

Introduction to Revelation

Session I - Apocalypse Now?

June-July 2012

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Introduction

The book of Revelation is possibly the most difficult book in the Bible to understand. So much so that many Christians go their whole lives ignoring it, assuming it either has nothing to say to them, or that if it does it will be so incomprehensible that they have no hope of ever figuring it out!

Question: What is your experience of the book of Revelation? What do you particularly find complex, off-putting, or difficult about it?

'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'
(2 Tim 3:16-17)

Background Information:

Date of Writing

The general consensus is that Revelation was written during the latter part of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD), probably around 95 AD. Some people place it earlier, during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD) though this is unlikely for a number of reasons:

- **Emperor Worship:** The Christian readers of Revelation were being required to participate in the Imperial Cult which saw the Emperor as divine and demanded worship of him, and it seems that John expected this to increase imminently (13:4-8, 15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). This fits more with what we know about the Domitian reign than that of Nero, as Domitian ordered that he be addressed as *dominus et deus* (lord and god).
- **Persecution of Christians:** There is no evidence that Nero persecuted believers for not worshipping him, nor that his persecution extended to Asia Minor where the churches of Rev 2-3 were located. Whilst the worst persecution for Christians came after Domitian's rule, it is likely that it was beginning by the end of his reign, and John anticipated it escalating quickly soon after (see 1 Clement, Tacitus, Pliny and Dio Cassius).
- **The Condition of the Churches:** The churches in chapters 2-3 seem to have deteriorated over quite some time and therefore a later date is most plausible. Given that Paul may have been in Ephesus up until 64 AD, a later date is preferable. Additionally, Laodicea suffered an earthquake in 60-61 AD, yet the church is described as being 'rich' which is unlikely unless it had had a good few decades for the economy to re-stabilise.
- **The Nero Myth:** Revelation 13:3-4; 17:8, 11 possibly draw on a myth that circulated in which people believed that Nero would return from the dead and lead a Parthian army against the Romans. Such a myth is unlikely to have developed during Nero's reign.
- **The Babylon Metaphor:** Post 70 AD, 'Babylon' was used as a term to describe Rome, since Rome destroyed the Jewish Temple as Babylon had done previously. See too other apocalyptic literature such as 4 Ezra 3:1-2, 28-31, 2 Baruch 10:1-3; 11:1; 67:7; Sibylline Oracles 5.143, 159-160
- **Early Church Traditions:** Many of the early authors put the date of Revelation at the time of Domitian, including Irenaeus, Victorinus of Pettau, Eusebius, possibly Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

Authorship

The book was written by John (1:4), likely referring the apostle John. The early Christian writer Eusebius tells us that of the twelve apostles, John was the only one not martyred for his faith. In his old age he was

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sent into exile on the island of Patmos 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9). He was allowed to return to Ephesus before the end of his life.

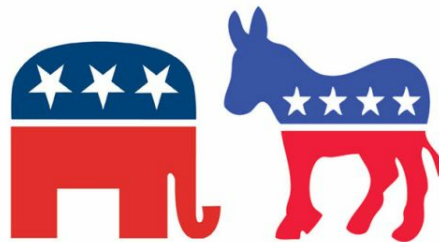
Literary Genre

The book of Revelation seems to be a mixture of three genres: apocalypse (1:1), prophecy (1:3) and letter (1:4). Carson, Moo and Morris describe it as 'A prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mould and written down in letter form.'

The book begins, '**The revelation of Jesus Christ...**' (Rev 1:1) and the first word in Greek is *apokalupsis* which means *disclosure* or an *unveiling* of something. Apocalyptic literature is not primarily about prophesying the future, but pulling back the curtain to give us a glimpse behind the scenes, and a new perspective on what is happening around us.

If the purpose is to bring clarity and a glimpse behind the scenes, why is it so cryptic? The genre relies heavily on numbers, symbols and pictures, which are often used to disguise political statements that might be dangerous to make in a more open fashion.

Unless we understand the kind of text we are dealing with, and the way symbols work within that genre, we will be unable to correctly interpret it, and will end up with some fanciful or confusing interpretations.



Major Interpretive Approaches

Broadly speaking there are four major approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation.

1) The Futurist View

The futurist view interprets everything from Revelation 4-22:5 as referring exclusively to a future time immediately preceding the end of history. The major problems with this view are that it pays little or no attention to the genre of apocalyptic literature, it fails to adequately interpret the symbols according to that genre and it would have had no immediate meaning or relevance to John's original readers. The futurist view also hinges somewhat on the rapture; the idea that Christians will escape the earth before the judgments take place. This seems to be contrary to the teaching of Revelation, which focuses on how the church can endure and overcome in spite of suffering.

2) The Preterist View

The preterist view interprets the book as a prophecy about events which were in the close future of the original readers, but have now happened in history. One view sees the whole book as being about the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, whilst another sees it as prophesying about the fall of the Roman Empire. The preterist

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view is often respected in academic circles, particularly by those who are sceptical about the ability for God to inspire long-term prophecy. However there are a number of problems. For example, it typically limits the book to speaking only to the nation of Israel, whereas the book seems to have a more universal picture in mind, as do texts like Daniel 2 and 7, upon which Revelation draws heavily (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 17:15).

3) The Historicist View

The historicist view sees Revelation as predicting major movements within history. People have seen in Revelation prophecies of the Protestant Reformation, Napoleon, Hitler, and so on. This approach is highly subjective, since it depends heavily on the date and geographical location of the author. It also would have little immediate meaning for the original readers.

4) The Idealist View

The idealist view sees the book as a symbolic picture of the conflict between Good and Evil, and thus doesn't identify any of the symbols with particular historical events. An alternative form, which G.K. Beale calls a 'Redemptive-Historical Form of Modified Idealism' sees Revelation as symbolically depicting everything that happens in 'the church age' before the final coming of Christ and New Creation. This means that events that happen throughout history may be identified to one symbol, but the symbols are not limited to single historical events. In this view, the book had an immediate relevance to the first-century readers, drawing on imagery with which they were familiar; but also has a lasting relevance for us, if we learn to interpret the symbols accurately and carefully against the original historical background.

The approach we have taken in this series takes the best bits from each. We will see that the book of Revelation is about how God interacts with the world throughout the church age, building to the second coming, and is therefore deeply relevant for believers at any point in history. The book looks at human history from various different perspectives, helping us to understand how we can interpret the events around us in the light of God's activity behind the scenes.

Symbolism in Revelation

Symbolism plays a big part in apocalyptic literature, and we'll come across various symbols as we work through the book, but here are a few considerations to get us started:

The Significance of Numbers

Numbers play a huge symbolic role in the book of Revelation and in apocalyptic literature in general. Here are some of the key numbers that we find in the book:

- **Seven** is the number of completeness. Creation was completed in seven days (Gen 1-2), and the OT regularly uses the number seven in this way (Gen 4:15, 24; Ps 79:12 etc). Roman rulers Hadrian (AD. 117-138) and Commodus (AD. 180-192) had coins minted with their image and seven stars representing their complete rule.
- **Four** is also the number of completeness, particularly referring to things being 'worldwide', as in 'the four corners or the earth.' See for example, Rev 7:1 or 5:9.
- **Twelve** also represents completeness, but includes the idea of diversity. There are twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles in the NT. Often when we see the number twelve it's referring to the whole spread of the people of God in all its completion and diversity.
- **Ten** also often refers to completeness, although it's perhaps less clear why. Within Judaism there were the ten commandments, and there are plenty of examples of 10 being used in the OT as a representative of a *good* or *full* number (Gen 18:32; Lev 26:26; 1 Sam 1:8; 18:7-8; 21:11; Ps 3:6;

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91:7; Ecc 7:19 etc). Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days and they emerged ten times more clever than their counterparts (Dan 1:12-14, 20). Similarly in Rev 2:10 we're told that believers will be tested for ten days, but emerge victorious.

- **Three** refers to the Trinity of Father, Spirit and Son/Lamb (1:4-5) which is parodied by the 'false trinity' of the dragon, the beast and the prophet (16:13; 20:10)

Sometimes these numbers are altered or combined in order to add new dimensions to the symbolism.

- **Thousand** is often added to numbers in order to make them larger. For example, the 12,000 people in each tribe in Revelation 7:12.
- **Addition and multiplication.** Sometimes numbers are added or multiplied together. There are 4x7 judgments which indicates that God's judgment will be complete (7) but also worldwide (4). The merchants of the Earth in chapter 18 have 28 items with them, which is 7x4, thus symbolising that they are bringing products from all across the world. Twelve is squared to create the number 144, to which 000 is added, making 144,000: a huge, diverse people of God.
- **Parodies.** Significantly, there is no number assigned to the evil forces in the book, except that sometimes they parody otherwise good numbers. Seven is the number of completion and is often related to God. Six is sometimes used to refer to evil things: forces who would set themselves up as if they were God, but fall short.

OT Allusions

John often draws on images and metaphors from the OT, often but not exclusively apocalyptic and prophetic books. We need to recognise those allusions and know how to interpret them, but also note what he does with them as well, since sometimes he reworks them, or combines various allusions together with surprising consequences.

General Metaphors and Images

As well as drawing from the OT, John uses images and metaphors which would have been in common usage in the ancient world, and whose meaning are relatively straightforward to understand:

Thrones:
Crowns:

Mountains:
Horns:

Exercise: What can we deduce from the metaphors and images in the following verses:

'The armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From [Jesus'] mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.' (Revelation 19:15-16)

Revelation 1:9-20

The book opens with the words '**The Revelation of/about Jesus Christ**' (1:1) which tells us immediately what the content and focus of the book is. It's not primarily about beasts, and judgments, and the future: it's about Jesus!

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'I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'

v9 John was in exile on Patmos, an island about 35 miles off the coast of south-west Turkey

v10 'The Lord's Day' refers to the day dedicated to worship: Sunday. This was in contrast to the practice of worshipping Caesar on the monthly 'Emperor's Day.'

'In the Spirit' is a phrase typical of the OT prophets like Ezekiel. 'A voice like a trumpet' is reminiscent of Moses' experience on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16, 19-20).

v12 There were lampstands in the tabernacle and temple, which emanated light, representing God's presence by his Spirit.

v13-15 'Son of Man.' On one level it can simply mean 'human' (Psalm 8:4). Ezekiel is called Son of Man 39 times (eg 4:1-7; 5:1-4). More significantly it was the title that Jesus chose for himself, based on Daniel 7, in which the Son of Man is victorious over various beasts which represent hostile nations.

The description that follows is drawn from Daniel 10:5-6, and resembles the attire of a Priest (see too the description of the angels' clothing in 15:5-8).

'Eyes like fire.' Fire represents judgment or purification. Eyes represent the ability to see.

'White hair' represents purity. In Daniel 7:9 this description is used of the Ancient of Days before whom the Son of Man comes.

'Feet like bronze refined by fire.' There is purity in the way that he walks.

'Voice like the roar of many waters.' Again this is similar to the picture in Daniel 10:6.

v16 The right hand symbolises power and authority. The stars, we're told in verse 20, represent the angels of the seven churches. The sword coming from his mouth represents his power and authority to speak judgment (Isaiah 11:4; 49:2; cf. Rev 19:15). His face shining like the Sun is similar to Daniel 10, but also reminds us of the transfiguration in Luke 9:28-36.

v17-18 'The first and the last' is a title used of God (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12) meaning that He is sovereign over all time and history.

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Recommended Reading

If you fancy reading further, here are a few recommendations for places to start:

***Straight to the Heart of Revelation* – Phil Moore**

Phil Moore leads Queen's Road Church in Wimbledon and is currently in the middle of producing devotional commentaries on every book of the Bible! His books are accessible, clear, fun and yet robust. They take the form of bitesized chapters, which are great to use for daily study. Highly recommended!

***The Lamb, the Beast and the Devil* - John Hosier**

This is a great little book, which makes a great deal of sense of the book of Revelation. It is less detailed than a commentary, but has a great balance of explanation to application. A brilliant place to start. Also helpful is his book *The End Times*, which takes a topical approach to subjects such as the second coming, the millennium and the new creation.

***Revelation for Everyone* – Tom Wright**

Similar in style and approach to Phil Moore's series, Tom Wright's 'For Everyone' commentaries are short volumes on each book of the NT. They are accessible and light, and yet if you've ever read Tom Wright, you'll know that there is an enormous amount of understand behind the scenes. There are a few sections where I would take a slightly different approach, but by and large, this is an accessible way in to Revelation.

***The Book of Revelation (New International Greek Testament Commentary)* – G.K. Beale**

This is by far the best commentary around on Revelation, but be warned, it's not for the faint of heart! It's about 1,000 pages long, with enormous amounts of detail, and often a fair amount of Greek. I wouldn't recommend this for many people at all, but it's the commentary on which I have drawn the most, so if you do want to go a lot deeper than this series can, you can do no better than this.

***Surprised by Hope* – Tom Wright**

Not a book on Revelation *per se*, but this book looks at the wider subject of eschatology and God's plan to renew the world. If you've ever wondered about the resurrection, heaven, or new creation and how those subjects shape our mission as Christians and churches, then this book will really help you.