

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 78

Revelation – Part Three

RANDOM ADDITIONS ON REVELATION

1. Revelation is singular! It is “Revelation,” not “Revelations.” Chapter one, verse one: “The revelation of Jesus Christ....” Knowing this point alone puts one 80% ahead of most whom speak about this book!
2. The revelation is one “of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1). 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. If we get too caught up in sequencing the last days from the book, then we miss the Christ of the revelation and we have lost the core of the book.
3. John writes from Patmos, an island off the coast of Turkey near Ephesus. John was near the end of his life, writing about 95A.D. Patmos is a small island shaped almost like an 8. There is a northern mountain and a southern mountain. They meet at the middle juncture of the 8 where the land is barely more than a few hundred miles across. The harbors that one can see from the indentation of the 8 face both east and west. When viewed from where history teaches John recorded the revelation, the harbors look very much like the Greek letters “alpha” and “omega.” Those on Patmos consider the statement that Jesus was the “alpha and omega” (Rev. 1:8) a reference to Jesus being the east and west as well. Jesus is the rising of the sun (east) as well as its setting (west).
4. While considering this, it is noteworthy to place John as the Apostle who wrote the fourth gospel and the 3 epistles in the New Testament. This places John as a very old man most likely in his 90’s as he wrote the revelation. An apostle who studied at the foot of Jesus, who shepherded the church for over 50 years, would indeed be a man of scripture! It is not surprising to find that John’s revelation was recorded in such a way that out of the 404 verses that make up the book, Bruce Metzger is able to find Old

Testament allusions in 278 of them! (*Breaking the Code, Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Metzger 1993)

5. Much of Revelation is built around numbers (numerology, not the Old Testament book of numbers!) Scholars offer a great deal of discussion and interpretations of these numbers. Rather than go into all the opinions, we note one number about which there is the greatest agreement: 7. Seven was a number thought to reflect completeness. 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 frequently has that usage: Creation was a 7 day process (Gen. 1); Jacob serves 7 years for Rachel (and 7 for Leah) (Gen. 29); Egypt had 7 years of plenty and 7 of famine (Gen 41); a number of Old Testament feasts were 7 days, 7 days and 7 circuits were key in the walls of Jericho tumbling down, etc.

No doubt Peter was using the significance of 7 as a complete number when he asked Jesus whether he should forgive his brother 7 times. How shocked he must have been when Jesus said forgiveness should extend beyond completeness to 70 times 7!

In Revelation, the apocalypse itself is replete with 7's. There are letters "to the 7 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 7 specified, but also in some broader sense, the universal church. So, the revelation applies beyond those 7 churches to the complete church. The revelation also has 7 seals that contain a complete or full aspect of the vision (Rev. 6-8:2). Likewise, there are 7 trumpets that signal a full announcement (Rev. 8-11). We have 7 bowls that give us yet another full aspect of the vision (Rev. 15-16). Similarly, there are 7 persons in Rev 12-1, 7 "new" things in Rev. 21-21, and 7 beatitudes found throughout the book.

Again, these numbers give us clues to understanding the book, but in no way detract from its core message as a revelation of the Christ who has walked in our history, conquered our demons and sins, and authored the conclusion of our fate which is eternity with him.

6. Revelation is one kind of a type of literature fairly well known at the time. We call this "apocalyptic literature." The word "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek αποκαλυπτεις (basically "apocalypse"), which means an unveiling or disclosing. It is the term used in Rev. 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 several hundred years before Christ. Folks at the time of John would have been quite conversant with apocalyptic writing.¹ Typical features of these books include a view of the world in stark contrasts of good versus evil in conflict. The 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.

7. The revelation itself contains views of God, heaven, future events and things unseen by men of John's time. How does John go about describing these things? If you could remove a twin from the womb, show and teach him all about the world and then return him to the womb to describe what he has seen to the twin left behind, then how could he do so? The twin left behind would not have the words or experiences to understand what the exposed twin was saying. In similar manner, John is not able to describe God and his heavenly experience with the words appropriate. We have no such words. So, John uses symbolic language that paints a poetic picture full of meaning, but it is not a Kodak snapshot.
8. In Revelation 1:1, we are told that God gave the revelation and "made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." The word translated in the N.I.V. as "made it known" is the Greek *semainein* (σημαίνειν). The American Standard Version translates it "signified." It was a technical term in the Greek that meant, "conveying a matter in symbols."² John's revelation, by and large, conveys "by picture rather than by definition" (Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*).

So for example, we read in Revelation 1:12-14:

I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire...

¹ A number of these books are still extant. We find most in the Pseudepigrapha, including the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Apocalypse of Zechariah, and others.

² Another Greek writing of the same time period was Plutarch. He used the word in the same way writing about a prophetic oracle from Delphi that "neither reveals the truth nor conceals it, he communicates by symbols (*semainei*)." Plutarch, *Moralia*, Book V.

The seven lampstands are the seven churches according to 1:20. So, we see Christ (“someone like a son of man”) in the midst of the churches. Christ is not missing from the church, he is found right in its middle. Christ is “dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash.” That language conveys the regal dress of a King. Without saying Christ is a King in the midst of the church, symbolism paints that very picture. We read of his “head and hair white like wool” not as a true indication of hair color, but to remind us that Christ is as the Ancient of Days referenced in Daniel 7:9 whose “clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.” The eyes “like blazing fire” are piercing eyes that penetrate and burn into the core of who we are. This symbolism is replete through the book. Someone who wants to work through the book carefully in this regard will find Metzger’s commentary mentioned above a very readable text.

One extra note scholars often overlook in the symbolism: When John writes of the streets of heaven paved with gold, or of God having the appearance of “jasper and carnelian” with a rainbow “resembling an emerald,” we have incredibly valuable materials that have not lost their values over the 1900 years since John wrote. John’s valuable descriptions were in terms that mean as much today as then.

9. The structure of Revelation is not as simple as reading on a prophetic timeline. The book seems dividable into a prologue followed by seven sections. While some see these sections as a long stretch on a timeline, a great number of scholars over the last 1800 years have considered the sections as repeating time periods. In other words, the sections cover the same time periods with a bit of extension each time. Still not clear? Let’s try this:

First century ----- to John = Section one

First century ----- into future = Section two

First century -----into deeper future = Section three

And so on, until the final section takes us complete into the new heaven and new earth at the end of days.

10. The section that deals with the seven churches sets out the letters in a particular order. Some have tried to assert that the letters apply to seven ages of the church. That seems a bit of a stretch. The letters are actually in the order in which the towns would be most easily visited once the letter made it back to landside at Ephesus.

11. Some folks have gotten so wrapped up in trying to understand some of the terms and visions of Revelation, that they have missed the boat rather substantially. The book has always seemed to have a contemporary message that folks could interpret in light of everyday events and fears. So, for instance, we can examine the historical considerations of the beast in Revelation chapter 13. The beast is given the number “666” in verse 18. Through the ages, people have worked to understand who the beast/Antichrist numbered “666” might be.

Early church fathers considered 666 to be Nero, for his name when written in Hebrew and broken into numbers totaled 666. Other candidates set out in history’s annals include Pope Leo X, Martin Luther, Henry Kissinger and the Ku Klux Klan (For this see *The Christian Century*, XLI (1924), “Ku Klux Fulfills the Scripture.”):

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 $K.K.K. = K \times K \times K$. 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 $K.K.K. = 11 \times 11 \times 11 = 1331$. 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 $1331 + 1 = 1332$. 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....”

Pretty absurd by today’s standards, no?

POINTS FOR HOME

1. Revelation...a great book that is fun to study.
2. Jesus...in our midst, in our church.
3. Watch opinionated fussing; time can make you look silly.
4. History helps put our Bible lessons in context!