

## Does Revelation tell us when the world will end?

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*One of the least-understood books of Scripture...*

At some point late in the early first century BCE, John of Patmos wrote an apocalypse that has puzzled the church in more recent centuries. It has since served as part of longstanding predictions about what the future has in store, and provided fertile debate for biblical scholars.

John's Apocalypse would eventually become a part of the biblical canon as the Book of Revelation...but not initially. When the Council of Nicea laid out consensus about what books of scripture would appear in the Bible in the fourth century, the book did not make the cut. Later, its inclusion was a matter of debate, with more than one church denomination refusing to include it in their editions of the Bible.

On the other hand, Revelation (no s) has enjoyed times of popularity, especially as the basis of speculative Christian fiction (the likes of the *Left Behind* series). With its terrifying eschatological vision and dense metaphors, the book is a terrifying one that is invoked as a prediction of how the world will end (although [it is not about this](#)). In a year as tumultuous as 2020, it is easy to see why the book enjoys a particular cache during trying times.

Dr Robyn Whitaker lectures at Pilgrim Theological College and has written about the Book of Revelation. In 2019, she delivered a keynote address at School of Discipleship about the book.

"Revelation has always been popular during times of crisis or for communities who feel persecuted or oppressed," Dr Whitaker said.

"For example, it was one of the most popular books in the medieval period, particularly around the year 1000 as millennial expectation rose. I don't see a particular rise in popularity right now although people are using the word 'apocalyptic' more (often wrongly!)"

Despite its occasional popularity, it is worth acknowledging that there is no scholarly consensus about Revelation, with theologians differing widely on the author's intent and the underlying theology surrounding the work. That said, biblical scholarship remains constantly interested in the Book of Revelation, if not in agreement about it, and we are fortunate enough that these scholars have provided some ways towards how we can approach this strange text.

The author, John of Patmos, identifies himself early on in the work as a 'servant'. A long-held church tradition suggested that this is the same figure as John, the disciple for whom John's gospel was named. It is unlikely that the two works shared a common author, however, with an analysis of each book's vocabulary suggesting that they are more dissimilar than any two other books in the New Testament.

Like most of the New Testament, the book of Revelation was written in koine Greek. Unlike other texts from the time, however, such as the Gospel of Luke, [Revelation's Greek is renowned by scholars as being particularly low quality.](#)

For anything that Revelation lacks in its use of language, the book provides rich and terrifying imagery to describe a cosmic clash between the forces of Sin and empire and Jesus Christ. Like other books in its genre, John's apocalypse features language that describes certain spiritual and political realities using end-of-world imagery, a technique that we see elsewhere in scripture.

"People often think apocalypses generally are all about catastrophe, but Revelation is about unveiling God's way of viewing the world," Dr Whitaker said.

"This often means exposing evil and injustice for what they are. We've seen resonances of that kind of apocalypticism or revealing during COVID – a light shone on the precariousness of certain work, the fragility of capitalism, our mortality, and injustice in terms of employment or access to health care, for example."

As is the case with the apocalypse genre, Revelation features a narrator who has a strange vision full of symbolism. An interesting area of this is the way it draws on numbers, with repeated use of seven (the seven scrolls, for example) and 666, the infamous number of the beast (which may be an opaque reference to the Emperor Nero).

While the latter part of Revelation offers an image of a future where Jesus has overcome this battle, [at least most of the book describes events that have already taken place in the world of its author.](#)

Revelation will continue to inspire and revile the church, and will no doubt be falsely invoked at points when it seems that the end of the world is here. But this does not mean that Christians need fear the book. Dr Whitaker told Insights that the book remains a helpful resource for exposing the hidden way God views things, almost 2,000 years after it was written.

"It is highly symbolic and imaginative, which intrigues and keeps drawing me in," she said.

"Revelation imagines evil as communal and systemic, something we can participate in without even knowing it at times. It's a helpful way to think about evil and one that makes huge sense in light of justice work being done in areas like racism."