

- In reality, John's flexibility in his use of symbolism suggests that he was not concerned to show the entire Empire destroyed, just the persecutors
- The defeat of the Emperor Domitian is thus assured, and is accompanied, on the one hand, by the mourning of all who profited through him(19: 9-19) and on the other, by angels rejoicing in Heaven (14:8, 18:2, and 20f) and by the faithful who suffered in his persecution (19:1-5).
- In other words, in the Book of Revelation, God uses the Beast (17:17) as his instrument to punish the persecutors and answer the prayers of the martyrs
- Earlier in the Book, John's vision of the throne of God and the Lamb (ch.4 and 5) illustrates **God's sovereign power** over all world events and leads to the Lamb opening the **7 seals on the scroll**, the first 4 of which release the '4 horsemen of the Apocalypse' signifying the conquering Parthians (the white horse) and the others the consequential war, famine and death. It is the **5th seal that reveals the prayers of the martyrs** asking for God's vengeance on Rome that is answered by God's use of the Beast outlined above. The **6th seal signifies God's eventual ultimate victory** over Satan and the Beast.
- The victory of the Beast over the initial persecutors (Domitian as the Great Prostitute) is followed by the continued reign of the Beast and his followers, those who have the mark of the Beast (19:20) This signifies a continuation of the Roman Empire with all its consequential evils, but this time it is not accompanied by direct persecution of the Church.
- However, God is still at work punishing the Beast and his followers for their evil ways (but the faithful will be protected, represented by the seal of God on the 144,000 of ch.7 and 14). This punishment is symbolised by John's use of the **7 Trumpets** (8:6-21 and 9:15f) and the **7 Bowls of Wrath** (ch.16). These parallel each other, **the first 5 of each** signify punishments that affect in turn the earth, the seas, the rivers, the sun, and the direct torture of the Beast's followers (the 5th trumpet differs from the 5th bowl in identifying the torturers, ironically, as demons/locusts), while **the 6th** depicts the gathering of the Beast's armies for a great battle against the Church (Armageddon in the 6th bowl), while the **7th** is a vision of God's victory.
- John depicts the actual victory over the Great Beast and false prophet (19:11f) This is generally understood as a battle occurring near the end of time, expressed by John as before a 1000 year reign of Christ (ch.20) but this may be better understood as a **prophecy** of the conversion of the Roman Empire, followed by 1000 years (just symbolic of a very long time) of the growth and development of the Church.
- The end of the Book is a vision relating to a final time of chaos (ch.20) when God will allow the release of the Dragon, Satan, who like the Beast before him will lead many astray and institute a persecution of the Church. However, his defeat is guaranteed and there will then be a great Final Judgement (ch.20) and the creation of a new Heaven and new Earth, symbolised by the new Jerusalem.

6. The Book of Revelation to John

Part Two

Interpreting and Trying to Interpret The Book of Revelation



Questions For Reflection

1. Do you think that the prime purpose of the Book of Revelation was to comfort and support Christians during a time of persecution or to reveal the future?
2. Is it reasonable for us today to think of the number 666 as a sign of Satanic influence?
3. Should the Woman, in the vision with the Red Dragon, be seen as a reference to Our Lady or to Eve?

Who Is the Author?

Despite the assertion of such 2nd century Christian writers as Justin and Irenaeus, the author of the Book of Revelation is almost certainly not John the Apostle. The author claims no title as apostle or even disciple, rather he describes himself as servant (1:2) and it is more appropriate to see him as an early Christian prophet (as in 1 Cor.14). Indeed, the Book refers to itself as a prophecy (ch.1 and 22), John is told to 'prophecy again' (10:11) and an angel who addresses John refers to 'your brothers the prophets' (22:9).



In addition, there are too many differences between the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John and 1 John for them to have been written by the same author, e.g. the use of different Greek words for Lamb, and the poor standard of Greek used which points to someone who thought in Aramaic but never really mastered the Greek e.g. he translated several Semitic idioms literally (e.g. 1:5, 2:27, 12:6).

However, the author may well have been a disciple of John the Evangelist, located in Ephesus, as that city is the first of the 'lamp-stands' to be sent a message (2:1-7). Given his Hebrew background, he may have been a Jewish Christian who settled late in life in Ephesus, perhaps following the Jewish revolt of 66-73AD (the reference to the Temple in Rv.11:1-2 should be understood in a spiritual sense).

Why Was the Book Written and How Should it be Understood?

There are numerous views about the purpose and nature of Revelation. The proposal below is very much a personal one but hopefully a useful one for you.

The Book of Revelation was written with **three** objectives:

1. to address a **concrete** situation in the life of the early Church, when it was experiencing persecution, using symbolism from the visions in order to strengthen its members, to urge them to persevere, and to reassure them of the inevitable triumph of Christ
2. to reveal a **prophetic revelation**, again using symbolism, about the end of the material universe, the final Judgement and the realisation of Heavenly hopes
3. to let the symbolism be applied in a metaphorical way to the **future history** of the Church

The Book is a compilation of different visions which are intermixed and some of these are re-presented in slightly different ways. This is what makes it difficult to follow e.g. there is a different nature to the **7 messages to the Asian Churches** (ch.2-3), and there are indirect references to the **Emperor Nero** (54-68AD)(11:7, 13:18, 17:8-11) contained within the symbolism used for the persecution of the Church by the **Emperor Domitian** (in the 90's AD) (ch.6, 13 and 17).

It is noteworthy that the messages to the Asian Churches (ch.2-3) are primarily about morality and their lukewarm Christian living or worse, and little to do with eschatology i.e. the theology of Last Things (like a final great battle against Satan or Last Judgement) and these letters are most probably **part of a separate record** incorporated into Revelation because of the key number 7, and the parallel of persecution (although persecution is not the main concern of these letters)

How the Book Addresses its Three Purposes

- The author wanted to strengthen the resolve and faith of Christians being persecuted by Domitian in the 90's AD
- He was aware of the earlier persecution of Nero in the late 60's AD, and, most importantly, of the legend associated with Nero that he had come back to life following his suicide and had fled to Parthia (Persia), the great eastern foe of Rome, and that he would return to destroy Rome. The author would incorporate this legend (which his readers would have been familiar with) into his symbolism.
- The author **initially** identifies **Rome** with the great **Beast**, with Nero only as **one of its heads** "the beast had 7 heads .. one had a **fatal wound** that healed" (13:3) The Beast receives its power **from Satan, the Red Dragon** (ch.12/13). This follows a symbolic vision by John of the Dragon as the enemy of Mary and the Messiah child Jesus, (N.B. but some associate the woman with Eve) and Satan's ejection from Heaven by Michael (ch.12)
- With the beast identified with Rome, the Domitian persecution against the Church is depicted "mouthed his blasphemies against God, his name, his tent and all who sheltered there", with the Beast assisted in his persecution by a **second Beast**, a false prophet. This may represent the local Roman rulers actually in charge of the persecution affecting the 7 cities in the earlier letters.
- **But**, soon afterwards, the author changes the symbolism of the Great Beast by giving the number of the Beast as **666** which is the numeric value of the Hebrew letters for Caesar Nero (13:18), thereby implicitly identifying the **Great Beast as Nero** with his followers branded with this number **666**.
- This flexibility of symbolism is reinforced later, with the author **symbolising Rome as the Great Prostitute** (ch.17) riding the **Beast**, which is now identified **solely with Nero** "the beast was once alive and is **alive no longer**, it is yet to come up from the abyss" (17:8 and especially the parallel in v.11). The Beast and its allies, the ten horns (representing 10 subservient kingdoms) are then depicted destroying the Prostitute (17:16) i.e. thus completing the legend about Nero leading the Parthians to destroy or, at least, destabilise Rome.

