

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 47

Revelation - Introduction

As a child, I loved puzzles. Heavens, as an adult I love puzzles. Several class members have given me puzzles, one of which I am still trying to solve after three years. (No, I am NOT giving up!). Maybe that is why I have always loved studying Revelation. Revelation has always struck me as a bit of a puzzle.

I remember when our son Will came home from school enthralled with Revelation. Someone had given Will some suggestions about certain aspects of Revelation that were supposedly being fulfilled at that moment in history. This was part and parcel with Will being taught that xyz was just about to happen, because the Bible said it so. It was akin to when Hal Lindsay got on television after the coup in Russia concerning Mikhail Gorbachev, using the Bible to show that the coup was explained in Scripture and Armageddon was right around the corner.

With Will, I was in a quandary. I wanted to let him know that the “predictions” people make off the Bible are people’s interpretations of Scripture, not absolute claims of Scripture. Scripture is 100% reliable; people’s interpretations are not. I told Will that some people believe what he was taught, but that I did not. I told him if events unfolded like he was told, I was wrong! If they did not, then I was right. We then had a good discussion over what it means to interpret the Bible rightly.

Probably no other book in the Bible brings out as many strong feelings among Evangelicals as the final book in the Bible known as Revelation. It contains highly symbolic language that often leads to heated debates among Christians. Recent world events including, but not limited to, conflicts in the Middle East, the reunification of Europe, natural disasters, and the increased and widespread persecution of the Christian Church, have brought about a rise in the interest and curiosity among Christians as to how these things fit into God’s timeline for future events and the last days.

Revelation has a lot of well-intentioned people heading in a lot of different directions. I suspect that once this world is over, then we will all look back and say “A-ha!” A few might even be able to say, “I told you so!” Until then, many are looking through a glass darkly.

That said, I am quite at peace that Revelation makes good sense to a careful study. I know a good many of godly people who also believe Revelation makes good sense, and their careful study leads to some different conclusions than mine! It is my hope to provide a structure to help people understand some of the basic approaches to the

book, along with some strengths to help people begin unfolding the puzzle for themselves.

WHY STUDY REVELATION?

If Revelation¹ is difficult to understand, and if so many well-intentioned people find so many different interpretations, why study it at all? While some choose not to read or study Revelation because it seems confusing and possibly raises as many questions as it answers. Others study the book along with additional prophetic literature and become so consumed with it that they develop tunnel vision and a preoccupation with signs and future events.

Our best reason to study is found in the words of the revelation. The Lord said,

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near (Revelation 1:3).

We should receive the Revelation as God's word, which is true and is profitable and useful in God's development of our lives. As we do so, we can fairly come to conclusions about how God's plan for the last days will finally play out, however, we should hold those opinions with grace and humility, and resist the temptation to become intolerant of people who might come to different understandings of the same passages of God's Holy Word.

AUTHORSHIP

The Revelation is written by "John" (Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). The question raised is generally, "Which John?" The apostle John? The John behind the Gospel of John, behind the epistles of John? Or perhaps those are all the same John? Some scholars write of the author simply calling him "John the Revelator."

There can be no doubt to a reader that the John writing was one of certain authority. He was the one who experienced the revelation first hand (Rev. 22:8). He wrote assertively to central churches in Asia, never feeling the need to justify his authority or explain why any should listen to him. He was persecuted for the church, and wrote from the island of Patmos, confident the church was aware of his identity (Rev. 1:9). Importantly, this authority was not exercised over one church or two,

¹ Revelation is singular! It is "Revelation," not "Revelations." Rev. 1:1 begins, "The **revelation** [singular] of Jesus Christ...." Knowing this point alone puts one 80% ahead of most whom speak about this book!

but over the whole of the church in Asia Minor and beyond. The letters to the seven churches are specific for each, yet also written as letters to all churches.²

While there are many novel ideas of who the “John” might be, I agree with the early church consensus that it was the apostle John. I would expect any other John to be clear on his appellation, to make sure no one ever confused him for the apostle. I find Justin Martyr (died 165) particularly authoritative on this as he lived in Ephesus, one of the receiving churches for the Revelation, within fifty years of its authorship. Justin Martyr referenced Revelation 20 writing it was by,

a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him.

For a more extensive discussion of the various arguments for and against John’s authorship, consult a thorough commentary such as Robert Mounce’s work in the series, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1998).

WHY DOES REVELATION READ SO UNUSUAL?

(WHAT ABOUT THAT SYMBOLISM?)

There is a chance that if the human race exists in 2,000 years, that people might look back at some political satire of today and wonder if it really means what it says. Or some may look at fantasy works like Tolkein’s Lord of the Ring series and wonder

² Much of Revelation is built around numbers (numerology, not the Old Testament book of numbers). While scholars often differ on interpretations of these numbers, there is one number where there is little disagreement, the number seven. In antiquity, both in the scriptures and in many other writings that predate our New Testament, seven was used to indicate a fullness or completeness. In the Bible, it denoted completion: Creation was a seven-day process (Gen. 1); Jacob served seven years for Rachel (and seven for Leah) (Gen. 29); Egypt had seven years of plenty and seven of famine (Gen 41); a number of Old Testament feasts were seven days. Seven days and seven circuits were key in the walls of Jericho tumbling down, etc. No doubt Peter was using the significance of seven as a complete number when he asked Jesus whether he should forgive his brother seven times. How shocked he must have been when Jesus said forgiveness should extend beyond completeness to 70 times seven!

In Revelation, the apocalypse itself is replete with sevens. There are letters “to the seven churches in Asia” (Rev. 1:4). Yet, we know there were a number of additional churches in Asia. The seven no doubt references the very seven specified, but also in some broader sense, the universal church. So, the revelation applies beyond those seven churches to the complete church. The revelation also has seven seals that contain a complete or full aspect of the vision (Rev. 6-8:2). Likewise, there are seven trumpets that signal a full announcement (Rev. 8-11). We have seven bowls that give us yet another full aspect of the vision (Rev. 15-16). Similarly, there are seven persons in Rev 12- 1, seven “new” things in Rev. 21-21, and seven beatitudes found throughout the book.

what was really going on. Satire and fantasy are two types of literature prominent today.

Revelation is a specific type of literature that was well known at the time of its writing, although less so today. We call this “apocalyptic literature.” The word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalupsis* or in English “apocalypse”), which means an unveiling or disclosing. It is the term used in Revelation 1:1, the “revelation” of Jesus Christ. The idea is that in this book, we have the disclosure or revealing of Jesus through the visions imparted to John.

If we read other writings still extant from that period, then we will read similar visions with similar symbols. This genre of literature dates back hundreds of years before Christ. Folks at the time of John would have been quite conversant with apocalyptic writing. A number of these books are still extant, and quite helpful in understanding the structure, content, and symbolism of Revelation. Some of the most pronounced examples are found in the Pseudepigrapha, including the the Enoch books we referenced in the lesson on Jude³, Apocalypse of Baruch, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and others, mostly Jewish works written between 200BC and 200AD. One of the unique features of these works is the “striking resemblance they all bear to the Book of Daniel” from the Old Testament.⁴ Like Daniel, these books are typically built around visions experienced by the authors. This will be important when we consider how to understand the Revelation.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain a lot of apocalyptic literature, and have proven an immense treasure for studying the works.⁵ Especially prominent are works that relate to the final battle at the end of days, with the Messiah winning the victory for God’s forces. One particular scroll, *The Apocryphon of Daniel*, typically dated from the Herodian period of 50BC to 1AD, used the term “Son of the Most High” for the coming messiah/ruler. This is the same phrase used in the same time period by the angel Gabriel who declared of the birth of Christ, “He will be great and will be called the *Son of the Most High*.” (Lk. 1:32) (although the Apocryphon of Daniel was written in Aramaic, while Luke wrote in Greek).

³ These lessons can be found on the class website at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁴ “Apocalyptic Literature,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans 1995), Vol. 1.

⁵ Since the German scholar Hilgenfeld wrote *Die Jüdische Apokalyptik* in 1857, scholars have generally conceded that the Essenes were the sect most likely responsible for the production of much of the Jewish apocalyptic works. It was 90 years later when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered that so many works were found in areas supposed to be works of the Essenes. See also, Kohler, K., “The Essenes and the Apocalyptic Literature,” *The Jewish Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Oct. 1920), p. 145-168.

An often cited example of the Dead Sea Scrolls using metaphor and symbolism in ways similar to Revelation concerns the New Jerusalem. John's Revelation uses the New Jerusalem as God's eternal city coming with distinct measurements.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband... It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates... And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement (Rev. 21:2, 12, 15-17).

There are a collection of Dead Sea Scroll fragments that refer to the New Jerusalem. Many scholars consider these fragments as part of a larger document often called, *The Description of the New Jerusalem* or *The New Jerusalem Scroll*. In the fragments, we read of a measured New Jerusalem complete with a temple and the Holy of Holies. (Importantly, the New Jerusalem in Revelation does *not* have a temple because the presence of God is the temple Rev. 21:22.) The New Jerusalem in the Dead Sea Scroll fragments contains twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed above each, just as we read in Revelation (and Ezekiel).⁶ Revelation adds twelve foundations with the names of the twelve apostles inscribed on each.

In the scrolls, and in apocalyptic in general, architecture and measuring removes something from being haphazardly constructed. Its symbolism indicates God's care and oversight.

Measuring serves as a symbol of God's order and protection, a symbol of God's presence and the surety of God's future blessing.⁷

With the dearth of material in the world of this kind of literature, it is helpful in reading Revelation, to unfolding the meaning in the eyes of its original readers if we read it in the context of its similar literature from that era.

Typical features of apocalyptic books include a view of the world in stark contrasts of good versus evil in conflict. While prophetic writings were commonly concerned with prophecies in an immediate and localized context, apocalyptic works were concerned on a much larger, often global scale, spanning vast swaths of time. The

⁶ See, Rev. 21:12-24; and the scroll fragments: 11QT [11Q19] 39.11-13; 4Q554 frag. 1 1.9-2.10; Ezek. 48:30-34.

⁷ Jones, Loren, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Apocalypse of John," *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (Baylor Univ. Press 2006) at 268.

good and evil struggle on earth is seen as a fight between the supernatural and spiritual forces of God and Satan. These writings would generally contain prophecies about the end times and the ultimate victory of good as God judges evil and vanquishes it. The Jewish apocalyptic writings that include a coming Messiah would show the Messiah as triumphant over the world's empires, not simply a Savior of Israel. In this way, the apocalypses again resemble Daniel which, unlike most of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, clearly indicate his victory over world empires.

There would be no surprise to Greek readers of the Revelation that much of the language was symbolic. While the literature genre itself would indicate such, the first words of the Revelation also tell the reader.

Revelation 1:1 begins the book saying,

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

The Greek word translated “made it known” is from *sēmeion* (σημεῖον), the Greek word for “sign.” It could be a signal, a token, or some symbol by which one should derive meaning. It was the “signal” pre-arranged by Judas as a kiss in betraying Jesus (Mt. 26:48). It was the “sign” of Jonah given to the generation of skeptics in Jesus’ day about how Jesus would be in the belly of the earth for three days as Jonah was in the fish (Lk. 11:29-30). God gave his signs and symbols of the coming days through the angel that came to John. We can discern from these symbols and signs important indicators to us. We need to read and understand them as best as we can.

It seems to me reasonable to understand Revelation as the intended readers would have understood it, in light of other literature of that genre. My own understanding is colored by this approach, as will be the lessons in this series. An example of how understanding the symbolism can go awry is found in understanding the mark of the beast, “666.” In Revelation 13:18, the beast is given the number “666.” Through the ages, people have worked to understand who the beast/Antichrist numbered “666” might be.

Early church fathers considered 666 to be Nero. If we remember that in Hebrew, like Greek and Latin, the alphabet also served the role of numerals. When Nero’s name is written in Hebrew letters, and broken into Hebrew numbers, it totals 666. Other candidates for the 666 beast claimed by well-intended searchers over the years include Pope Leo X, Martin Luther, Henry Kissinger, and the Ku Klux Klan! Consider this 1924 assessment:

The riddle has puzzled the minds of Bible students for centuries, but when the Ku Klux Klan is used as the key, it becomes as simple as

child's play. Let us start with the magic letters K.K.K. with their proper punctuation marks. Webster tells us that "multiplication is often expressed by a dot between the factors," thus K.K.K. = K x K x K. The numerical value of K is eleven, as it is the eleventh letter in both the English and Hebrew alphabets. Substituting this value for K we have K.K.K. = 11 x 11 x 11 = 1331. This is the sample numerical value of K.K.K. but there is one lacking. The founder and first head of the K.K.K. has been cast out and must be restored before we have the perfect symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. Adding the lost one in we have 1331 plus 1 = 1332. This is the perfect numerical value of the Ku Klux Klan. The number in verse 18, however, is the number of the beast while in the chapter as a whole the Ku Klux Klan is represented by two beasts, namely, the beast with seven heads and ten horns representing the dynasty of William Joseph, King of u, and the beast that looked like a lamb but "spake as a dragon" representing the dynasty of Hiram, King of Klux. Therefore, to get the number of one beast we must divide the complete number by two (1332 / 2 = 666). And this is the number by which the prophet may be known...."⁸

Pretty absurd by today's standards, no? Yet perhaps not too much more absurd than some of the ideas put forward today.

VIEWS OF INTERPRETATION

Recently I received an email wanting to know if I thought a "preterist view" of Revelation was heresy. Now many will not even know what a "preterist view" is.

There are basically four systems of interpretations of the book of Revelation. Like most matters in academia, there are labels that are applied to these schools of thought. The labels don't serve too great a function beyond helping abbreviate the understanding of one approach to another. I offer the labels because they help identify different schools of thought and because most people who study Revelation, even if reading from a study Bible, will come across these terms.

1. **Preterist** – This approach of interpretation sees the events of Revelation as only taking place in the Roman Empire while John was still living. Most of the events, according to this view, have already taken place under the persecutions of Nero or Domitian.
2. **Historist** – This approach interprets the book as describing a long chain of events from Patmos to the end of history. The sections describing the seals,

⁸ "Ku Klux Fulfills the Scripture," *The Christian Century*, XLI (1924).

the trumpets and the bowls all refer to specific events in history and their relationship to the Church.

3. **Idealist** – This view sees all of the events of Revelation as being strictly allegorical picturing the ongoing struggle between the forces of heaven and hell, and God’s ultimate victory over Satan.
4. **Futurist** – This view interprets the events of Revelation, especially from chapter four on, to be in the future and provides a chronology of the end times.

Some of these approaches can be co-mingled, and some can be modified somewhat. So, for example, a “partial preterist view” could say that some of the vents were taking place while John was living, while other events are futurist and provide insight into future events, up to and including the end of days.

This preterist/futurist view, which I confess is my own, then allows one to further try to understand how those end days occur. Some see the future unfolding in an earthly millennial of Jesus (“pre- and post- millennial views”) while others see no such earthly reign (“a-millennial view”).

We should never get so bogged down in exploring these views that we lose the overall message of Revelation, for that is clear regardless of one’s view. That message is found in some very simple principles:

- There is a spiritual and physical war going on for the hearts and minds of people.
- God is warring on behalf of his church.
- The church will suffer, but be victorious because God wins through the work of Jesus!
- Evil has been defeated, time will prove it, and the church will be with the Lord eternally.

CONCLUSION

Revelation gives a certain teaching that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow and His word will endure forever. The words of Revelation are to be taken seriously by Christians today as much as they were in the first century when the Apostle John delivered them.

POINTS FOR HOME

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

The revelation is one “of Jesus Christ.” This conveys that Jesus Christ was the source of the revelation and also that the revelation is about Jesus Christ. Christ is not a mere part of the book; Christ is the core of the book. The meaning of the revelation is bound up in the person and work of Christ. Christ is the one watching over the church (Rev. 2-3). Without Christ, we have no one worthy to open the scrolls (Rev. 5:1-5). Christ is the lamb and the victor. Christ reigns in heaven and on earth. Christ is the alpha and omega, beginning and end (Rev. 1:8; 21:6). Christ has the book of life. The church has eternal significance as the bride of Christ. We must never get so caught up in sequencing the last days from the book, that we miss the Christ of the revelation and we have lost the core of the book!

2. *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”* (Rev. 1:3).

Revelation is the only book in the Bible that proclaims a blessing on those who read it. That alone should compel us to read and study this marvelous book. It comes with a blessing! (Actually, there are seven beatitudes or blessings contained in the book.) Let’s read this together and grow in the Lord’s blessings!

3. *“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father”* (Rev. 1:5-6).

The core to understanding Revelation, to understanding our future, and to understanding our present is found in Jesus Christ, who has brought us deliverance from the powers of evil by his atoning death on our behalf. It makes us something entirely new, a kingdom to God and priests to the Father. This has present and eternal implications. This is worth exploring and understanding!