

INVITATION TO REVELATION

The Roman Empire, like most kingdoms in the ancient world, portrayed itself as the divinely intended ruler over the earth. It justified its economic and political control on spiritual grounds. The religion of the empire included the worship of the traditional Roman gods and the veneration of the Caesars as divine beings. This tendency toward emperor worship began in earnest with Caesar Augustus, the one who oversaw the transition of Rome from a republic to an empire. The following inscription, from Asia Minor in 9 BC, shows how Caesar's rule was proclaimed in both political and religious terms: The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere; the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the gospel that has come to men through him. By the time of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), this gospel of the *pax Romana*, or Roman Peace, was well established. The wealthy cities of western Asia Minor were competing with one another for the emperor's favor and patronage, proclaiming his divinity and promoting a cult of emperor worship. Any resistance to this cult would put a city's hopes of imperial favor in jeopardy. But believers in Jesus who lived in these cities acknowledged a different Savior, and they worshiped only the true God. God sent a message to these believers through a Jewish Christian prophet named John. He circulated among seven cities in the Roman province of Asia Minor, challenging and encouraging Jesus' followers in each place. On the island of Patmos, John received a vision in which he saw that the cult of emperor

worship would soon become deadly to followers of Jesus. Believers needed to be warned to be on their guard against any compromise, and to be faithful, even to the point of death in order to receive life as their victor's crown. John wrote down his vision and sent it as a circular letter to be read aloud in the churches under his care. He wanted it to be understood as a word directly from God, so he described it as a prophecy. John communicated the vision he received through a particular literary form, called apocalypse, which was well known in his day, even though it's unfamiliar to us now. This form was perfectly suited to his task. In an apocalypse, a visitor from heaven uses vivid symbols to disclose the secrets of the unseen world and the future. This visitor typically takes the recipient of the vision on a journey through heaven and offers a review of history leading up to a present crisis between good and evil. The vision enables the recipients to understand the spiritual dimensions of their situation and to respond to the crisis by remaining loyal to God. (The book itself is named Revelation, or Apocalypse, meaning unveiling.) The vision report that John sent to the churches of Asia has four main parts. Each one is marked by the phrase in the Spirit. : In the first part, John is in the Spirit on Patmos and receives a vision on the Lord's Day. In this vision, Jesus speaks words of warning and encouragement to each of the seven churches (pp. 1871–1874). : In the second part, John relates how he was taken in the Spirit into heaven and saw Jesus being exalted because he had redeemed humanity through his sacrifice. John also saw Jesus begin to execute God's judgment against his enemies, while protecting those who belonged to him. Next, the first coming of the Messiah and the threat against the early Christian community are depicted symbolically. John sees that Jesus will be victorious in the end, but in the meantime there is a call for endurance (pp. 1874–1885). : This extended vision is interrupted by

the third part of the book. John is taken in the Spirit to a wilderness, where he is shown the true spiritual state of the Roman Empire. Despite Rome's pretensions to glory, it is really drunken, greedy, blasphemous and immoral—and doomed to destruction (pp. 1885–1889). : The long vision that begins in the second part of the book then continues to its conclusion. It depicts the triumph of the Messiah over all his enemies (pp. 1889–1891). : Afterwards John is taken in the Spirit onto a mountain, great and high, where, in the fourth part of the book, he sees the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. The city is portrayed as the home of the true ruler over all things; it's the reality of which Rome is the parody. The vision closes with the promise that God's faithful servants will reign over the new creation (pp. 1891–1892). While the symbols in the book may appear strange at first, the meaning of many of them becomes clear when viewed in light of John's circumstances and of the imagery found in other parts of the Bible. The number twelve, for example, which occurs repeatedly in the description of the new Jerusalem, describes the people of God, since there were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of Jesus. When John writes that the woman in the third part of the book is seated on seven mountains, he's identifying this character with Rome, the city of seven hills. With some care and reflection on the book's first-century setting, modern readers can interpret many of its symbols. Revelation was written to warn followers of Jesus living in a specific place how they needed to respond to the challenge of a particular time. But the book also functions as the appropriate conclusion to the entire drama of the Bible. John's closing vision incorporates images from the Garden of Eden, the first story in the Bible. The world will experience a fresh beginning: He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" But until then, all who would reign with Jesus need to know that they can

triumph only by following the path of Jesus. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the people of God.

