 2000 years ago, these churches were part of the Roman province of Asia (Rev 1:11). John seems to have been some kind of authoritative figure to those churches.

Now there are some interesting features in the book of Revelation that may shed some light on the kind of person this John was. For one thing, the book is filled with grammatical flaws in the original language (Greek). The Greek of Revelation reminds scholars of the practice writing of first-century school children (Greek samples of school work can be seen in papyrus documents unearthed in Egypt). So John was probably not a Greek speaker by either birth or training. Further evidence suggests that the author probably grew up in Palestine in a Jewish environment. If John had spent most of his life in Palestine and then moved to the Greek-speaking province of Asia, it would explain some of the difficulties he seems to have had with

the Greek language. As a second language it was “Greek to him.”

While the book of Revelation doesn’t give us much detail about John, a number of other ancient documents address the issue. Most of them tell us that years before this book was written, John was one of the twelve disciples that walked with Jesus. He was the brother of James and the son of Zebedee. Jesus called him and his brother “sons of thunder” (apparently a reference to their loud and combative personalities– Jesus *did* have a sense of humor). According to these sources, John lived in Jerusalem for some thirty years, spent time in Pella across the Jordan, and then settled in Asia Minor some fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The tradition then tells us that during the final years of his life John wrote both the book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel, the one that bears his name.

Many scholars question, however, whether the author of Revelation could be the same person as John, the disciple of Jesus and the author of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John and the book of Revelation are very different. While the grammar of the Gospel is simple it is very correct and tells the story of Jesus in a stunning, masterful way. By way of contrast, the book of Revelation uses rough language to tell an apocalyptic story of strange beasts and perplexing symbols. Many scholars look at the differences and wonder how the same person could have written both of those books.

Other scholars, nevertheless, look at the two books and say, “Really, they do have lot in common.” For one thing, both books make much use of the number seven, if not directly, at least by implication. In the Gospel of John Jesus performs exactly seven miracles (no more and

no less!) In the course of His ministry, and at many points in the book there are seven-day periods. The number seven is even more crucial to the book of Revelation, of course. Another common element in the two books is the use of the words “testimony” or “witness” to describe fidelity to the gospel, and the use of “light” and “darkness” to represent truth and error. Jesus is also referred to as “the Word” of God (**logos** in the Greek) only in John and Revelation.

Given the similarities between the two books, why are they so different? One possibility is that John, a Palestinian Jew living in Asia Minor, thought in Hebrew as he wrote in Greek. Stephen Thompson, an American scholar who has spent much of his career in England and Australia, demonstrates that the Greek in the book of Revelation is heavily influenced by Hebrew, or Semitic, thinking.⁶ So John’s Hebrew background may account for much, if not all, of the poor grammar in Revelation. But if this is the case, why is the Greek of the Gospel of John so beautiful?

I have a suggestion. As mentioned earlier, the book of Revelation was not written from Ephesus or Smyrna or any of the other churches of Asia Minor, but from Patmos, an island some forty miles off the coast of Asia Minor. No one knows for sure why John was there on the island of Patmos, but most external traditions tell us he was there as a prisoner. Perhaps Patmos was an ancient version of Alcatraz. If so, John was probably on his own when it came to writing this book. He wrote down the visions he received in his own words, grammatical flaws and all. If he had been at Ephesus, on the other hand, he could have had access to editorial help.

It is known that Paul had a lot of secretarial help, people who would take things he told them and write them up. So perhaps the difference between the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation is that John did not have access to editorial help when he was writing the book of Revelation on Patmos. It would be fun to learn more about the person(s) who helped John shape his Gospel into the magnificent literary piece that it is, but information about that process is lost to history for now. With the evidence that is available to us, we will make the working assumption that the author of Revelation is the same John that we learn so much about in the rest of the New Testament.

The Date of Revelation

Did John write the book of Revelation early or late in his career? Do we have any idea as to a date when was it written? Among scholars there are generally two opinions on this subject. The minority view is that the book reflects the time of the Emperor Nero, around 65 A.D. The majority view, supported by the bulk of the non-biblical tradition, is that John wrote during the reign of Domitian, who was Emperor of Rome from 81-96 A.D. In the latter case the date is usually thought to be around 95 AD, as there is some evidence that John left Patmos shortly after writing Revelation.

Both periods were selected because of evidence that each of the two emperors persecuted Christians at some point in their reigns. This ties in with the theme of martyrdom that can be found in the book of Revelation. The first organized Roman persecution of

Christians seems to have been the brief episode after the burning of Rome in the time of Nero. Some think that Nero himself set the fire and blamed the Christians in order to deflect attention from his own actions. On the other hand, Ireneaus, a Christian writer who flourished from about 175-200 A.D., named Domitian as the emperor at the time of John's writing of Revelation. Which of the two dates is more likely?

I prefer a late date for the book of Revelation, around 95 AD. Before Domitian's time, Rome as an empire was not against Christians, at least not in any consistent fashion. In the book of Acts, you will note that time and again Roman authorities rescued Paul from his enemies (Acts 18:12-17; 20:23-41; 21:27 - 22:29; 23:1-10; 23:12-35). So Rome was not hostile to Paul, or the Jews in general, during the time described in the book of Acts. Nero's acts seem more impulsive than systematic. They were probably the isolated acts of a mentally disturbed person.

The hostility of the Roman state toward Christianity in the Second Century AD, on the other hand, was associated with emperor worship. One of the ways that the emperors of Rome kept people loyal was through a system of worship in which the emperor was actually made a "god," and in many parts of the empire people built temples in honor of the emperor. The emperors themselves did not seem all that interested in the idea at first (obviously they knew better). So there is little evidence for emperor worship in the First Century, but when it does arise it seems to have originated in Asia Minor. The practice may have begun during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD), although the evidence is mixed. If Revelation was written at this time, its

theme of martyrdom was expressed at a time of transition, when systematic persecution of Christians was beginning and worse things were on the horizon.

How solid is the outside evidence tying the authorship of Revelation to the time of Domitian? Irenaeus, who wrote around 180 A.D., was a friend of Polycarp who was martyred in 156 A.D. Polycarp was old enough at the time of his death that he would have been a young adult in 90-95 AD. Irenaeus based his testimony regarding the authorship and date of Revelation on personal contact with Polycarp, who claimed to have known John personally. So while the outside evidence is not conclusive it points strongly in the direction of a late date for the book of Revelation, toward the end of the first century as the Roman Empire began to institute the cult of emperor worship.

“The Time Is Near”

I believe, however, that there is decisive biblical evidence for a late date for the book of Revelation. This can be found by comparing certain texts in Revelation with Jesus’ End-Time sermon on the Mount of Olives, as recorded in Mark 13. Note Mark 13:28-29: “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that ***it is near***, right at the door.”

In Mark 13 (a similar account is found in Matt 24:32-35) Jesus was describing the future, telling the disciples what would occur between their time and His mighty and spectacular

second coming. They had asked Jesus questions about the destruction of the temple and the timing of His return (Matt 24:3; Mark 13:4; Luke 21:5-7). They didn't want Jesus to delay long. They wanted Him to come back as soon as possible. But Jesus alerted them that a series of "signs" would come first: wars and rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, heavenly signs, false prophets, and the gospel going to the world (Mark 13:5-23). Only when these events had taken place would His coming be "near, right at the door." What was Jesus saying here? That His coming was not near at the time He was talking to His disciples. A number of things had to happen first. After all these things had taken place, **then** and only then would it be appropriate to say (in the words of Mark's account) "***It is Near.***"

Mark's account of Jesus' sermon continues in verse 33: "Be on guard! Be alert! you do not know when ***that time*** will come." What time? The time of Jesus' coming. You cannot know the time that Jesus will come but you can know when it is near. Now notice the difference between the assertions of Mark 13:29-33 and the words of Rev 22:10: "Then he told me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because ***the time is near.***'"

Mark 13:29		"is near"
Mark 13:33	"the time"	
Rev 22:10	"the time	is near"

As illustrated in English in the box above, Rev 22:10 contains an exact verbal parallel to Mark 13 in the Greek. But in Mark 13 Jesus said that "the time" would be near only after certain things had taken place. In other words, in A.D. 31 (when Jesus spoke) the time was not near. But by the time the book of Revelation was written, things had changed. The time was now near. What's the difference between the two statements? The difference is the "all these things" of Mark 13:29. The "signs" that were to come between the time that Jesus spoke and the time when His coming would be near had been fulfilled by the time John wrote the book of Revelation.

To us today, this whole issue makes little sense. We have seen nearly 2000 years go by without the return of Jesus. Many of us are still looking for Jesus' signs of the end in today's world. How then could John and other Christians perceive that all those things had been fulfilled in the first century?

The key lies in the fact that Jesus blended two events in his End-Time sermon of Mark 13, the destruction of the temple (and Jerusalem) in AD 70 and the end of the world. While much of His End-Time sermon applies particularly to the final generation of earth's history, by the time of the temple's destruction there was plenty of evidence that the signs Jesus spoke about had already occurred. Let me share with you a little history of the first century.

Were there false Messiahs in the first century (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:22)? In Acts 8:9-24, Simon the Sorcerer wanted to be a messiah figure and in Acts 5:36-37 a couple more "messiahs" are mentioned. In the histories of Josephus, who wrote around AD 100, there are even more

examples of people who claimed to be Messiah in the first century, particularly in the era just before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Were there “wars and rumors of wars” in the first century (Matt 24:6-7; Mark 13:7-8; Luke 21:9-10)? Very much so. While the *pax romana* (Roman Peace) dominated the empire at the time when Jesus spoke, that peace broke down widely in the 60s of that century, particularly in the province of Palestine, when the Jews revolted against Rome (66-73 A.D.) In the events of this “Jewish War” (so-called by Josephus) we see much of the fulfillment of the “all these things” that Jesus spoke about.

What about Jesus’ prediction that there would be famine (Matt 24:8; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11)? History describes a terrible famine in Palestine around 46 A.D. This seems to be mentioned in Acts 11. Jesus also talks about pestilence or contagious disease (Luke 21:11). This too is confirmed. History tells us that in the time of Nero (54-68 AD) 30,000 people died of the Bubonic Plague (Black Plague) in Rome in one autumn season.

What about the earthquakes that Jesus predicted would occur (Matt 24:8; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11)? In 60 A.D., the city of Laodicea was leveled by an earthquake. In 63 A.D., there was an earthquake in the city of Pompeii. In 68 AD one struck even the city of Rome. Earthquakes seem to have been a very common occurrence in the Mediterranean area during the middle of the first century.

What about signs in the heavens (Matt 24:29-30; Mark 13:24-25; Luke 21:25)? If you are familiar with the writings of Josephus, you are aware of his report that when the Roman armies

surrounded the city of Jerusalem, there were tremendous apparitions in the sky, in addition to other remarkable events interpreted as signs.⁷ These signs were taken to indicate that the Jewish cause was failing and the city of Jerusalem was doomed. If you don't have access to the writings of Josephus, you can find some of his descriptions in the book *The Great Controversy*.⁸

Jesus also spoke about persecutions that His own disciples would experience (Matt 10:17-23; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19). Were these also fulfilled in the first century? As mentioned earlier, the Roman Empire generally was fairly neutral about Christianity in the first century, but the accounts in the Book of Acts indicated that the early Christians suffered a great deal from those around them, particularly in their relationships with the synagogues and the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-42; 6:8-15; 7:1-60; 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 12:1-10; 13:45,50; 14:5,19-20, etc.). Persecution was sporadic rather than systematic, yet it played a major role in first-century Christian experience.

Jesus also talked about false prophets that would come (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:22). Were there false prophets in the first century church? New Testament books like Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, 2 and 3 John, and Jude contain abundant evidence that many people within the early church raised ideas that were in tension with those of Jesus and the apostles.

Perhaps the most prominent of Jesus' "signs of the end" was His assertion that the gospel would go to the whole world before He comes (Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10). While many have felt that this prediction was limited to the end of the world, there is plenty of evidence in the New Testament that the apostles believed that it had in some way been fulfilled in their day.

In Colossians Paul wrote: “This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant” (Col 1:23). Paul evidently had the impression that the gospel had already been preached to the world. It was “now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him” (Rom 16:26; cf. 1:8).

What about the great tribulation that Jesus talks about (Matt 24:21-22; Mark 13:19-20)? Did it too have a fulfillment within the first century? Once again Josephus describes the horrific experience of the Jews in Jerusalem about forty years after Jesus' sermon.⁹ The suffering of the Jews around AD 70 was so powerful and so tragic as to set the tone for the sufferings of the End Time.

The above evidence shows how a first-century Christian could come to the conviction that the signs of the end had been fulfilled within that first generation. If John was familiar with the End-Time teachings of Jesus, and there is no question that he was, he seems to have believed that by the time Revelation was written the coming of Jesus could be described as near. If the coming of Jesus was near by the time John wrote, then John believed that the signs Jesus had said would precede His return, the “greening of the leaves before summer” (Matt 24: 32-33; Mark 13:28-29), had already taken place.

Here's the point of this whole exercise. If the author of Revelation can declare that “the time is near” (Rev 1:3; 22:10), it is strong evidence that the book of Revelation was probably not written in the time of Nero. The signs we have described above were just beginning to be

fulfilled in the 50s and early 60s of the First Century. After the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) first century Christians could easily have drawn the conclusion that the signs of Jesus' return had been fulfilled and that the time of His coming was near. This leads me to believe that the most likely of the two dates for the writing of Revelation is around AD 95, the very time recalled by Second Century Christian writers after the close of the New Testament canon.

How could John describe the coming of Jesus as near more than 1900 years ago (1:1,3)? The coming of Jesus was certainly not near in the chronological sense! It was, however, near in terms of God's desire to come and His desire for His people to be ready. Whether or not Jesus comes in our lifetime, the healthiest stance to take is that it is near for us. Not only that, a thorough study of Revelation indicates that the term "nearness" is especially appropriate to the times in which we live today. As we study this glorious and perplexing book, we will be led to follow the instructions of Jesus in Luke 21:28, "When you see all these things taking place, lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near."

Notes

1. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1923), 113.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, 114.
4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

7. Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 5.5.3, translated by William Whiston in *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1960).

8. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Takoma Park, Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1911), 29-30.

9. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, books 5 and 6; cf. *Great Controversy*, 31-36.