

A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO

THE BOOK OF REVELATION



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IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR EUGENIO CORSINI (1924–2018)

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**Cover: *The Angel with the Little Scroll*
“The mystery of God will be fulfilled” (Rev 10:7)**

Title page: *Death on a Pale Horse* by Joseph Mallory Turner

**Page 3: *The Anastasis fresco in the Church of the Holy Saviour
in Chora*, by Jose Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro**

PREFACE

The *Friendly Guide* series has made a significant contribution to biblical education. Books on the Prophets; the New Testament; the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John; the figure of the Apostle Paul; Women in the Bible; and other biblically based themes have appeared. Since the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII in 1893, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church has insisted on the central role the Word of God in our Christian lives and liturgies. Pope Francis has recently established the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time as a day for the whole Church to celebrate the Word of God each year. The time is ripe for a more widespread and deep knowledge of our Sacred Scriptures.

But a *Friendly Guide to the Book of Revelation* is a challenge!

There have always been doubts about the meaning and relevance of Revelation. Eastern Churches do not hold it in high regard. Martin Luther (1483–1546), writing a preface to Revelation for his German version of the New Testament, complained: “I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it ... There are many far better books available for us to keep” (1522). Fundamentalist Christians read the narratives as signs of the end of time, applying the book’s symbols to the evils of their times – from a corrupt Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, to the contemporary COVID–19 pandemic – as God’s angry punishment of sinful humankind.

The key to the interpretation that follows is a recognition that Revelation is about the perennial presence of the saving effects of “the Lamb slaughtered from

the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). It depends upon two recently published studies: my full-scale commentary on Revelation: *The Apocalypse of John. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020) and my guide through its use in the Church’s liturgies: *Reading Revelation at Easter Time* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2020). I trust that this *Friendly Guide* shows that, as conflict rages between good and evil, Revelation is an inspired reflection upon the definitive victory of God in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

It is dedicated to the memory of Professor Eugenio Corsini of the University of Turin (1924–2018). His personal influence and ground-breaking work lie behind almost everything that follows.

Francis J. Moloney, SDB, AM, FAHA



INTRODUCTION

A FRIENDLY GUIDE TO A HOSTILE BOOK

Apocalyptic literature appeared in an early form in the Old Testament (e.g., Ezekiel, Isaiah 24–27, Zechariah, and especially Daniel). It developed among Jewish authors into a major way of writing in times of trouble (e.g., 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch and some texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls). There are also Christian apocalypses (e.g., 5 Ezra, Sibylline Oracles and Shepherd of Hermas).¹

Most would claim that it is impossible to render the Book of Revelation “friendly”. Given the anger and violence that it has inspired over the centuries, especially among Christians, it could better be described as “hostile”.

THE CHALLENGE OF READING REVELATION

The book is heavily dependent upon earlier writings from the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament). They belong to what is called an “apocalyptic” form of literature. Indeed, picking up the very first Greek word of the text (*apokalypsis*), the Book of Revelation is often called “the Apocalypse”. The Greek word means “unveiling,” or “revelation”, i.e., making known

or visible. The modern name “the Book of Revelation” is a translation of the first Greek word of the book.

In general terms, apocalyptic literature appeared within Judaism when Israel found itself under threat of destruction. The authorities and people were powerless. Israel’s evil enemies were so dominant that the nation’s imminent political destruction was inevitable. The destruction of the temple and the religious life and practices of the nation would follow. Authors wrote narrative theological reflections promising that God would enter the story, destroy the wicked and save the virtuous. What was humanly impossible would be achieved through the direct intervention of God. John of Patmos, a Jewish-Christian who authored the book

Below: *The Last Judgement in the Duomo, Florence*

Right: *The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem*



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of Revelation (Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) used Israel's Scriptures to find his language and imagery. He *never* cites the name of the biblical book he is using. Among all his allusions to Israel's Scriptures, John's favourites were the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. Ezekiel appeared during the time of Israel's exile in Babylon (586–539 BCE). Daniel opposed the efforts of the Seleucid King Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE) to force Israel to accept the ways of the Greeks by military means. He desecrated the Jerusalem temple in 169 BCE.

But once the God of Israel becomes the main agent of the story, symbolic language, and descriptions of unimaginable and fierce sequences of events are used. God's entry into history could not be paralleled with human processes. At the time John was writing Revelation, many Jewish apocalypses, and

even Christian apocalypses, appeared, following the destruction of Israel and its Temple, results of the Jewish revolt against Roman authority in 65–70 CE. (see box far left).

The puzzling symbols and violent narrative sequences of apocalyptic literature indicated a God who transcends the human story. The Lord of history acted on Israel's behalf. John makes copious use of such symbols and narrative sequences. As we will see, *he uses them in his own unique fashion*. Encountering these descriptions, as they appear in the Book of Revelation, we find ourselves “outside” the world in which apocalyptic language was current. Unless we have a key that allows us entry into this challenging worldview, John's book remains a puzzle for contemporary Christians.

KEY NOTES

- ◆ “Revelation” is an English translation of the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which also means “unveiling”.
- ◆ As well as Revelation, there are other biblical books in the Old Testament, in Jewish literature and in early Christian literature that use the same symbolic language and stories.
- ◆ To ask people to wait patiently in suffering, and even martyrdom, in the hope that God will finally destroy evil and reward good is hardly Christian.
- ◆ Violence is widespread in Jewish apocalyptic literature.



INTRODUCTION

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

You are worthy to take the
scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and
by your blood you ransomed
for God saints from every
tribe and people and nation;
you have made them to be a
kingdom and priests serving
our God and they will

reign on earth.

Rev 5:9–10

IS REVELATION CHRISTIAN?

We Christians of the third Christian millennium face a more subtle problem. The basic presupposition of a Jewish apocalypse is that *in the end* God will overcome all evil, punish and destroy it, and reward the faithful. The message of apocalyptic literature is essentially associated with “the end”. In technical language, we call it “eschatological”. This word means that it tells a story of God’s *final* solution of an insurmountable human problem.

Is this Christian? Does the inspired Word of God found in Revelation, part of the Christian Bible for almost two thousand years, ask us to endure all the suffering, rejection, abuse, and martyrdom of our present age because in the end God will sort it out?

Does Revelation mysteriously prophesy the suffering and death that accompanies the spread of the COVID–19 pandemic? Is this “plague” a sign of God’s just anger? If so, does this lessen the significance of the role of self-sacrificing and heroic medical personnel, and the work of governments to protect their people? Of course not. Christian history teaches us, however, that theological fanaticism lurks behind many readings of Revelation.

In a Christian view of history, something new has entered the human story in the life and

teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John makes it clear on the very first page of Revelation that Jesus Christ has made a difference. He greets the churches in Asia with a word from God “and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). John describes Jesus Christ as the one “who loves us and freed us by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (1:6; see 5:9–10). What, then, are we waiting for?

WHAT IS THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

The Book of Revelation, found at the end of a printed Bible, has fascinated and puzzled Christians for centuries. With such vivid imagery as the four horsemen (Rev 6:1–9), the Beast whose number is 666 (13:18), and the battle at Harmagedon (16:12–21), many wrongly see it as a map to the end of the world. This well-established interpretation is at everyone’s fingertips on Google and in various entries in Wikipedia. This *Friendly Guide* will endorse a different understanding of Revelation. It is a book that uses end-time language to proclaim the victory of God over evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Right: *Dragon menaces woman*
by Giusto de Menabuoi

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QUICK OUTLINE OF REVELATION

John's use of "sevens" shapes the book's argument, framed by a prologue and an epilogue.

John's prologue: greetings and introduction (1:1–8)

- A heavenly encounter and the letters to seven churches (1:9–3:22)
- A heavenly encounter and the opening of the seven seals (4:1–8:1)
- A heavenly encounter and the blowing of the seven trumpets (8:2–11:19)
 - A threefold preparation for the pouring out of the seven bowls: the woman and the dragon (12:1–18), the two beasts (13:1–18) and God's initial intervention (14:1–20)
- A heavenly encounter and the pouring out of the seven bowls (15:1–16:21)
 - The threefold consequences of the pouring out of the seven bowls: the destruction of Babylon (17:1–19:10), the destruction of all evil powers (19:11–21:8), and the gathering of the faithful in the New Jerusalem (21:9–22:5)

John's epilogue: greetings and conclusion (22:6–21)



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THE BOOK OF REVELATION AT A GLANCE

CHAPTER 1:1–8	CHAPTER 1:9–20	CHAPTER 2	CHAPTER 3	CHAPTER 4	CHAPTER 5
John's greeting and prologue	Heavenly encounter	Letters to churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira	Letters to churches at Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea	Heavenly encounter 1: vision of the court of the creator	Heavenly encounter 2: vision of the redeeming Lamb
CHAPTER 6	CHAPTER 7:1–8:1	CHAPTER 8:2–13	CHAPTER 9	CHAPTER 10	CHAPTER 11
Opening of the first six seals	Opening of the sixth seal finalised, and the opening of the seventh seal	Heavenly encounter 8:7–13: blowing of the first four trumpets and preparation for the "woes"	Blowing of the fifth and sixth trumpets: two "woes"	Blowing of the sixth trumpet continues	Blowing of the sixth trumpet finalised and the blowing of the seventh trumpet: the third "woe"
CHAPTER 12	CHAPTER 13	CHAPTER 14	CHAPTER 15	CHAPTER 16	CHAPTER 17
The first preparation for the pouring out of the bowls: the woman and the dragon	The second preparation for the pouring out of the bowls: the two beasts	The third preparation for the pouring out of the bowls: the salvation of the faithful in Israel	Heavenly encounter	The pouring out of the seven bowls: Harmagedon	First consequence of the pouring out of the bowls: the destruction of Babylon
CHAPTER 18	CHAPTER 19:1–10	CHAPTER 19:11–21	CHAPTER 20	CHAPTER 21:1–22:5	CHAPTER 22:6–21
The destruction of Babylon continued	The rejoicing of the saints as Babylon is humiliated. The end of the first consequence of the pouring out of the bowls.	The second consequence: the rider of the white horse destroys the beast and its armies	The final battle, the thousand-year reign, the defeat of Satan. The end of the second consequence.	The third consequence: the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and the gathering of the faithful	John's epilogue and farewell