



Summary :

Seven churches are called the Christian communities of seven important Asia Minor cities. The *Apocalypse* of St John and other Christian texts, such as the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, make reference to them in order to strengthen the faith of the Christians and to prepare them for the Day of Judgement.

Date

1st century AD

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. The peculiar meaning of John's Apocalypse and research issues

John's Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) is the last book of the New Testament. Its theme is the struggle of God against the Devil until the very end. This supreme contest ends with the triumphant sovereignty of divine will and the defeat of the forces of Evil. The main purpose of this text of disclosing nature was the preparation of the believers for the advent of the Day of Judgement.

This goal is succeeded in two ways; the first one involves the eschatological enlightenment and the encouragement of the Christians for vigilance and repentance, and the second one involves the solace concerning the impending probations that will precede the Day of Judgement. In this context, the text is structured on a continuous interchange of revealing visions that announce terrible deeds, with comforting scenes, whose aim is to moderate the terror of the announcement of such impending calamities.

The topic of the writer of the Apocalypse is one that continues to preoccupy the field of research from Late Antiquity until today. The Christian tradition explicitly reports that the Apocalypse is a piece of writing by John the Apostle from Palestine, son of Zebedee. He has been assigned four more texts from the New Testament, the Fourth Gospel and three epistles.¹ John himself cites that he is the writer of the text and in fact he refers to himself as God's 'slave'. Despite this, the Apocalypse caused so many intense reactions in the heart of the church from the very start, that its paternity has been questioned.² The most systematic questioning has derived from Dionysus of Alexandria (+265), who claimed that the writer of the Apocalypse is not the same as the one who wrote the Fourth Gospel.³ Modern researchers have expressed the opinion that the Apocalypse is a spurious piece of work, as is the case with many other Judaic and Christian disclosing texts. They share the view that the above written work has been attributed to John at a much later stage, which was a tendency that the Church followed, in order to associate revealing texts with significant figures of the early Christian years. The aim was to strengthen their status in the conscience of believers. The issue of the text's paternity has not yet reached clarification.⁴ Yet, the majority of modern researchers has adopted the general stance of the Christian tradition and has, thus, attributed it to John the Apostle.

The matter of dating is also relevant. Irenaeus (circa 180), who knew the bishop of Smyrna and subsequent martyr [Polycarpus](#) (circa 70-150), and others from the same generation, date the Apocalypse to the last years of Emperor [Domitian's](#) rule (81-96). Modern researchers date the written work to much earlier, in [Nero's](#) years (54-68).⁵

A careful examination of the historical information that can be traced in the Apocalypse indicts to the chronological period from 70 AD until the death of Domitian in 96 AD. In this way, the writer seems informed on the burning of Rome by Nero in 64 AD (for which the Christians were accused), the chaotic situation that prevailed after Nero's death (when civil wars broke out, 68-69 AD), and the wretchedness of the Judaic war (66-70 AD).⁶

The language used in the text is the koine that was spoken in the 1st century AD, but in its more popular form, with an intense Semitic influence evident in syntax and style. These influences are owed to the writer's descent, but also to the numerous illustrations and



expressions that he borrows from the Old Testament. John's Apocalypse is above all one of the most controversial religious texts. It was considered false for a long time ("doubtful"), until it won a place in the New Testament, among the "irrefutable ones". In this context, the struggle for its enforcement, particularly in the Eastern churches, has been long and strenuous.

2. The problem of the historicity of the Apocalypse

John the Apostle cites in the introduction of his work the divine origin, the character and the purpose of the Apocalypse. His main concern is to focus to the present and the future, not the past. For this reason he sets forth some pieces of (vague) historical information, without wishing to intentionally mislead his readership. Moreover, it is highly likely that he deliberately adjusted to the usual philological conventions of his time, in order to become more comprehensible by his readers. According to a dexterous remark, John "reshapes the fear of a single experience into a future expectation".⁷

In the first main part the apparition of Christ's man-god figure is set forth, which appears in front of John and asks him to write about all that he knows and all that is to come. The dictation of seven epistles to the angels follows, namely the bishops of the seven churches of Asia Minor; the epistles include recent messages of a revealing nature to each one.⁸ John the Apostle himself confesses that the dictation of the divine had occurred while he was in a state of ecstasy.⁹ Christ revealed to him God's terrible punishments to the unrepentant pagans, and he in turn carried them to the believers. John's prophetic visions reached their peak with Babylon's catastrophe, which was the city of evil, the incarnation of anti-Christian Rome, and the defeat of the seven-headed beast who was the Satan. The latter was imprisoned for a thousand years, until God's final judgement, which would lead the believers to a modern Jerusalem.

3. John's Apocalypse and the seven churches of Asia

The Apocalypse was written in a period of [Roman sovereignty](#) throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Pax Romana and the propagation of the Greek culture created favourable conditions for the [spread of Christianity](#). The Christians were few in number. They enjoyed relevant calm living conditions, as the Roman authorities did not regard them as a serious threat for the Empire yet. Any expulsions that occurred were only because the Christians refused to participate in the [Imperial cult](#), which was particularly popular in the [province of Asia](#).¹⁰ The social events that were linked to the Imperial cult were of small significance for the Asian cities, and the negative attitude of the Christians vexed the Ethnic and was considered as a precursor of misfortunes.¹¹ On the other hand, the Christians refused to accept the tolerance that the multi-cultured Roman Empire displayed towards the various cults of the time. Christianity appeared as a revealing religion and required exclusiveness from its believers.

In relation to the above observations, it is impressive how the Apocalypse text creates a fully obscure picture concerning the living conditions of the Christians in the seven cities. Rome is compared to a beast and its representatives are characterized as persecutors of faith, who will be punished with the greatest of disasters. This fury partly echoes John's emotional tension from the recent dramatic deeds of the Judaic war. This was also a subjective view of the writer, who thus foresaw the leading position that the new religion was to acquire within the Roman dominion.

Besides the clearly religious-theological approach, John's explicit reference to the direct recipients of the text – namely the seven churches of Asia – is of utmost importance for any attempts of historical interpretation. The term 'church' in the early Christian years referred to the first Christian communities. The seven churches that are mentioned in this text used to be the Christian communities that were found in [Ephesus](#), [Smyrna](#), [Pergamon](#), [Thyateira](#), [Sardis](#), [Philadelphia](#) and [Laodiceia](#).¹² Despite the local differentiations, the living conditions in these seven cities were identical.¹³ All social classes were represented in the Christian communities. The craftsmen, the merchants and the slaves were also part of them. On the other hand, the Christians did not appear to maintain particularly close bonds with the Roman aristocracy. The spiritual leaders of these socially complex groups were well-off people with a great social status. They were in a position to host the churches at their own places, organize common meals (the agapes), support the poor, travel according to their own will, and host visitors.



The preference for the specific towns has been interpreted in various ways, as the existence of Christian communities in those years is also certified elsewhere in Asia Minor.¹⁴ Research generally accepts the fact that the number seven had a specific symbolic significance and that the seven cities symbolize the total body of the Church. Probably these churches already constituted a totality that played an unknown part in Asia at that time. In any way, the writer does not cite that he is addressing a universal church. On the contrary, his direct readers, the Christians of the seven churches, were informed that they were the sole recipients of a God-inspired text. Probably John wished to address the cities that he was responsible for, adopting the role of a pastor and an instructor.

By coincidence or not, the above cities were significant centres of commerce and were located around a circular commercial road, whose starting-point was Ephesus.¹⁵ The writer had efficient topographical knowledge of each town and its local traditions. He was familiar with each town's social-political conditions and was acquainted with the *ageloi* (messengers), namely the heads of the churches, and possibly even all the believers. The expressions that he uses certify the existence of a close relationship with them. His goal was to strengthen the faith of the Christians, given that the signs of weariness and spiritual decline were evident, mainly because the long awaited Judgement Day had not yet arrived. There are many points where the writer has a direct conversation with his flock. His tone of voice illustrates that he addressed a public that was familiar with conversations of theological and moral context. As it appears, he was convinced that his – limited, indeed – audience would receive direct knowledge of the text.

In addition, he had no doubt that the believers in the communities of Asia Minor had the ability to fully understand his eschatological messages. As far as the way in which the Christians would be informed of his book's context, John cites it clearly; one of them would read the text (the *anagnoskon*) and the rest would listen (the *akouontes*), since it was impossible for each Christian to possess his own copy. Besides, Christianity at that time was a matter of joint groups of people, not an individual matter. The believers gathered together and listened to the reading and the interpretation of the holy text. Perhaps some people who had additions to suggest also spoke out. This collective way of studying did not leave any space for misconception. Besides, the believers were familiar with the language and the symbols of that time, but also with the eschatological expectations of their prophets. In every one of the seven communities there must have been at least a single person who was accustomed to John's style and way of thinking.

The interpretation of the text takes another dimension, if one is to consider that for those first recipients the text did not present the same interpretation problems that the subsequent generations were faced with. The reference to [Patmos](#), for example, the place where the text was written, probably provided some information – even if that is unknown to the modern reader. It is likely that John did not live there exiled by the Roman authorities,¹⁶ but he willingly alienated himself for some time, because of the problems that he was facing with his Christian enemies in the seven cities. He evidently believed that his stay in Patmos would strengthen his position in the neighbouring communities of Asia Minor, of which he was a spiritual leader. It is highly likely that after the writing of the text John settled in Ephesus.

In the text no personal preference by John can be traced towards one community or the other. He was forced to oversee them all and provide his advice without discrimination.¹⁷ In his epistles to Ephesus and Pergamon he reproaches the Nicolaites, a sect that professed the ability of a connection between the Christian religion and certain pagan authorities,¹⁸ as well as others sects, which urged the Christians to consume food that derived from pagan offerings and to commit adultery.¹⁹ Such references prove that John visited the seven churches from time to time, perhaps following the same route that is evident from the enumeration of the cities. Naturally, he could follow a different route, if it was necessary. His goal always remained to kindle the flame of Christianity to all the Christians who dwelled there, so that they would be able to resist the religious, social and economic requirements of his time, which – according to John – would lead humanity to disaster.

The messages that govern the text make it clear, beyond doubt, that the only opportunity for deliverance is the Christian faith and the leading of a virtuous life. He uses an overall critical tone. On John's own showing, intensity and corruption conditions prevailed in the seven cities. Among the believers there was a number of 'pseudoapostles' and 'pseudoprophets'. The communities were divided, because there were groups of people with contradictory teaching methods and adverse moral and religious conceptions. Even the small number of believers that John praises appear uninspired, without sharing their old zeal for the Christian faith, or even tolerant towards the rivals of Christianity. Some communities had followed a high society lifestyle, some others had been beguiled, while some other ones had become indifferent to faith or had lost the initial affection for Jesus Christ. John praises only Smyrna and Philadelphia



for their virtuous lifestyles of the Christians who lived there. He considered some of these sins as deadly, and in order to fight them he terrorized the Christians with some of the most fearful threats that he was able to produce. According to him, these domestic problems posed a much greater threat than the external difficulties with the Ethnic and the Jews.

The social dimension of this revealing text is thus evident. What kind of effect did John's preachings have in the seven churches? It is not an overstatement to make that his position as a spiritual leader was difficult, since he seemed to have lost control over his spiritual flock to a large extent. It is evident that a portion of believers did not take his advice seriously into account, some of them were selective as to which piece of advice suited them, while only a few of them followed a path that he assented to. While he believed in social alienation in the expectation of the world's end, most believers continued with their daily activities for a better lifestyle. He did not hope that he would be accepted by the majority of believers. Perhaps he anticipated the creation of a restricted circle of pious people from all his recipients. Finally, it is interesting to mention that the *Apocalypse* does not include any references to possible future readers. Its readership was modern and it was taken for granted. The expectation of Lord's immediate arrival did not allow for future generations to rely on the text.²⁰

1. On the reference of the name 'John' in other sources, see Kyrtatas, D.I., *Η Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη και οι Επτά Εκκλησίες της Ασίας* (Athens 1994), p. 45.

2. It must be noted that many of these problems in research are due to the silence of the sources in relation to the early Christian years. The Acts of the Apostles are primarily mentioned in St. Paul's activity, while the data on the first Christians are scarce. In this way, the first writers who began writing in the 2nd century AD about the first steps of Christianity could rely only on very few sources.

3. Based on linguistic analysis, he supported the existence of a second 'John', a different one from the son of Zevedaeus, also due to rumours related to the existence of two monuments in Ephesus that were dedicated to 'John'. The existence of a second, older John, writer of the *Apocalypse*, was also supported by Eusebius from Caesaria in the 4th century.

4. For a relevant discussion, see Kyrtatas, D.I., *John's Apocalypse and the Seven Churches of Asia* (Athens 1994), pp. 10-11.

5. The image of the Antichrist, for example, echoes the popular notion that Nero would return from the underworld after his suicide. On the other hand, many researchers regard the *Apocalypse* as the Christian's reply to Domitian's request to be worshipped as Lord and God in the towns. Despite this, there is no evidence in the epistles that proves that they were written in a period of official persecutions.

6. The revolt's suppression was completed in 73, with the fall of the fortress of Masada.

7. Kyrtatas, D.I., *Η Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη και οι Επτά Εκκλησίες της Ασίας* (Athens 1994), p. 17.

8. For a discussion concerning the structure of the book of the *Apocalypse* see Bratsiotis, P.I., "Αποκάλυψις Ιωάννου", *Θρησκευτική και Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια 2* (1962), πλ. 1083-5' Sweet, J., "The Book of Revelation", *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (1993), pp. 651-2.

9. The ecstatic prophecy was usual in the early Christian communities.

10. It is worth noting that the Emperors of the dynasty of the Flavians (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian) were extremely popular due to their generosity towards the popular societal classes. In the *Apocalypse* only one witness, Antypas, who had lived in an earlier period, is mentioned, and the general picture alludes to calm living conditions.

11. The Christians usually refused to participate in the events. Despite this, when John arrived at Ephesus, he was surprised by the spread of the Imperial cult and its acceptance by Christians. It is said that he participated in the ceremony related to the cult of



Artemis Ephesian dressed in black and not in white as was customary, in order to make a point of protesting.

12. John, *Apocalypse*, 1.9-11.

13. Older information comes from St. Paul's epistles. The data from the *Acts of the Apostles* are a little more recent. From the beginning of the 2nd century the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch, as well as the epistle and the martyrdom of Polycarpus and other texts can also be added. The sources make mention of other Asia Minor communities not mentioned in the *Apocalypse*, which probably had the same or a similar social structure.

14. For instance, in the 1st century the existence of Christian communities at Troas and Cyzicus is certified.

15. The distances between the seven towns ranged from 45 to 67 kilometres.

16. Besides, Patmos is not one of the known places of exile in the Empire years.






17. Kyrtatas, D.I., *Η Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη και οι Επτά Εκκλησίες της Ασίας* (Athens 1994), p. 52.

18. Nicolaos, the leader of this sect, tried to compromise the Christian teachings with the social reality of his time. It seems that this sect had a great effect at that time. It is noteworthy that John the Apostle is concise enough as far as the teachings of the sect go, in his letter to the Ephesians, while providing more information in his letter to the Christians of Pergamon. Also, he mentions the sect in his letter to Thyateira.

19. John, *Apocalypse*, 2. Later writers associate the sect of the Nikolaites with agnosticism.

20. Kyrtatas, D.I., *Η Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη και οι Επτά Εκκλησίες της Ασίας* (Athens 1994), p. 64.

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