



THE
**LAST
WORD**

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF **REVELATION**

an overview of revelation

introduction

The book of Revelation, perhaps like no other, has generated everything from fascination to frustration to fanaticism. Anyone who has spent time in the book will have some sympathy for the challenge of hearing its message. But of course, as Scripture, we trust it to generate deeper faith and fuel godly living. That confidence is not misplaced as we come to a book written to strengthen a church buckling under pressure. Revelation doesn't come to us as a mystery to decode. On the contrary, it is given to help us decode our reality. Its "arresting images and depictions capture the minds and hearts of readers, as they confront the world with new lenses."¹ It's designed as a shock to the system for any Christian whose vision is clouded by the pains or pleasures of this life.

The book is often misconstrued as a roadmap to the future but it has a more important purpose at hand—**Revelation is here to guard our hearts in the gospel til the very end for God's glory.** It is a pastoral book that seeks to call us to life in the "eternal gospel"; a life of repentance and worship (14:7), even in troubled waters. As Revelation is read again and again, the church is reminded that the world has always needed and will always need the challenge of the gospel. The church has always needed and will always need the Spirit's courage to take a stand. All creation has always found and will always find its fulfilment in its Creator King. **God has always been and will always be the last word on the blessed life both now and forevermore.**

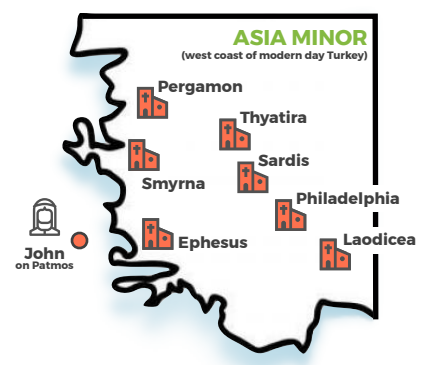
Rev 1:3 ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

Rev 21:7 ⁷ And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

author + audience

The author identifies himself as a prophet named John (1:1-3). John was a common name and it may not necessarily have been **John the Apostle**. But there is a good chance that it was John the Apostle since the early church father Irenaeus (who followed Polycarp who followed John) affirmed this. Regardless, it doesn't affect the substance of the message in helping the church persevere in its witness.

Revelation addresses 7 churches in Asia Minor (1:11), churches that were facing "the challenge of witnessing in the midst of temptations to compromise with idolatry... Therefore, the focus of the book is **exhortation to the church community to witness to Christ in the midst of a compromising, idolatrous church and world.**"² Chapters 2-3 shows us the varying pressures John wanted to address. To read well, we will begin with the context of these 7 real churches and not short-circuit the process by fast forwarding to our present circumstances nor future speculation.



¹ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 28.

² Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 33.

Of course, Revelation is also for us because it “is addressed to specific churches as *representative* of *all* churches... precisely by addressing very specifically a variety of actual church situations, Revelation addresses a *representative* variety of contexts.”³ Therefore the call to the 7 churches remains immensely relevant for us today.

context

historical context

There are arguments for an earlier date (60 A.D., before the destruction of the temple) but it is likely that Revelation was written around 95 A.D. during the reign of Roman emperor Domitian. Christianity was a growing religion and with that came increasing friction. It was now recognised as a distinct faith apart from Judaism and no longer enjoyed its social and legal privileges. So, Revelation was a letter circulated to **a church under increasing persecution from both Jews and Romans**. Relationships with Jews soured further after the fall of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. with Christians claiming it to be judgment from God. There was also sporadic persecution from Roman authorities, most notably when emperor Nero blamed and executed Christians for the fire of Rome in 64 A.D.

Perhaps the most significant threat Revelation addresses was the growing Imperial religion; where Roman emperors began to require citizens to worship them as gods. The threat was not simply a blade at their throats but **an ultimatum to betray God**. Revelation, therefore, speaks to the mounting pressure to shrink back and stand down, to hand in their gospel confidence and integrity.

literary context

We have noted already that Revelation is a real **letter** to real people in a real time. It should not be understood as a document that was written in code for future generations. Instead, we hear its timeless message when we unpack it as an epistle to the 7 churches.

Revelation also falls under the genre of **apocalyptic prophecy** (similar to OT books like Daniel or Zechariah). This can be “defined as God’s revelatory interpretation (through visions and auditions) of his mysterious counsel about past, present and future redemptive eschatological history.”⁴ It is about *revealing* (meaning of ‘apocalypse’) God’s heavenly perspective and *truth* (meaning of ‘prophecy’) that we may be blind to when simply observing life from our earthly station. As a prophetic word, Revelation is much more concerned with truth telling than simply future telling. “Life on earth may look ordinary, but for those who have eyes to see, for those who hear the revelation communicated to John, they see and hear about truth from another dimension, which represents the truth about life, death, evil, and goodness.”⁵ Beyond revelation, the genre also carries a sense of imminent divine intervention where God will uphold the righteous and condemn the wicked. And so, it calls its readers to realign themselves with God and live his way.

³ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 16.



⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 38.

⁵ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 31.

There are some key features of apocalyptic literature that are worth pointing out to help us through what may be quite an overwhelming read.

1. apocalyptic symbolism

Revelation is full of symbols and visions. Reading the symbols too literally will create complicated and false interpretations. You could end up trying to match everything up to historical events, invent scenes of the future, or freaking out over symbolic pictures. But all this doesn't mean Revelation is abstract and vague, rather **symbolism figuratively points to the truth**. For example:

-  The sword coming out of Jesus' mouth (1:16) points us to the power of his word.
-  The church as the bride of Christ (21:9) points us to how much he loves us.

The striking symbolism of Revelation is designed to awaken us to this heavenly message that points us to our new world and new life under God.



2. number symbolism

A prominent subset of symbols in Revelation are symbolic numbers. Numbers are often used as non-literal shorthand. "The repetition of the numbers and the repeated series of numbers highlight that nothing is haphazard or accidental."⁶ Here is a list of the key symbolic numbers:

- **7** is the number of **completeness**. (7 spirits, churches, seals, trumpets, bowls)
- **4** is the number of **all creation**. (4 corners/winds of the earth)
- **12** is the number of **all people**. (12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles)
- **10** is also a number of **completeness** and often multiplied to convey vastness. (10 commandments, 1000 years)
- **6** is falling short of/parodying 7. (666 is the mark of the beast, 6th in a series often brings judgement)

3. OT references

The first question we should ask whenever we see a symbol is, "**Have we seen this before in the OT?**" Much of the confusion around the symbols would dissolve if we traced them back to their Old Testament roots. As Beale notes, "The OT and Judaism are the primary background against which to understand images and ideas of the Apocalypse."⁷ John uses the OT creatively to show continuity with past prophets but applies them in light of the gospel to show the fulfilment of God's truth. Sometimes the OT is clearly referred to verbally and at other times it is alluded to thematically. For example:

-  Babylon is a well known image of anti-God civilisation and prosperity.
-  The fearsome image of Jesus, derived from Daniel 10, further highlights his divine power and authority.

We can discern the meaning of many symbols with confidence when we understand their OT context. "Thus it would be a serious mistake to understand the images of Revelation as timeless symbols... Their resonances in the specific social, political, cultural and religious world of their first readers need to be understood if their meaning is to be appropriated today."⁸

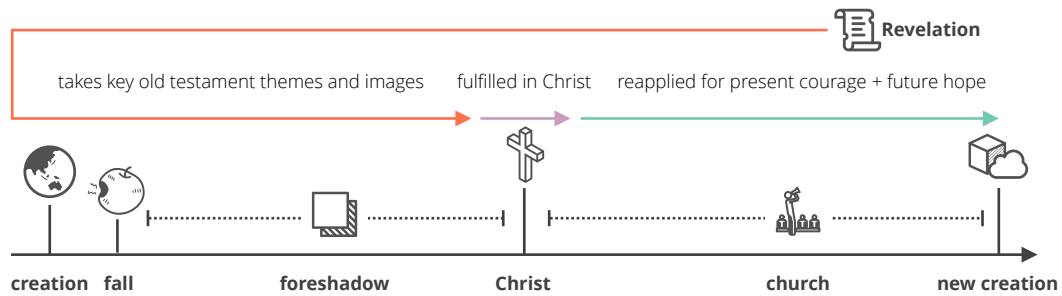
⁶ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 60.

⁷ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 56.

⁸ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 19.

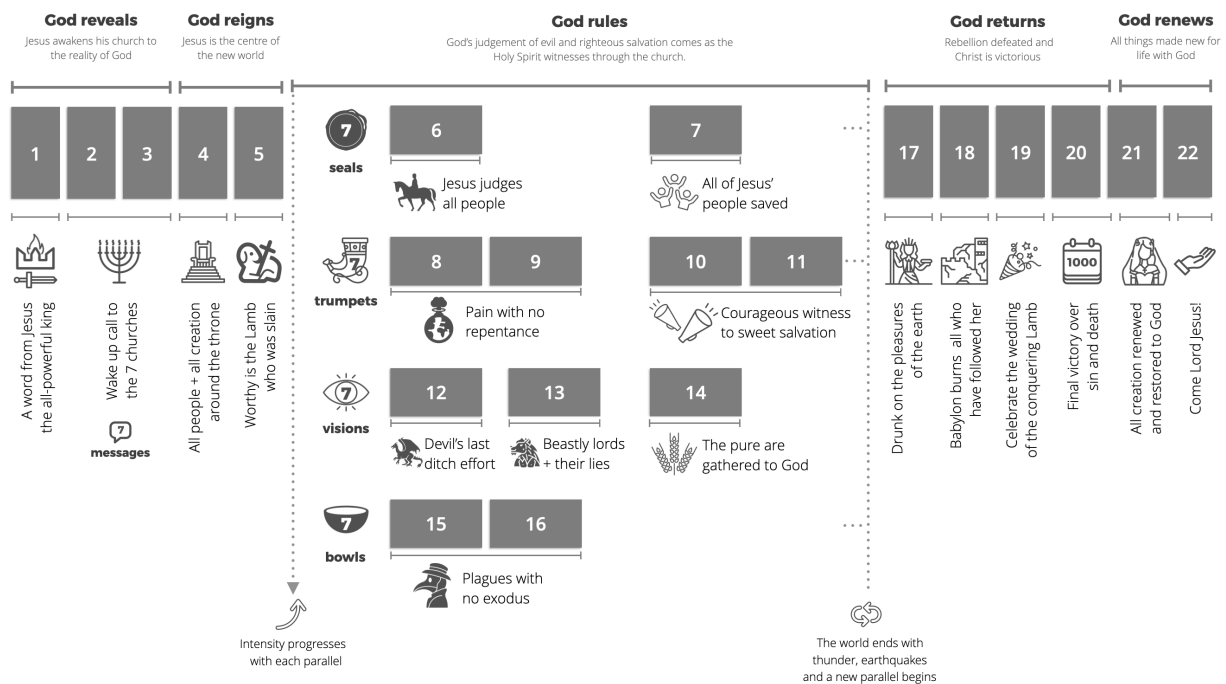
biblical-theological context

Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It is undoubtedly a future-oriented book that pushes us to see the impending perfection of all creation under Jesus. However it would be a mistake to not see that Revelation is just as, if not more, concerned for the present. In many ways, it is the capstone of the New Testament witness in addressing life in the ‘now and not yet’ age of the gospel. It galvanises the Christian to wait and work as Spirit-empowered people for the paramount purposes of God. Revelation also leans heavily on the Old Testament, drawing on its prophetic images to show Christ as the ‘yes’ to all of God’s promises. It is richly drenched in symbols and themes that span all of Scripture. Therefore it “presents itself as the climax of biblical prophecy that shows how various Old Testament prophecies and patterns find their consummation in the present and future reign of Jesus Christ, who decisively defeats his foes, saves his people and restores all things.”⁹



structure

Throughout the book of Revelation you will see repeated scenes of judgement and salvation (e.g. 11:14-18). These repeated scenes are not sequential i.e. there are not multiple instances of definitive judgment and salvation from God. Rather they are **parallel scenes of final judgement and salvation**. They are giving different angles of the same culminating event. Therefore the structure of Revelation should be understood as below.



⁹ Tabb, *All Things New*, 2.

key themes



God's sovereignty as the alpha and the omega

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (1:8)

God's unassailable sovereignty is first given to us in his titles (1:8):

- *The Alpha and the Omega* - God is supreme as the beginning and the end of all things.
- *The One who is, who was and who is to come* - This is the meaning of God's name, *Yahweh*, given to Moses in Ex 3:14-15. He is eternal and sovereign over all history.
- *The Almighty* - God is all powerful and can do all the things he has declared.

The creator king of the universe is gloriously unparalleled in all that he is, says and does. God's sovereignty is not just observed in his nature but also in his actions throughout salvation history. What he says, he will do. He can and will judge the wicked. He can and will redeem the righteous. And so, a "major theological theme of the book is the glory due to God because he has accomplished full salvation and final judgment."¹⁰ Therefore God has demonstrated what has always been true; **he is the glorious centre of reality and deserves worship from all** (7:9-10).



Christ's victory as the lion and the lamb

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" (5:13)

We are confronted with a Jesus of a different stature in Revelation. He is not meek and mild, but mighty and fearsome (1:12-15). He is no longer a victim on the cross, but a victorious conqueror. Despite previous or present appearances, Jesus is God's promised King of kings—a king who decisively conquered sin and evil by his death and resurrection. "Fundamental to Revelation's whole understanding of the way in which Christ establishes God's kingdom on earth is the conviction that in his death and resurrection Christ has already won his decisive victory over evil."¹¹ In Revelation, **Christ is the conquering saviour, chief witness of God, enthroned Son of Man, and centre of creation's worship.** He is *Christus Victor* and his gospel is to be heralded across the earth.

The tone of Jesus' gospel carries into his victory march. It is not brute slaughter; instead, righteous judgement and gracious redemption is championed. Revelation's striking image for Christ is the sacrificial lamb (5:6-9). "Paradoxically, Jesus is the messianic ruler descended from David and Judah who conquers *as* the slaughtered lamb."¹² **He is the lion and the lamb, the sacrifice and the sovereign.** Having seen the real king Jesus, will we follow his ways?



the Holy Spirit's power as prophet and perfecter

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (2:7)

The Holy Spirit might appear shy in Revelation but he is in fact powerfully bringing forth the word and work of God. First, **the Holy Spirit brings a prophetic word** (19:10). "The Spirit

¹⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 172.

¹¹ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 73.

¹² Tabb, *All Things New*, 61.

is the Spirit of revelation, the Spirit of prophecy who declares and affirms Christ's words to the churches."¹³ Again, prophecy is more concerned with truth-telling rather than future-telling. The Spirit is sent to give John the visions (1:4), speak to his churches (2:7) so that God's people may live in the truth of his blessed reality (19:9). This is contrasted with the spirits of the world which are steeped in glamorous lies with a gruesome end (16:13,18:2).

The Holy Spirit brings God's will to perfection. Revelation often refers to the Holy Spirit as the 'seven spirits'. The number 7 symbolically signifies the Spirit as the fullness of God bringing forth his purposes. The Spirit is sent out as the eyes of Christ (5:6) across the whole world, bringing resurrection life (11:11) and, more importantly, empowering us to witness and wait for God's perfection at Christ's return (22:17). So when it comes to the church's prophetic voice, the "essence and heart of prophecy are inspired by the Holy Spirit himself, and the Spirit centres on the testimony about Jesus Christ."¹⁴ The two are intertwined—the Spirit and the church's prophetic voice is key to God's plan to perfect his world.

✦ the church as persecuted martyrs

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. (6:9)

John shows us a church that was persecuted, often to the point of death. These were chilling scenes for a church familiar with sporadic persecution and escalating tension. We see economic pressure (13:17), spiritual perversion (13:15), and physical persecution (11:7,16:6) brought upon God's people. **Revelation calls the church to persevere as persecuted witnesses of Jesus Christ.** We take our stand as witnesses¹⁵ rather than warriors. We must be ready to step forward and stand firm in true worship even to the point of bloodshed. Not all will die for the faith but all must be ready to do so. The point being made is not just your death but your all of your life must testify that Jesus is Lord. We do not retreat into castles or caves; instead we carry a courageous hope for the nations to come to Christ. In the words of Tertullian, "the blood of the martyrs is seed for the church". Therefore, "Christian participation in God's purpose of establishing his kingdom is portrayed in Revelation as a matter of witness, primarily verbal, but substantiated by life."¹⁶

The church rightly cries out for vindication (6:9-11) and **Revelation emboldens God's church with Christ's present victory and future vindication.** Jesus promised his church that he will build it and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Matt 16:18). It will not be the church who overcomes, but "the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." (17:14) Martyrdom is not the prize, rather it is the product of proclaiming Jesus to the very end. And every witness will receive their prize at the end (14:13,21:7). And so, it "is not that faithful Christians are to suffer martyrdom or that their martyrdom will be their victory... Their faithful witness and death is to be instrumental in the conversion of nations of the world. Their victory is not simply their own salvation from the world doomed to judgement... the people of God have been redeemed from *all the nations* in order to bear witness to *all the nations*."¹⁷

¹³ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 117.

¹⁴ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 142.

¹⁵ Our English word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word for witness/testimony, *marturia*.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 163.

¹⁷ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 84.

church as conquering martyrs

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. (12:11)





For a letter that speaks to impending suffering, John surprisingly paints the church as 'conquerors'. 'The one who conquers' is repeated in the address to the 7 churches (2:7) and the language is echoed throughout. **Knowing Christ as conqueror guards the church from losing faith and hope by giving them true perspective** (6:2). "Who are the real victors? The answer depends on whether one sees things from the earthly perspective of those who worship the beast or from the heavenly perspective which John's visions open up for the readers."¹⁸ Despite the apparent dominance and even 'conquering' (13:7) of God's enemies, we take heart that Jesus has overcome the world (Jn 16:33).

We also have an active part to play in 'conquering'. "Victory is not a matter of military might, political influence or athletic achievement; rather, it entails enduring faithfulness to Christ and his word and spiritual conquest against sin and evil."¹⁹ **We conquer in Christ by remaining steadfast in the truth and pure in the face of temptation.** Jesus has gone before us and the Spirit empowers us to follow him every step of the way. "The Lamb's followers are to recapitulate the model of his ironic victory in their own lives; by enduring through tribulation they reign in the invisible kingdom of the Messiah."²⁰

judgment as hope for justice

"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just." (19:1-2)

Revelation portrays a vivid picture of contrast and conflict between those who belong to the rule of heaven and the opposition on earth. There are several key images that portray this:

-  The **'earth dwellers'** (3:10,17:1-5) are those who are drunk on the pleasures of the world and have thrown in their lot with the anti-God forces of the earth.
-  The **dragon** symbolises Satan and the losing war he has been desperately waging on God's people (12:17). He has been defeated by God, and we must not listen to his lies.
-  The **beasts** symbolise Rome's self-declared throne and abusive power. Their strength is stained with blasphemy and bloodshed as they con people into false worship (13:5).
-  **Lady Babylon** further symbolises arrogant human rebellion that intoxicates the nations with the delusion of prosperity that only ends in ashes and tears (18:19).

Revelation peels back human prosperity to reveal the prostitution of their souls. God's judgement comes as his long-awaited justice upon the wicked. It comes in the general brokenness of this world (6:4) but ultimately it comes at the end as God burns all who have glorified themselves and made merry in the blood of the innocent (17:6); by their blood they will pay (14:20). **God's final judgement is our hope that sin and death will not be the last word** (20:14). Hearers of this hope "are comforted by God's judgment not because they take glee in seeing their enemies punished; they are comforted because they are reminded that evil will not triumph, that goodness will have the final say and will be the final reality."²¹

¹⁸ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 90.

¹⁹ Tabb, *All Things New*, 109.




²⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 171.

²¹ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 101.

renewal as hope for life with God

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (21:3)

Whilst we have stressed that Revelation speaks not only to the future, it does powerfully point our hearts and minds to a glorious future. This is again captured in a series of images:

-  The **Bride of Christ** reminds us that the faithful preparation and anticipation of God's people will be consummated and celebrated as Jesus returns (19:6-9).
-  The **New Jerusalem**, in contrast to burning Babylon, is the splendid city of God. Here God will dwell with his people unhindered once again (21:22-23).
-  The **Tree of Life** along with other Edenic images shows us see the untainted state of blessedness we were always designed to live in (22:1-3).

Our future and final hope is that God is making all things new so that we may live with him (21:5). He will wipe away all that has tormented us in our sin (21:4) and restore us back to him. **Everything about the renewed creation focuses on our renewed relationship with God.** The precious gems and metals of the heavenly city is but an augment to the real treasure, the immediate and intimate presence of God himself with his people. "She is called the new Jerusalem because Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God in the Old Testament, the city where the Lord chose to put his name, and in the new covenant God's *people* are his dwelling place."²² There is no longer a mediating temple because God is fully among us (21:22). A glorified humanity finds its home in a new creation that is brimming with God's glory. "New covenant, new temple, new Israel, new Jerusalem and new creation are metaphors for *the one reality of God's intimate, glorious presence with his people.*"²³

goals

How do we hope to mature in studying the book of Revelation? As with all Scripture, "The prophecy, however, isn't written merely to convey information; the purpose is ethical formation and transformation, since genuine hearing leads to obedience, to keeping the words of the prophecy"²⁴ Beale summarises the purpose of Revelation as "The sovereignty of God and Christ in redeeming and judging brings them glory, which is intended to motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word."²⁵ So the overarching goal of this teaching series is to **trust God as our gracious king to guard our hearts to the very end and grow us in our faithful witness everyday.**

head

- **God is king**
God is the undisputed king of his creation. He has conquered sin and defeated death. Rebels will not stand, the righteous will be redeemed.
- **Jesus is coming soon**
We stand in unwavering hope as we wait for Jesus' return. The world might look like an ungodly mess but we look to the future armed with God's faithfulness and grace.

²² Hamilton, *Revelation*, 26.

²³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 173.

²⁴ Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, 24.

²⁵ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 151.

 **heart**

- **Worship God alone**

We must learn to resist temptation and withstand pressure in our world. We worship God alone because everything else is a betrayal of his grace, and poison to our souls.

- **Not yet home**

Revelation stirs in us, not a polite interest or rancid conspiracies, but a desperate homesickness that recognises we do not belong to the things of this age but long for renewal and reunion with God.

 **hands**

- **Hear his word**

Revelation wants us to hear God's word so that we might see the world as God sees it. We want to live and learn through its wake up call to all churches.

- **Witness in Spirit-filled lives**

If we are captivated by Christ and his victory in the gospel, we will be his Spirit-empowered champions til our very last breath. His church will stand and proclaim the gospel of the lion and the lamb until we meet him again.

resources

Here are some other resources for further reference.

- This overview can also be found in [video format](#).
- Check out the summary videos from The Bible Project ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#))
- Accessible commentaries
 - Tim Chester - *Revelation for You*
 - Greg Beale - *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*
 - Tom Schreiner - *The Joy of Hearing*