

# Revelation Introduction



“Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as Revelation. Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation, resulting from a tragic misapprehension of the work's literary form and purpose.”

–Luke Timothy Johnson

# Revelation: Introduction

Theology in images

Bad readings: Haiti, Branch Davidians, Montanists, Family Radio, our dating system

Good readings: hymns– Holy, Holy, Holy; Crown him with Many Crowns; Handel's Messiah; Agnus Dei; The Revelation Song; Augustine's understanding of the Fall of Rome

Main focus: the Lamb, the throne, and witness

Absent: “rapture” and Antichrist

This meant something to the first churches!

# Revelation: Introduction

Title from *apokalupsis* (“apocalypse” or “revelation”)

John the Apostle? John the Elder? John of Patmos?

John’s perfect time and place

**Date:** AD 90s

Clear allusions to Nero (d. AD 68)

Jews and Christians refer to Rome as “Babylon”  
after the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70)

Domitian begins new persecutions (AD 90s)

Genres: apocalypse, letter, and prophecy (1:1–4)

Delos



# Revelation Introduction

**Genres:** Apocalypse, letter, prophecy...

**Apocalypse** has something “revealed” but **does not have to be** about the end times

2 Esdras, Epistles of Enoch, Sibylline Oracles,  
parts of Daniel, Apocalypse of Baruch

Features of apocalypses:

Heavy use of symbolism and numerology in  
Revelation

# Revelation: Introduction

Symbolic language points to transcendent reality: more than “Rome”

Numerology: the significance of numbers (4, 7, 12= good; 6=bad)

**Prophecy**— primarily *forthtelling*

Revelation is not about speculative foresight, but theological insight

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must **soon** take place.”  
(1:1)

Favorites: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Joel, and Daniel

# Revelation: Introduction

Begins as a **letter**, but with seven addressees

A liturgical (i.e. worship) text

A theo-political text

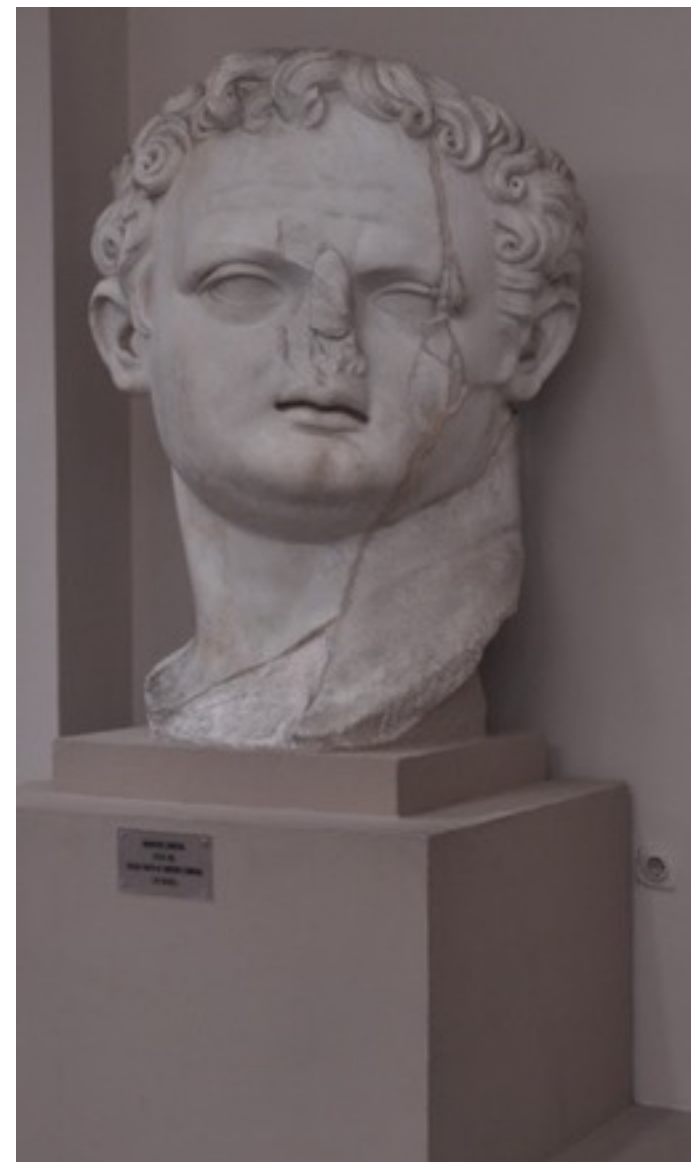
404 verses— over 500 OT allusions

## **The Big Picture**

1. Rome
2. Gospel and Counter-Gospel
3. Worship and Blessing
4. Overlapping Stories



# Rome



# Rome

Revelation critiques Rome's injustice and idolatry  
(Rome's Gospel)

Injustices: military, economic, political, and religious  
oppression

Rome as “civil religion”– everything the State does is  
sacred

Rome and Apollo

## **Gospel and Counter–Gospel**

Rome's Gospel: the gods have chosen Rome (and  
Caesar)...





637.





# Gospel and Counter-Gospel

## **Roman Gospel**

Empire

Roman Peace

Victoria (goddess)

Faith in emperor

Eternity of Empire

## **Counter-Gospel**

Kingdom of God

Babylon: Blood-shedder

Victory of the lamb

Faith of Christ

Eternal reign of Lamb



# Worship and blessing

Hymns and doxologies:

1:5-6, 7; 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-8; 22:20-21

## **Overlapping Stories (non-linear story)**

Re-creation

Redemption

Judgment

Witness (of the suffering pilgrim church)

Victory of the triumphant church



# Structure

- I. Revelation 1-3: Opening vision of the risen Lord and his seven messages
- II. Revelation 4-5: Central and centering vision of God and the Lamb
- III. Revelation 6-20: Visions of the judgment of God, with interludes
- IV. Revelation 21-22: Final vision and new creation

"John is a poet, and poetry is not the language of objective explanation, but the language of imagination... It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after reading a poem, we have more experience."

–Eugene Peterson

# Revelation 1

- v. 1– Revelation is from and entirely about Jesus Christ
- v. 2– The faithful “witness” (1:5, 9, and 2:13)
- v. 3– First blessing (the readers)
- v. 4– seven as number for “completeness”
- v. 5– the faithful rulership of Christ over all kingdoms
- v. 8– Alpha and Omega (Isa 44:6)
  - First of two times God speaks (21:5–8); same titles as Christ (1:17 and 22:13)
- vv. 12–16– Christ as “son of man” and “ancient one” (Dan. 7:9 and 13); partakes in identity of God
  - Christ dressed as high priest (Exod 29)



““As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; **his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool**; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came **one like a son of man**, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”

(Daniel 7:9–14 ESV)

# Revelation 1

- v. 16– the sword as a violent symbol?
- Christ's ultimate victory and judgment is not one of actual violence, but through the word that proceeds from his mouth.
- v. 18– Keys to “Death and Hades”
  - “Death and Hades” in OT and Greek religion
  - Hecate: Goddess of witchcraft, keys, first and last, A and W, savior; founded near Ephesus; conflated with Apollo
  - Christ is undoing the power of empire



# Revelation 1

- vv. 12–13 and 20– Christ is in the midst of his Church



# Schedule

- Churches and the central vision
- Judgments
- Judgments (pt. 2)
- New Heavens and New Earth
- Numbers and Nero

# Rev 2–3: The Churches

- Similar to an imperial edict: Christ the emperor
- Letter pattern:
  - Address to church's angel
  - Description of Christ from Ch. 1
  - Commendation
  - Condemnation
  - Challenge
  - Eschatological promise
  - Invitation to hear Spirit

Delos



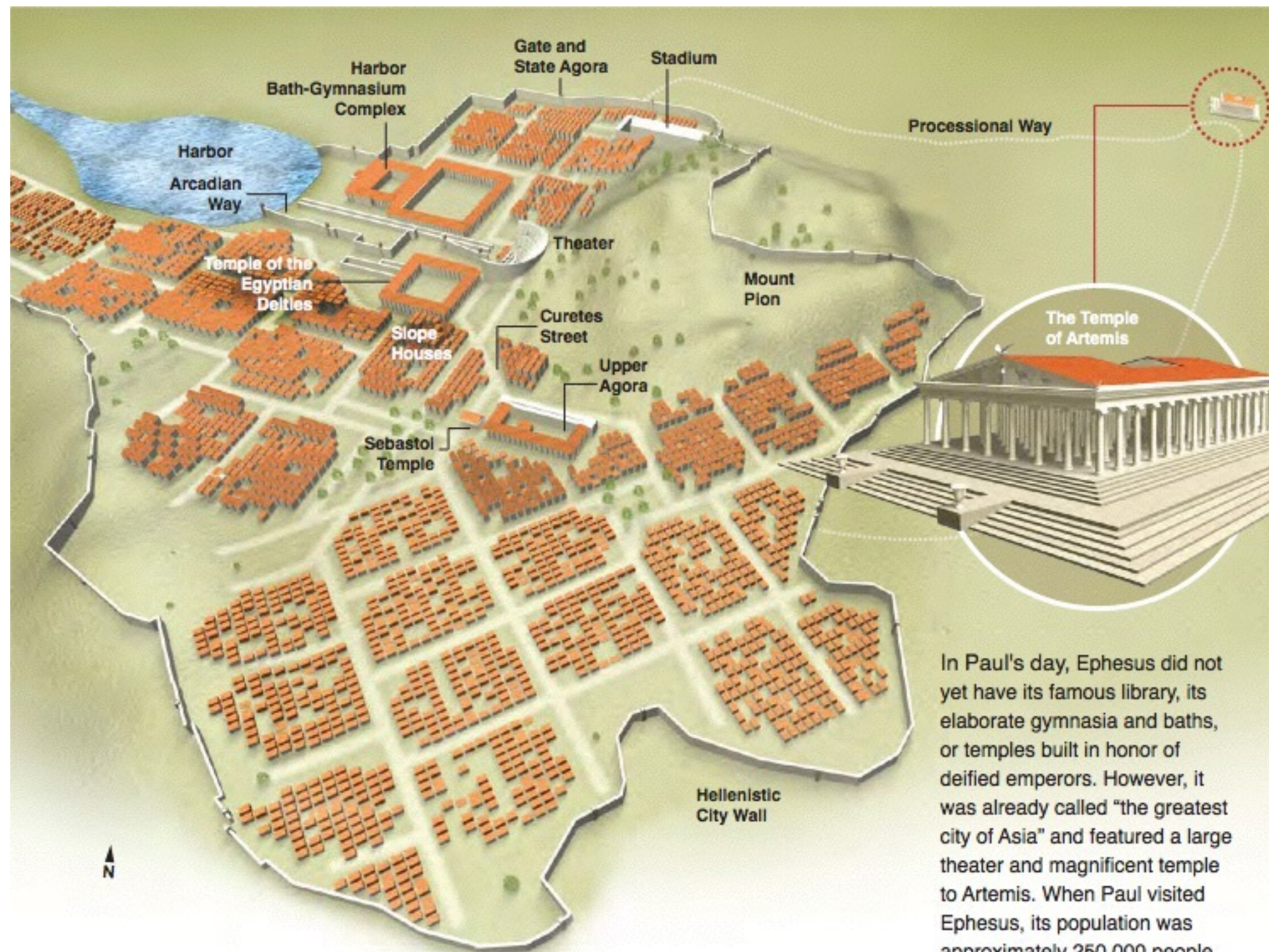
# Rev 2–3: The Churches

- Reflect persecution and willingness to compromise faith (e.g. food offered to idols)
- Symbolic names: Balaam; Jezebel; the Nicolaitans
- Largest cities in the region (100,000+ people)



# Ephesus

- “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’”(Revelation 2:1)
- Commercial center of Asia
- Temple of Artemis (Roman: Diana)
- Emperor Cult



In Paul's day, Ephesus did not yet have its famous library, its elaborate gymnasia and baths, or temples built in honor of deified emperors. However, it was already called "the greatest city of Asia" and featured a large theater and magnificent temple to Artemis. When Paul visited Ephesus, its population was approximately 250,000 people.

# Smyrna

- “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:  
‘The words of the first and the last, who died and  
came to life.’” (Revelation 2:8)







# Pergamum

- “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.’”(Revelation 2:12)











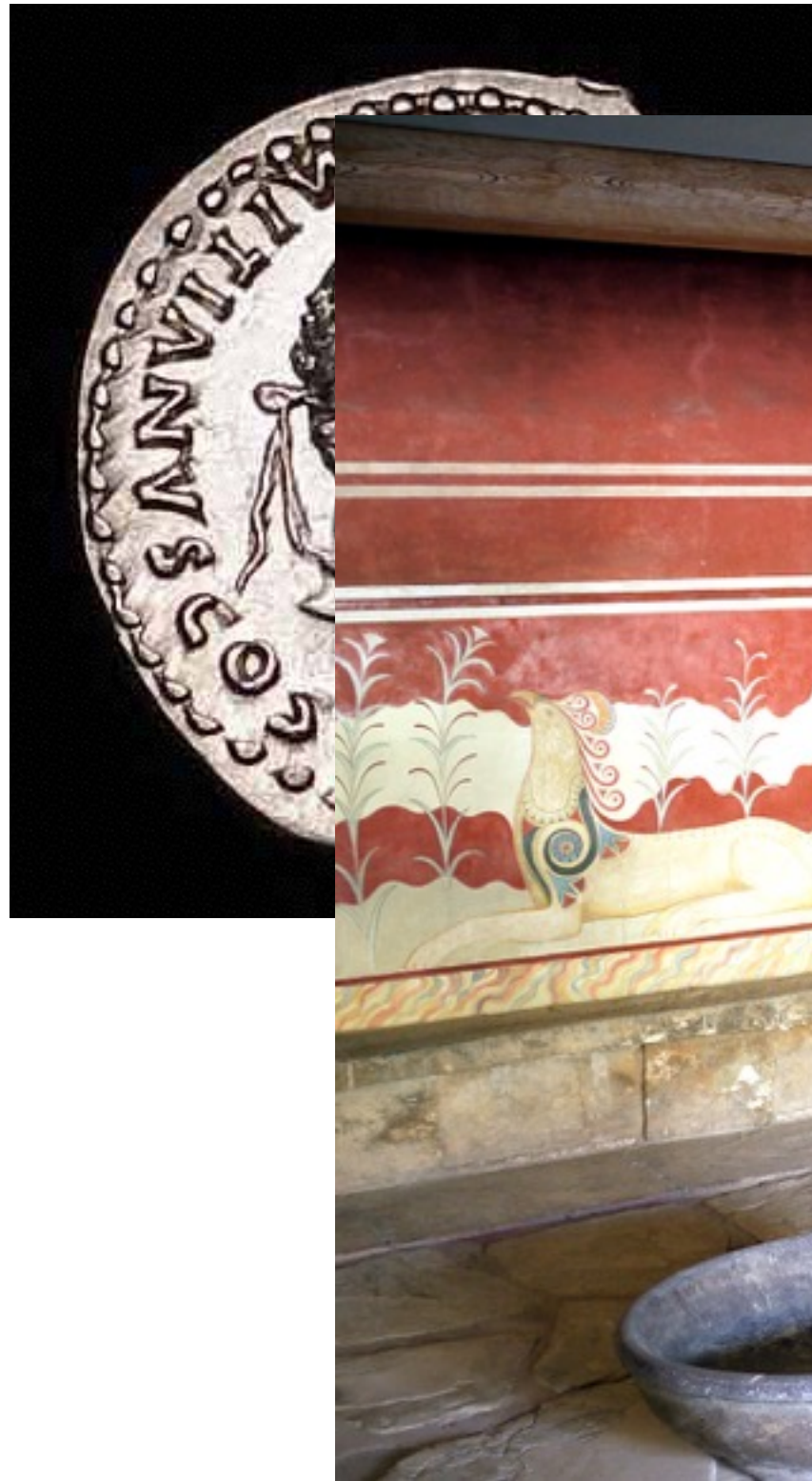


# Laodicaea

- “Lukewarm” is not a reference to spiritual indifference
- The Christians are so prosperous and accommodating of cultural values they are completely out of fellowship with Christ
- The Churches are a summary of how to be Christians in the world– following Christ is the foundation of our ethics and our ethics entail right worship

# Revelation 4–5

- Chapters 4–5 are theological center of book
- Heavenly throne room and the OT (and Hebrews)
- Uses imagery of Roman imperial throne
- Elders are political figures
- God rules on a cosmic level
- Sovereignty plays out in the rest of Revelation by references to worship





# Living Creatures

- 1.) Their entire existence is completely fulfilled in the worship of God
- 2.) They are the central units of worship that expands out into all of creation
- 3.) Mostly animal, rather than human faces: this book worship involves all of creation
- The chapter focuses on worship, not the one on the throne; knowledge of God connected with worship

# Revelation 5

- The scroll– God’s eschatological plan
- The lion of Judah!
  - Is a lamb that was killed?
  - Christ is not the conquering, messianic lion
  - A militaristic symbol reinterpreted: conquest through sacrificial death
- Lamb is central vision of Revelation
- Also “centering” vision– constantly redirects attention of all believers (especially persecuted)

# Comparison: Rev 4 and 5

- Ch. 4: vision of God
- Ch. 5: vision of Christ
  - A reconfiguration of God in light of Jesus Christ
- Son shares: the Father's dominion (1:5-6), white hair (1:14), name (1:17), throne (3:21; 22:1, 3), the source of salvation, the wrath of God (6:16-17), and will be the temple and light in the New Jerusalem with the Father (21:22-23)
- Sacrificial death is central to identity of God



and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne... and twenty-four elders... And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures they never cease to sing... And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him singing, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (Rev. 4)

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne... And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing...with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth... the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang, "Worthy are you..." singing with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb...to receive power...and honor and glory" (ch. 5)

## Revelation (not “Revelations”): Week 1

- Revelation= *apokalupsis*; the first word of the book in Greek
- Throne, Lamb, and witness are the focus



- Written in the 90s during the reign of Domitian

### Genres: Apocalypse, prophecy, and letter

1.) “Apocalypse”

2.) Prophecy

3.) Letter

### Big Picture

- Rome
- Roman Gospel vs. Revelation’s Counter-Gospel
- Worship and blessing
- Overlapping stories

### Structure

1.

2.

3.

4.