

2.10 - Acceptance into the Canon

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Three factors are difficult to separate in any consideration of the book of Revelation: the uniqueness of its [style of writing](#); the question of its [authorship](#); and its acceptance into the [canon](#) of the New Testament. These three factors are interrelated in that each of them depends to some extent upon the others.¹ Most frequently, the unique *style of writing* has been used as evidence against apostolic *authorship*, which in turn has been used to reject the book from the *canon* of Scripture. We have already discussed the first two of these interrelated factors and here we spend some time looking at historic attitudes toward the book of Revelation from the perspective of its acceptance into the canon. We need to also be aware of a fourth factor which is the ultimate explanation of many of the attacks upon the authority of the book. “the canonical fortunes of no book hinged more on personal prejudice and theological bias than that of the Revelation of John.”² In other words, the pattern of events in history has often run in the opposite direction: *First*, a teaching found in the book is opposed; *Second*, a desire developed to reject the teaching by rejecting the book; *Third*, an attempt is made to undermine its apostolic authority by attributing its writing to someone other than John the Apostle; *Fourth*, differences in writing style between the book and John’s other writings provided a potential means to reject apostolic authorship. The two teachings of the book which have probably been most opposed have been the millennial reign of Christ on earth (Rev. 20:4+) and the prophetic certainty of a time of great upheaval and judgment coming upon the earth prior to the establishment of the reign of Christ. The former was a key reason for the rejection of the book among some in the early church who viewed any fulfillment of Old Testament promises involving the Jews with great disdain. The latter is more frequently under attack in our own day by those who hold to [Dominion Theology](#) or Christian Reconstructionism.³ We touch on Dominion Theology’s attempts to “reinterpret” passages which speak of a future time of tribulation in our discussion of [systems of interpretation](#).

2.10.1 - Rejection

The first substantial opposition to the book of Revelation arose in the second century in response to the teachings of the cult of Montanism. [Montanus](#) appealed to the book to support some of his teachings. Those who opposed his teachings called into question the validity of the book he employed for his doctrines.⁴ Montanism taught an extravagant view of the Millennial Kingdom which placed great emphasis upon material and sensual aspects. Although the [Millennial Kingdom](#) will be a time of great material blessing, many felt that Montanus misrepresented the emphasis of New Testament teaching which is focused upon a denial of the flesh in favor of greater spiritual realities.⁵ This led the church to emphasize the purely spiritual aspects over the material aspects of God’s blessings—an imbalance which is still with us today. This opposition to the materialism of Montanus and to a literal Millennial Kingdom in favor of a spiritual emphasis went hand-in-glove with the growing tendency to employ [allegory in interpretation](#).

To . . . leaders in the Eastern church, millennialism was nothing more than a Jewish concept that appealed to Christians’ baser sensual appetites rather than to their higher spiritual nature. . . . Early on, Augustine held millenarian views. But he abandoned that doctrine for the superficial reason that some millenarians had envisioned a kingdom age of unparalleled fruitfulness featuring banquet tables set with excessive amounts of food and drink. He favored . . . a spiritualized interpretation of the Apocalypse. . . . Augustine articulated an amillennial view in which no future thousand-year earthly millennium was expected.⁶

Yet a belief in a literal thousand-year-reign had been the view held by those in the very early church who had closest contact with the living apostles.⁷ As we mentioned in our discussion of the [authorship](#) of the book, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, felt that John the Apostle was not the author of the book. Although Dionysius was careful not to reject the book out-of-hand, his views had a large effect upon the Eastern Church and led to doubts by many who followed him.

Criticism, . . . from so distinguished a Bishop as Dionysius . . . could not fail to carry weight in Egypt and the Greek-speaking East, shaking the faith of many in the apostolical authorship of the Apocalypse, and therefore in its canonical authority. In the fourth century Eusebius is unable to speak positively as to its canonicity . . . Cyril of Jerusalem, a few years later, not only omits the Apocalypse from his list of canonical books, but seems definitely to exclude it from private as well as public use . . . it finds no place in the Laodicean list of 363, or in that of Gregory of Nazianzus; . . . In Eastern Syria the Apocalypse was either still unknown or it was ignored; it formed no part of the Peshitta New Testament. Junilius, . . . in the sixth century, is silent about the book; Ebedjesu, a Nestorian Bishop in the first year of the fourteenth century, still passes it over without notice in his list of New Testament books. . . . Neither Theodore, Chrysostom, or Theodoret is known to have quoted the Apocalypse. . . . As late as the beginning of the ninth

century Nicephorus places it among the *antilegomena* with the Apocalypse of Peter.⁸

Origen's pupil, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria . . . opposed the chiliastic views of Nepos, a bishop in Egypt, and believed that linguistic differences with the Gospel of John as well as differences in thought and style meant that the Apostle John was not the author. His influence led to serious doubts in the East. Eusebius . . . said Revelation was written by John the Elder and refused to consider it canonical. Other Eastern Fathers who doubted it were Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. As a result it was not in the canonical list at the Council of Laodicea in 360, . . . Athanasius accepted it completely . . . and it is in the official canonical list at the Council of Carthage in 397.⁹

Among those who either distinctly declared against it, or seem to have used it with reserve, were Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, Amphilochius of Iconium, Chrysostom, Theodoret.¹⁰

The opposition of the Eastern Church showed some weakening in the third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) which finally included it in the list of [canonical](#) books,¹¹ but the book was not fully accepted by the Eastern Church until the Third Council of Constantinople in A.D. 680.¹² Although the book was endorsed and enjoyed a wide circulation by the Western Church from a very early date (see below), an attitude of opposition or indifference toward the book continued even until the time of the Reformation. It may be surprising today to read of Martin Luther's attitude toward the book. He rejected its divine [inspiration](#),¹³ placed it last in his New Testament along with other books he felt had relatively little value,¹⁴ and made a quite disappointing statement in view of the claim of the book to be the "Revelation of Jesus Christ": "In 1522 Martin Luther wrote of the Revelation, 'My mind cannot use itself to the Book, and to me the fact that **Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it** is good and sufficient cause for my low estimation.' Though he modified his view some years later, to the end Luther remained doubtful about the book's authenticity." [emphasis added]¹⁵ Luther was not alone in his disdain for the book of Revelation. It was rejected from the canon by Zwingli¹⁶ and Calvin never produced a commentary on it.

2.10.2 - Acceptance

The acceptance of the book of Revelation by the Western Church was markedly different than that of the Eastern Church.¹⁷ Perhaps this was because the Western Church had more direct knowledge of its author since the [seven churches](#) of Asia were its direct recipients. Beckwith lists the following Church Fathers who accepted the Apocalypse: [Papias](#), bishop of Hierapolis; Justin Martyr; [Irenaeus](#), presbyter and bishop of Lyons (Gaul); Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (in Syria); [Tertullian](#) of Carthage; and Clement of Alexandria.¹⁸ The early acceptance of the book of Revelation in the very area to which it was addressed is strong evidence of its rightful canonicity. "If the Apocalypse were not the inspired work of John, purporting as it does to be an address from their superior to the seven churches of Proconsular Asia, it would have assuredly been rejected in that region; whereas the earliest testimonies in those churches are all in its favor."¹⁹

In the literature of the second half of the second century, evidence begins to reveal wide circulation of the Apocalypse. Andreas quotes Papias about Revelation 12:7± ff. Irenaeus refers to old copies of the book and to people who knew John. Other early authors who mention the book are Justin, Eusebius, Apollonius, and Theophilus the Bishop of Antioch. It is referred to a number of times in the *Epistle of the Churches of Vienne*. Other references to the book abound. Tertullian . . . quotes from eighteen out of the twenty-two chapters . . . and cites it as Scripture. Some literature from the period seems to refer to the book using similar phraseology, e.g., the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which refers to the great tribulation, and the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*, which according to Swete abounds in imagery similar to the book of Revelation. The circulation and wide use of the book as Scripture are evident by the beginning of the third century.²⁰

The Apocalypse seems to have been accepted almost from the beginning in the Western church . . . it appears to have been recognized by Papias . . . and may be reflected by Ignatius . . . it was accepted by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. It was included in the earliest list of canonical works, the Muratorian Canon, in the latter part of the second century.²¹

The book was accepted as [canonical](#) in the West much earlier than the East. "full acceptance in the canon was recognized in the Festal Letter of Athanasius written from Alexandria in 367. The Damascene Council (382) and the Council of Carthage (397) ratified this by officially including it in the canon of New Testament Scriptures."²² Today, the book of Revelation is well-established in the canon of Scripture. Its extensive connections with the Old Testament and undeniable relationship to [related passages of Scripture](#), especially its many parallels with the book of Genesis, make it impractical to dismiss as uninspired or inconsistent with the rest of Scripture. Yet there are still those who oppose its teachings. Earlier the battle over the authority of its teachings took place in relation to its canonization, but now the battle rages over how it is to be [interpreted](#). Opposition to its plain teachings in our own time has come on two fronts: a rejection of the predicted time of upheaval and judgment to come upon the earth prior to the return of Christ

and a rejection of His subsequent reign for one thousand years upon the earth following His return. By [overemphasizing the symbolic nature](#) of the text or associating the text with the [genre](#) of obscure Jewish [apocryphal](#) works, today's commentators attempt to persuade the student to approach the text in a way which allows the denial of these realities. Yet, as we shall see, these are plainly the teachings of this most fascinating book of the New Testament.

Notes

¹“The determining factor in New Testament canonization was inspiration, and the primary test was apostolicity . . . If it could be determined that a book had apostolic authority, there would be no reason to question its authenticity or veracity.”—Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, [A General Introduction to the Bible](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 283.

²Larry V. Crutchfield, [“Revelation in the New Testament,”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 23.

³Dominion theology does not undermine the book by explicitly attacking its authority, but by implicitly undermining its teachings through a method of interpretation which denies any application to events of the future.

⁴“In the middle of the second century the heterodox teachings of Montanus precipitated the first substantial opposition to the Apocalypse of John. . . . Because Montanus appealed to the book of Revelation for support of his extreme views, Montanism cast a dark shadow of doubt over the book of Revelation.”—Ibid., 26.

⁵“The opposition to the heresy of Montanism, which made great use of the Apocalypse and gave extravagant form to its millennial teaching, caused it to be either rejected or differently interpreted.”—Isbon T. Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 323. “A number of church fathers rejected the book because of the chiliast debate and its use by the Montanists.”—Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 22. “In the second century, the Alogi, a group of anti-Montanists in Asia Minor, rejected the Apocalypse on the basis of its unedifying symbolism and because they held it to contain errors of fact (eg., no church existed at Thyatira at that time).”—Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 38.

⁶Crutchfield, [Revelation in the New Testament](#), 27,31.

⁷“The most explicit reference in Scripture to the thousand-year millennial reign of Christ is found in Revelation 20⁺. It is a significant fact that the early adherents of premillennialism (or chiliasm, as it was first called), either had direct contact with John, the longest living apostle, or with his most famous disciple Polycarp.”—Ibid., 24.

⁸Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), cxi-cxii.

⁹Osborne, [Revelation](#), 23.

¹⁰Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), 341.

¹¹“The first action relating to the scriptures taken by a synod is that of the council of Laodicea, not far from 360. . . . It adopted an ordinance forbidding the reading of uncanonical scriptures in public worship. And in the list of canonical books given, the Apocalypse is wanting. . . . The third council of Carthage (397) adopted a decree regarding the scriptures to be read in service, and the Apocalypse, in keeping with the universal opinion of the Western Church from the earliest times, was included in the list of canonical books,”—Ibid., 342.

¹²“The Revelation of John finally received official acceptance in the Eastern church at the Third Council of Constantinople (A.D. 680).”—Crutchfield, [Revelation in the New Testament](#), 32.

¹³“In reference to Revelation, Luther wrote in 1522 that he could find ‘no trace’ of evidence that the book ‘was written by the Holy Spirit.’ In other words, he rejected its divine inspiration.”—Ibid., 33.

¹⁴“Martin Luther . . . [rearranged] his New Testament into sections which reflected his own attitude about the various books. In the front of his New Testament he placed those books he valued most. Another section, which he placed in the back of his Bible, included the New Testament works he felt had relatively little value (Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation).”—Ibid.

¹⁵Harold D. Foos, [“Christology in the Book of Revelation,”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 105.

¹⁶“The only book he apparently excluded from the canon was the Apocalypse.”—Crutchfield, [Revelation in the New Testament](#), 34.

¹⁷“No other writing of the New Testament can claim in comparison with the Apocalypse more abundant and more trustworthy evidence that it was widely known at an early date.”—Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), 337.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 338-339.

¹⁹A. R. Fausset, “[The Revelation of St. John the Divine.](#)” in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, [A Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 1877), Rev. 1:1.

²⁰John F. Walvoord, [The Revelation of Jesus Christ](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), 14-15.

²¹Osborne, [Revelation](#), 23.

²²Monty S. Mills, [Revelations: An Exegetical Study of the Revelation to John](#) (Dallas, TX: 3E Ministries, 1987), s.v. “Introduction.”

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