Bible Study
The Book of Revelation
Introduction and Overview of Chapters 1-5

Introduction

The Book of Revelation, perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, attracts many readers and interpreters in our modern times. In an age of war and terror, some people turn to the Book of Revelation to look for signs of the end.

However, much of the interest in the Book of Revelation is very superficial. Since the 1970’s for instance, author Hal Lindsay has put out a series of books that seem to amaze people as to how the prophecies of the Apocalypse seem to apply to our own times. But is this how we should be interpreting the Bible and the Book of Revelation in particular?

In this lesson, we will conduct a brief overview of the Book of Revelation, discuss aids to interpretation and how we should approach this book, and then finally provide an overview and summary of chapters 1-5.

Author, Date, and Purpose
The Book of Revelation was written by Saint John, the beloved disciple of Christ, who for the height of his teaching concerning God the Word also receives the title, “Theologian.” The writer of the Book of Revelation calls himself John and we have many of the Church Fathers who testify and point to Saint John as the author of this book. We also see similar words and phrases used in the Book of Revelation as compared to the Gospel according to Saint John and the Catholic Epistles that bear his name.

Saint John wrote the Book of Revelation while exiled to the isle of Patmos during the reign of Domitian around 95-96 A.D. This was a period of persecution and tribulation. Therefore, the Book of Revelation was written to comfort the Church during this time, and to reveal God’s promise of the things to come: although the Church would suffer persecution on earth, there awaited a great reward in the life to come and Satan and all his armies would suffer ultimate defeat in the last day.
Where the Bible begins with the Book of Genesis and the story of man’s creation, God’s endless love toward him, and the fall of man and his expulsion from paradise, the Book of Revelation concludes the Bible and offers the believer a joyous picture of heaven and the banquet and wedding that awaits those who are faithful in tribulation. The Book of Revelation is a book of joy, a book of hope, a book of praise, and a book of victory.

**Aids for Interpretation**

As it is written, the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to show, “things which must shortly take place” (Revelation 1:1). Because the nature of this book is prophetic, it is very tempting to enter into many fanciful interpretations as to what this book means. Therefore, there are certain aids we can look to that will help us interpret the Book of Revelation soundly.

1. In some cases, the Scripture itself interprets its own difficult images. For instance, in the first vision of the Book of Revelation, the Lord explains that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches (the bishops), and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).

2. Parallel passages in other books of Scripture can also help us. For instance, other books of the New Testament, such as Saint Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonians tell us about the Antichrist. The fact that there are a number of Orthodox commentaries on these other books helps make up for the fact that there are few on the Book of Revelation itself.

3. Knowledge of Orthodox doctrine, in general – particularly of Orthodox eschatology (doctrine of the last things, including the end of this world) – helps us study the Book of Revelation properly. Without this understanding, we might fall into the notions of “rapture” and the “millennial reign,” for instance.

4. A historical examination of this book – the author, time, place of writing, and purpose – all within the context of Orthodox tradition will also help us.

5. Knowledge of ancient languages, geography, history, and archaeology can sometimes shed light on various passages of Scripture.
6. Finally, having a general view and philosophy of history and culture can help us. For example, we might understand the nature of the Antichrist by studying ancient tyrants as well as modern rulers who attempted world conquest.

Here are some other things to keep in mind when properly interpreting the Book of Revelation:

1. We must be careful when it comes to understanding things literally, symbolically, and allegorically. We must carefully distinguish passages that refer to the realities of this fallen world of earth with those that refer to the other world, heaven, and not confuse these two spheres by trying to apply prophetic visions of heaven to this earthly world. This might lead us, for instance, that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years, but in fact, we are in the thousand-year reign now. But even with symbolic language, we may have many levels of interpretations and images with multiple meanings that are not contradictory.

2. Also, the visions mentioned in the Book of Revelation are not presented chronologically. They are simply a series of visions, quite different from one another – some of heaven, some of earth, some very general and symbolic, some very specific and literal; some of the past, some of the future, some of the present.

3. We have to remember that we are reading Scripture. It should not be done with fevered excitement, but with a sober awareness. It ought to be done with regular spiritual nourishment. By realizing that our Orthodox Christianity is a conscious struggle, we will not be overwhelmed by every disaster and catastrophe as some new fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecy. This is a book of mysteries, bound up with the beginning and end of all things. We must read it in the fear of God and with a humble distrust of our own wisdom.
Outline of the Book of Revelation

1. A vision of the Son of God with the command to write to the seven churches (Chapter 1)
2. Instructions to the Seven Churches (Chapters 2-3)
3. The Heavenly Vision of God’s Throne (Chapters 4-5)
4. The Opening of the Seven Seals (Chapters 6-7)
5. The Voices of the Seven Trumpets (Chapters 8-11)
6. The Church of Christ (Chapter 12)
7. The Beast (Antichrist) and the False Prophet (Chapter 13)
8. Preparatory Events before the General Resurrection and the Last Judgment (Chapters 14-19)
9. The General Resurrection and the Last Judgment (Chapter 20)
10. The Revelation of the New Heaven and the New Earth (Chapter 21-22:5)
11. Conclusion (Chapter 22:6-21)

Overview of Chapter 1: The Vision of the Son of Man

This chapter clearly defines the character and purpose of this book: “to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass” (1:1). This book is therefore distinguished from other books of the New Testament which contain instructions about our faith and morality. However, there is also a moral significance as indicated in verse 3. Blessed is he who reads and prepares himself by his life and deeds of piety for eternity; for the translation to eternity is near for each of us.

We can understand some of the elements of this chapter as follows.

1. God is often referred to “Who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4; 1:8). According to some church fathers, this points to the Trinity: the Father who revealed Himself as “I am Who am”, the Son, or the Word, Who was in the beginning with God by Whom all things were made (John 1), and the Holy Spirit always descending upon and guiding the Church.

2. The Lord instructs Saint John to write a message to the seven churches. These seven churches actually existed in Asia Minor, but the number seven is a number of completion and fullness, so this
message to the seven churches is a message to all the churches in all eras.

3. Our Lord is described as One like the Son of Man, clothed in a garment like the Jewish chief priests, and girded about the breast with a golden belt as a King. This points to Christ as high-priest and King of kings. His hair is white, a sign of old age, which indicates to us that the Son of Man Who appeared is one with the Father, begotten before all ages, and is the same as the “Ancient of Days” mentioned in the Book of Daniel. His eyes were like a flame of fire to indicate His Divine zeal for the salvation of the human race and His piercing vision which sees into the hearts of men; that is, there is nothing hidden or dark from Him. His feet were like fine brass, burned in a furnace; perhaps indicated that His enemies are trampled under His feet, but also the feet are the Apostles, the foundation of the Body of Christ (the Church) which were tried by fire and followed our Savior. The voice as the sound of many waters indicates the voice of a threatening judge that trembles the disturbed soul of a condemned man. In His hand are the seven stars, the seven bishops of the Church and He stands among the seven lampstands, the churches, to show His ever-presence in the Church. Finally, out of His mouth proceeded a sword, a reminder of the all-penetrating power of His word that is like a two-edged sword able to divide the soul from the spirit, the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). His countenance as the sun demonstrates His glory as we saw Him on Mount Tabor during His transfiguration.

4. The Lord has the keys of Hades and of Death, to demonstrate His authority over these things. He lives forever and death has no dominion over Him.
Overview of Chapters 2-3: The Message to the Seven Churches

In Chapters 2 and 3, we find specific messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Each church faces a particular problem. The Lord presents Himself in a way that is relevant to that problem. Then the Lord presents a reward for those who can overcome that obstacle. If we look carefully at these chapters, we find problems that we face in our own spiritual life. For example, the Church at Ephesus left her first love. How often do we leave Christ for the love of the things in this world? So the Lord presents Himself as one Who has the seven stars in His right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, to show that He is ever-present among us. This ought to stir up our love for Him. Therefore, to those who overcome this weakness and repent, God will give him to eat from the tree of life.

The Church at Smyrna faces the problem of persecution, so the Lord presents Himself as One Who has overcome death.

The Church at Pergamos faced many obstacles and stumbling blocks, so the Lord presents Himself as one with the two edged sword Who is able to divide good from evil.

The Church at Thyatira was tempted with evil lusts, and therefore the Lord presents Himself as One who discerns all things with eyes like a flame of fire, and as One crushes evil under His feet like fine brass.

The Church at Sardis faced the problem of hypocrisy, therefore the Lord presents Himself as a model of integrity and perfection having the seven Spirits of God (the fullness of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; but also representing the seven archangels before the throne) and the seven stars.

The Church at Philadelphia faced the problem of laziness in her works. The Lord presents Himself as holy and true. Wheneveer the heavenly orders say they word, ‘holy,’ they are moved to worship. They arise and fall on their faces. In the same way, we ought to arise from our laziness and pursue the Truth at all costs.
Finally, the Church at Laodicea faced the problem of spiritual lukewarmness and apathy. The Lord presents Himself as the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God. As God is always active and True, we also ought to arise from our lukewarm state and pursue Truth.

**Overview of Chapters 4-5: The Heavenly Vision of God’s Throne**

Chapters 4 and 5 present to us a second vision of God’s throne. We are inspired as we look to the throne of God and we realize that we see the same images every time we pray the Divine Liturgy. Indeed our service is the work of heaven on earth. Around the throne, we see the twenty-four elders clothed in white robes, and we see a similar image around the altar during the Divine Liturgy.

We see the vision of the four incorporeal living creatures, in which we find many meanings. Some fathers see the four Gospels represented. Others see the whole of creation represented: mankind, the beasts of the wild, the animals in the field, and the birds of the air. Others see the story of our salvation in Christ: the incarnation, the sacrifice on the cross, the power of the resurrection, and the ascension into heaven.

We see the offering of incense which represents the prayers of the saints.

Finally, in chapter 5, we see an image of the Lamb which appeared as though it had been slain (to show us that He would been crucified is alive), and to Him it had been given scroll to open and to reveal unto us the mysteries of God. It shows us that no one can understand the Scriptures and the mysteries of God except through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The heavenly orders and the angels praise His power as the one who conquers and grants victory; His riches in that He became poor to make us rich; His wisdom in that He became ignorant as man in order to redeem us; His strength in that He became weak to support our weakness; His Honor which He emptied for our sake in order to raise the earthly to the heavenly honor; His glory in that He carried our shame in order that we may be glorified in Him; and finally His blessing in that He bowed down to carry our curse so that we might be blessed through Him.

**Glory is due to God forever. Amen.**