

A Brief Outline of the Revelation to John

1. Introduction (Chapter 1)
 - Perspective One: 7 Letters to 7 Churches*
2. The Cosmic Jesus speaks to the Seven Churches of Asia (Chapters 2-3)
 - Perspective Two: The Scroll of the End*
3. The Heavenly Throne Room: Who is worthy to open the seals? (Chapter 4-5)
4. The Sealed Scroll and the Sealed Children (Chapters 6-7)
5. The Seventh Seal: Trumpets & Woes (Chapters 8-11)
 - Perspective Three: The Cosmic War*
6. Prologue: The Cause of the War (Chapter 12)
7. The Two Armies (Chapters 13-14)
8. The War: Seven Bowls of Wrath (Chapters 15-16)
9. The Funeral of the Whore of Babylon (Chapter 17)
10. The War Reviewed and Evil’s Final Defeat (Chapters 18-20)
11. Heaven on Earth: The New Jerusalem (Chapters 17 & 21-22:6)
12. The Final Warning/Promise (Chapter 22:7-21)

Symbols in the Revelation

Numbers (Numerology)

- 2 – the Church/Israel, because Israel was to function in two offices (as kings and priests, per Zechariah 4), and because the Church is now made up of both Jews and Gentiles
- 3 – the spiritual world/the cosmic world, because there were understood to be three levels: Heaven, Earth, under the Earth/Hades. Also came to represent God/Trinity.
- 3½ – the number of incompleteness, because it is half of the perfect number. This number is used to indicate that something is limited or finite, and also to represent Evil
- 4 – the created order or Earth, because of the four “corners of the earth” or the Cardinal directions
- 6 – the number of humanity/imperfection, because it is nearly the complete number but is not quite, just as humans are the pinnacle of creation but are not divine ourselves
- 7 – the number of perfection (which in the biblical world meant *complete*, not flawless), because it was the sum of the Heavens and the Earth, which was used as an idiom for the whole of creation. Implies universality of that to which it is applied
- 10 – another number to represent wholeness, but with the sense of *totality*, and can be multiplied by another number for emphasis, often with an emphasis toward time (when multiplied by itself, indicates a long period of time)
- 12 – represents the Church/Israel, because of the 12 tribes. Can be multiplied by itself for emphasis.

Other Common Symbols

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| <p><i>Body</i> <u>Right</u> (hand, side, etc.) – authority <u>Eyes/Heart</u> – the realm of the body that includes knowing/seeing/willing/judging <u>Hands/feet</u> – the realm of the body that includes activities and behavior</p> <p><i>Colors</i> <u>White</u> – victory <u>Red</u> – war/blood</p> | <p><i>Misc.</i> <u>Stars</u> – angels <u>Lampstands</u> – Israel/the Church (see Zech 4) <u>Olive tree</u> – Israel/the Church (see Zech 4) <u>Horn</u> – power/authority <u>Crown</u> – authority to rule or victory, depending on the Greek word used (see Background info) <u>Fire/flame</u> – the Holy Spirit <u>Sackcloth</u> – Repentance</p> |
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Background Information

Ancient Legal Documents: In the ancient legal world, contractual documents were written down on scrolls and then sealed with the seals of seven witnesses (seals were made of wax melted and dripped onto the scroll, then impressed with a signet ring and hardened). A short description of the contents was written on the outside of the scroll. The scrolls were not considered legally binding until they were opened (which entailed breaking the seals). Royal decrees were commonly communicated this way.

Apollyon: The word ‘destruction’ (Hebrew *abbadon*, Greek *apollyon*) in Jewish thought is closely related to concepts of Sheol/Hades/the dead.

Ark of the Covenant was lost when Babylon sacked Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The Ark represented God’s presence on Earth, and many Jews believed it would surface again at the End.

Boundaries and the Creation Order: For Jewish persons, the idea of *created boundaries* was important. God’s work in Genesis was not creating something from nothing as much as it was taking the worthless, formless stuff that was there and putting it in its proper place by assigning boundaries. “Clean” animals were those animals that fit nicely into categories, while “unclean” animals were those that were out of place (e.g., most (clean) fish have scales, but catfish don’t have scales, so they are unclean). Essentially, what was considered good and holy was that which stayed within its created boundaries; that which did not was evil.

Cities as prostitutes: The image of a prostitute was a popular one in the Old Testament. Ezekiel and Isaiah both referred to the Mediterranean port town of Tyre as a whore because of its willingness to do anything to attract business. Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire, was referred to as a prostitute by Nahum. Babylon, the nation that conquered Judah and destroyed the first Temple, sat on the Euphrates river and had canals running throughout the city. Jeremiah described the city as a cup in God’s hand which made the nations drunk (Jeremiah 51:7).

Crowns and Diadems: While today we associate crowns exclusively with royal rule, the ancients had two distinct words that we translate as “crown” – *stephanos* and *diadema*. The *stephanos* was a wreath given as the prize in an athletic event or to persons who have performed some sort of public service or duty to the Empire. These sorts of “crowns” were associated with honor and privilege. This is the sort of crown we see mentioned in the letter to Sardis and in chapter 4. The *diadema* is what we normally think of – this is a band that was worn by a ruler as a symbol of power and authority. This is what we see on the dragon in chapter 12.

Day of the Lord: Prophetic and popular Jewish eschatology looked for a final coming of the Messiah that would culminate in the resurrection and judging of the dead, the destruction of evil and the unmaking of creation (similar to the Flood). This “Day of the Lord” as it was called was seen as a day of vindication for God’s people, but of judgment for those who had failed to uphold justice and mercy. It involved all of creation coming apart at the seams – sun blacking out, locust plagues, moon turning to blood, etc. All of this would culminate in the Kingdom of God finally retaking its place that was displaced by Sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The end of time was seen primarily as a *recreation*, not as a new creation.

The Destruction of Babylon: Jeremiah prophesied during and immediately after Babylon's conquest of Judah. All of chapter 51 is his prophecy of Babylon's destruction. In it, he uses images of a desolate city, a burning city, drunken officials and a millstone being cast into the Euphrates to picture God's judgment of the city.

Eating a Scroll: In Ezekiel 2, God commands Ezekiel to eat a scroll that contains a prophecy against the rebellious people of Earth on it. Ezekiel eats it, and describes the experience thusly: the scroll is sweet (on his lips) because it contains God's word, but it is bitter (in his stomach) because it means pain and destruction for those who are meant to hear it.

Four Beasts of Daniel 7: Daniel 7 begins the apocalyptic section of the book. Daniel sees four animals that emerge from the sea; each animal represents an Empire that in some way persecuted Israel (God's people). The four empires were (in order of their appearance in Daniel) Babylon (who destroyed the first Temple), Media, Persia and Greece. The Greek Empire was established by Alexander the Great and divided up after his death by his three generals. The Selucid kings ruled over Israel, and Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the Jerusalem Temple in 163 BCE – the event that led to the Maccabean Revolt and the establishment of the Hanukkah festival. Each of the four empires was in some way a threat to God's people.

Gematria: Early persons knew no end of the joys of playing with numbers. Neither Hebrew nor Greek had numerals, so they used the letters of their alphabets (A/alpha=one, B/beta=two, etc.). Thus each person's name had a numerical value that could be of some other significance. For instance: Jesus' name could be calculated to total 888; many early interpreters understood this to represent Jesus' role as the reestablisher of the old creation order (since the 8th day began a new week, and thus represented both the Sunday on which he rose and the first day of a new Genesis week). Nero's title was *Nero Caesar*; in Hebrew, this added up to 666 (interestingly, many of the oldest copies of the Revelation that we have report the number of the beast as 616, which is the total of an alternate spelling of Nero's Hebrew name and title).

Gog and Magog: Gog king of Magog appears in Ezekiel 38-39 as the archetypal archenemy of God. God defeats him in a final, climactic battle and establishes once-and-for-all his glory on the Earth. After God has defeated Gog, he invites the birds of the air to gorge themselves on the blood and flesh of the kings and princes who have opposed him.

Harvest practice: The first – and usually best – crops brought in from a harvest were known as the “first fruits”. Oftentimes these were sacrificed to a deity in gratitude for a good harvest, because the first fruits were a picture of what the rest of the harvest would bring.

Imperial Cult Worship: Since Rome considered itself the center of the universe, the Empire encouraged (or demanded, depending on the emperor) worship of both the Caesars and Roma, the goddess who personified Roman rule (see **Roma**). Cities and nations who wished to demonstrate their loyalty to the Empire would build temples and erect statues in the Emperor or Roma's honor, and make large, public displays of loyalty. One of the commonest forms of worship in the Imperial Cult was that of paying homage to a statue of the emperor, nearly always done in full view of the priests or in a very public setting.

Jewish Eschatology: Popular Jewish eschatology taught that at the end of time, the Messiah would come and usher in the “Day of the Lord” in which Yahweh would come to the Earth, resurrect the dead and judge all humanity. All of this would culminate in the Kingdom of God finally retaking its place that was displaced by Sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The end of time was seen primarily as a *recreation*, not as a new creation.

The Messianic Kingdom: In Jewish thought, at least two unique perspectives on the End were popular. One is a prophetic (happening within time) view, in which the Messiah comes to Earth and establishes a temporary kingdom. Depending on the source material, the kingdom lasts anywhere from 40-7,000 years. The other is an apocalyptic (happening outside of time) view, in which God destroys the old creation and establishes a new, permanent kingdom in a new creation.

Mt. Magedon: The Hebrew word “Harmagedon” literally means the Mountain of Magedon. There is no such place; the nearest thing in Hebrew geography is the Plain of Megiddo, on which several key battles in Israelite history took place. There is no mountain here, however.

Nero Reborn: Nero (54-68 CE) is universally considered to have been one of the worst Caesars in Roman history, due in part to a possible mental illness. He is thought to have set fire to Rome, and we know that he blamed the fire on Christians, putting them in the Arena to fight wild animals as punishment. As with all other Roman Caesars, Nero was hailed while he was in power as the “Son of God”. When he was deposed in 68 CE, he allegedly committed suicide, though rumors grew up that he had actually escaped to Parthia (the cavalry guys from chapter 6) and would return to retake Rome one day. No fewer than three separate “returns” were documented between 68-88 CE; most historians understand them to have been impostors. In any case, Nero was considered by Christians to have been the most evil of the Roman emperors, and many believers feared that he would one day return to renew his persecution on the Church.

New Jerusalem: Many Jews looked forward to a New Jerusalem coming down from heaven at the end of time. In several of the descriptions of this new city, it would be constructed from precious jewels and metals (i.e. Tobit 13:16-17, 1 Enoch 90:29). The New Jerusalem was a restoration of the former glory of Israel’s kingdom (really, God’s kingdom) on Earth. The Messiah (David’s greatest descendent) would rule the world from the New Jerusalem.

Parthia: The Roman Empire had an aggressive policy of imperial expansion that in the last two hundred years had been thwarted consistently by only one other Empire – the Parthians (located only a few hundred miles from the province of Asia). The Parthians were known for their fierce bowmen cavalry, which formed the central force of their armies. These cavalry led the charge that pushed back Roman conquest on three separate occasions (53 BCE, 32 BCE and 62 CE). Despite these repeat setbacks, the Roman Empire continued to proclaim the **Peace of Rome** everywhere within its conquered borders – even if they had to enforce it with frequent violence.

Pax Romana: Life in the Roman Empire was overshadowed by the *Pax Romana*, or the “Peace of Rome”. Coined by Augustus, the *Pax Romana* was Rome’s primary piece of political propaganda. Rome declared that any loyal subject could feel safe and secure at all times within Roman borders, free from hunger, fear of violence or economic instability. Because Rome ruled the world, all who served Rome could live in peace.

Poverty: The average day's wage was a denarius; the normal amount of wheat that one person needed to eat for a day was one quart (and three quarts of barley). A family of even three would take much more. A day's wage would have been considered an exorbitant price for these goods (see Revelation 6)

Prophetic Calls: Some of the prophets of the Old Testament received dramatic calls to preach. The most well-known is probably Isaiah's (Isaiah 6), in which Isaiah is called up to Heaven, sees God, is purified to preach by an angel with a hot coal, and who then offers to be sent by God. Ezekiel's call is even more dramatic. Taking place in chapters 1-3, Ezekiel sees a giant wheel of fire surrounded by four creatures. From this vision, God gives Ezekiel a scroll on which is written the message Ezekiel is to preach. Ezekiel eats the scroll, which is sweet on his lips (because it is God's word), but bitter in his stomach (because it was a message of destruction).

Religion: There are something like fifty different definitions of 'religion'; it is a very difficult concept to describe. We may be able to talk about "national religion", however, in somewhat concrete terms. A nation can be said to worship something or someone if they ascribe to that person or object a primary place in the daily life of the nation, especially with reference to its leadership. Religion is the source of a person (or nation's) worldview

Roma: Rome was celebrated as a goddess on coins and in Roman temples. There were temples to her in Sardis, Ephesus and Smyrna, and her worship had been made official by Augustus. Roma was thought to embody all that went into being a proper Roman citizen. She was typically shown reclined on the Seven Hills of Rome, surrounded by various accessories, from grain to swords, depending on what type of propaganda was being displayed.



Roman Soldiers preparing for battle were expected to abstain from any sort of sexual relations with women.

Seven Angels of God: Tobit 12:15 (an Apocryphal book) says, "I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Holy One." These seven angels were agents who carried out God's will.

Satan: It might surprise you to know that the story of Satan as the fallen angel Lucifer was created by Origen (a church father) around 200 CE. In the Old Testament, Satan is an agent of God, a sort of ‘prosecuting attorney’ for God (“Satan” is the Hebrew word for “accuser”). He appears for the first time in Job as a member of God’s heavenly court, and again in Zechariah 3 and 1 Chronicles. His role seems to be to travel around the Earth recording humanity’s sins so that he can report them to God (this same sort of thing happens in Zechariah 9). In the New Testament, Satan is clearly an adversary of God – testing both Jesus and believers. Revelation 12 is a good look at what happened in between.

The Seven Cities of the Revelation:

Ephesus was a coastal port city that was vital to the economic livelihood of the Asian province. As such, it had developed an extremely metropolitan culture. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a Temple to Artemis, was housed in Ephesus, having been built around an ancient tree shrine to Artemis, the goddess of wisdom. Ephesus held athletic events in its stadium and had a thriving trade industry. Ephesus was the third (and most recent) of the seven cities to be granted an Imperial Temple.

Smyrna was another port city that at one time had been “demoted” to village status. It was rebuilt by Alexander the Great so that it stretched from the harbor all the way up the side of a mountain. This “rebirth” of the city was a point of pride for its citizens, who were quite wealthy due to the city’s trade industry. Smyrna was known for its fierce loyalty to its allies. Smyrna was the second of the seven cities to be granted an Imperial Temple.

Thyatira was a city known for its merchant class. One of Paul’s converts, Lydia, traded in cloth and lived in Thyatira (Acts 16:14-15). As a merchant city, it was home to many guilds, whose participants regularly met in pagan temples as a part of their business transactions. It was the least consequential city of the 7 mentioned in Revelation.

Sardis, despite the fact it is situated on a hill – making it very easy to defend, had fallen twice to surprise attacks that succeeded because the city guards weren’t paying attention (5th and 3rd centuries BCE). In 17 CE, a fierce earthquake devastated the city, and it was rebuilt with help from Rome. As a result, the citizens became very pro-Roman and built several Roman temples within the city, either to Roman gods or to the Imperial cult.

Philadelphia was destroyed by the same earthquake that hit Sardis (17 CE), and rebuilt by Rome. The citizens renamed it “Neocaesarea” in appreciation, and then later renamed it “Philadelphia Flavia” in order to show their support for the Emperor Vespasian (Flavian was his family name).

Pergamum was built around a citadel hill, and at the very top of the hill (some 1,000 feet above the plains) was a Temple to Zeus. The city was a noted center for the Imperial Cult – it was the first city in Asia Minor to be granted an Imperial Temple. That temple (to Augustus) was one of the city’s two major temples – the other was to Asclepius, and the city boasted a Roman proconsul (regional governor) as well. Apparently, one believer in the city, Antipas, had been killed for his faith, though this does not seem to be an immediate concern for the other believers (mob violence?).

Laodicea was built for military reasons rather than for practical ones. As such, it had no natural water supply, but was situated halfway between the hot springs at Hieropolis and the cold springs at Colossae. Aqueducts transported the water to the city, but by the time the water arrived, it would be a lukewarm, fertile breeding ground for disease-causing bacteria. Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in 60 CE, but the city was so rich and proud that it refused Rome's offer of assistance to rebuild. As a fiercely proud city, Laodicea was also famous for an eye salve thought to cure blindness and a fine, dark wool used to produce high-quality textiles.

** A first-century custom also good to know for interpreting this letter: When a person would travel, he would stop for the night at a town. Rather than staying in an inn, he could go to the town center, and if he were honorable enough, a citizen of the town would come out to give him lodging for the night. To be left outside was considered a terrible insult to the traveler. **

Son of Man: The 'son of man' is a figure who first appears in the book of Daniel (7:13-15) as a herald of the final judgment, where he is pictured descending on a cloud to rule the nations. Jesus often referred to himself as the 'son of man' in the Gospels.

Stadia: 200 miles is roughly equivalent to 1600 stadia. Some English translations put measurements in the Revelation (distance, size, etc) into American measurements. This is bad because the measurements are not meant to be taken literally. If you find that to be the case, you should have a footnote in your translation that gives you the ancient equivalent. Use that and the numbers guide (Page 1) to interpret what John meant by the measurement he's using.

Taxonomy: In the first century, Jews broke animals into four categories: domesticated, undomesticated (wild), birds and sentient/human.

Temple and Tabernacle: The Tabernacle and the Temple were really two different versions of the same idea. The Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting, was the portable house of God that the Israelites carried with them while they were in the wilderness; the Temple refers to the Temple in Jerusalem first built by Solomon and then later rebuilt by Ezra and Herod the Great. Both structures were crafted down to the smallest detail and most exacting measurement (the Temple was exactly twice as big as the Tabernacle) because they were meant to symbolize creation. Thus, they painted a picture of a perfected creation that God ruled from the center (the Holiest Place/Holy of Holies).

Miscellaneous Reading Notes: