

Revelation in the Christian Canon

The book of Revelation had some trouble gaining acceptance as a work of scripture. Our knowledge on this subject is limited, but from what resources we do possess, two observations stand out.

First, Revelation appears to have met with initial acceptance and then came to be questioned later on.

- In our earliest list of canonical writings, the Muratorian Canon (ca. 170–200), Revelation is listed as a book that is to be received as scripture.
- But about a hundred years later (ca. 311), when the church historian Eusebius prepared a list of writings accepted by Christians as scripture, he indicated that Revelation was a “book that some reject but others judge to belong.”

Second, Revelation appears to have been endorsed by more-or-less official spokespersons but challenged at other levels.

- In 367, Athanasius, the prominent bishop of Alexandria, included Revelation without any hesitation in his list of twenty-seven books to be regarded as Christian scripture. And in 393, a regional council known as the Third Synod of Carthage ratified that list, declaring those books to be the canon of Christian scripture.
- Nevertheless, a Christian poet from this same period, Amphilocus of Iconium, refers to Revelation as a book “that some approve, but most say is spurious.”

What was the problem? There seem to have been a few difficulties with the book:

1. Revelation often was popular with Christians given to expressions of the faith that others would regard as religious fanaticism. In the second century, it was a popular book with the Montanists, a charismatic group that stressed prophecy and the imminence of the end times, but that was ultimately judged to be a heretical sect. We know of at least one second-century leader in the Roman church, Gaius, who thought that the book of Revelation should be rejected on this account.
2. The authorship of the book was uncertain. Dionysius, a third-century Egyptian bishop, maintained that Revelation could not have been written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John. He based his argument on linguistic and literary analysis, but he did not care for the theology of Revelation either and thought that the book should be rejected.
3. Many leaders in the early church (including Dionysius, but also Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus) believed that the book of Revelation taught a doctrine called “chiliasm.” In a nutshell, chiliasm envisions the rewards of Christians in materialistic or political terms; Revelation was believed to support this doctrine by promising the faithful that they would partici-

pate in a thousand-year reign on earth with Christ. Supporters of chiliasm made much of this, and as a consequence, opponents of the controversial doctrine were less inclined to view Revelation as authoritative scripture.

4. The book of Revelation takes a very harsh and negative view toward the Roman Empire and toward governing authorities in general. Eventually, this became an uncomfortable problem for churches that were maintained and supported financially by Christian emperors.