

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Revelation

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Although many details in Revelation are debatable, the basic thrust is not. The true and living God summons us from our preoccupation with the world to recognize, in light of his ultimate plan for history, what really matters and what really does not. God first gave Revelation to a culture where people would hear the words of the book and imagine the stark and terrifying images; to be struck by the full force of the book, we must likewise use our imaginations to grasp the images of terror. Revelation is not meant for casual or “lite” reading; to genuinely hear it summons us to grapple with God’s judgment on a world in rebellion against him.

The Key to Interpretation

Some readers believe that current events unlock the meaning of the biblical prophecies. Thus, for example, one writer opines that even Luther and Calvin “knew little about prophecy.”

Yet this approach seems to me wrongheaded I believe that it runs up against the evidence of Revelation itself. John writes to seven literal churches in literal Asia Minor, following the same sequence in which a messenger traveling Roman roads would deliver the book. If we take seriously what the book itself claims, then it was a book that must have made good sense to its first hearers, who in fact were “blessed” for obeying it (1:3). That John wrote the book in Greek probably suggests that he also used figures of speech and symbols that were part of his culture more than ours.

If today’s newspapers are a necessary key to interpreting the book, then no generation until our own could have understood and obeyed the book (contrary to the assumption in 1:3). They could not have read the book as Scripture profitable for teaching and correction – an approach that does not fit a high view of biblical authority (cf. 2 Timothy 3:16-17). If, however, the book was understandable for the first generation, subsequent generations can profit from the book simply by learning some history. Some popular prophecy teachers have ignored much of the history that is available, preferring to interpret the book in light of current newspaper headings. That is probably why most of them have to revise their predictions every few years as the headlines change.

Another matter of interpretation is that some want to take everything in Revelation literally. When Reformers like Luther talked about interpreting the Bible

“literally,” they were using a technical designation that meant taking each part of Scripture according to its “literary sense,” hence including attention to genre or literary type. But they did not mean that we should downplay figures of speech or symbols. We should take literally historical narrative in the Bible, but Revelation belongs to a different genre, a mixture of prophetic and “apocalyptic” genres, both of which are full of symbols. The Reformers did not demand that we interpret symbols as if they were not symbols, and this kind of literalism is actually at odds with what they meant.

In fact, to take every symbol in Revelation nonsymbolically is so difficult that no one ever really attempts it. No one takes Babylon the Great as a literal prostitute or mother of prostitutes (17:5), no one takes new Jerusalem as a literal individual who is a bride, and few Protestants take the mother in chapter 12 as a literal mother (certainly not one clothed with the sun). Are literal monsters like those in chapter 9 possible? God could certainly create them, but they do bear many striking resemblances to creatures that simply represent locusts in the book of Joel. Is it not more important to be consistent with how the rest of Revelation and prophetic literature invites us to interpret them (much of which is plainly symbolic) than to try to take all its language literally? Is it not more respectful to Revelation to hear it on its own terms (symbols included) than to read into it a system of interpretation the book itself nowhere claims. That Revelation clearly includes symbols and sometimes tells us what they mean (e.g., 1:20) should lead us to suspect any interpretive method that ignores the intense symbolism of the rest of the book.

Revelation begins by telling us that God “signified” (cf. John 18:32; John 21:19) the book to John (1:1, NIV, “made it known”), a word that is related to the one John occasionally uses for “sign” or “symbol” (12:1, 3; 15:1). This suggests that the opening verses forthrightly announce a book communicated by symbols. Revelation’s Jewish contemporaries were accustomed to the sorts of symbols the book employs. Thus one reads in a first-century addition to the early Jewish apocalypse 1 Enoch, for example, of mysterious animals (1 Enoch 85:3) impregnated by stars (ch. 86), a vision clearly not intended literally in the context. Likewise, “John’s “locusts” (Revelation 9:3-11) have much in common with Joel’s; we who rightly recognize that we should not interpret literally all the graphic language about a locust army in Joel 1-2 (1:4; 2:11, 20, 25), should interpret Revelation the same way.

Prophetic Failures

The massive loss of life among David Koresh’s followers in Waco, Texas, involved a misreading of the book of Revelation. Prophetic speculation is not,

however, a new phenomenon. Jewish works sometimes guessed numbers and times still future – and history proved them wrong. Early church fathers also indulged in some speculations that never materialized, such as Hippolytus’s view that the world would end in A.D. 500.

Many interpreters, however, have failed to learn the original setting of the book and have in effect “added to” it, despite its warning (22:18), by reading into it theological systems not justified by the text itself. Of course, Jehovah’s Witnesses are known for such activities. Whereas most groups that have set dates gave up after they missed once or twice, “Jehovah’s Witnesses won’t quit. Their leaders have earmarked the years 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, and 1984 as times of eschatological significance.”

One may take as an example of diverse end-time views among Christians the Millennium, or the thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation 20. Does Jesus return before the future Millennium (the premillennial view, the most common among North American evangelicals today) or after it (the postmillennial view), or is this period merely a symbol for the present era (the amillennial view)? Many readers may be surprised to learn that most Christian leaders in history were amillennial (like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin), many leaders in North American revivals were postmillennial (like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney), and most of the early church fathers were premillennial (but posttribulational).

If Calvin, Wesley, Finney, Moody, and most Christians today each have held different views, is it possible that God’s blessing may not rest solely on those who hold a particular end-time view? If different views strongly dominated different eras of history (e.g., amillennialism during the Reformation; postmillennialism during the U.S. Great Awakenings; premillennialism today), is it possible that our own views are more historically shaped than we care to admit? Studying various views better equips us to read Revelation more objectively on its own terms.

The Turkish Ottoman Empire once constituted a great threat to the Western world from the East, but after its fall the World War II generation naturally read the “kings from the East” (16:12) as a reference to Japan (the seven churches of Asia were clearly not thinking of Turkey). After Japan’s collapse and communism’s rise in China, the title was transferred accordingly. Most prophecies have been reapplied as newspaper headlines have changed, so that modern prophecy teaching is rarely relevant for more than a decade. As one historian mourns, “end-time thinking has been incredibly elastic”; elements of the “prophetic jigsaw puzzle” have achieved “a chameleon-like character – it has been regularly adjusted to suit

the changes in current events.” As we will see, the “revelation of Jesus Christ” to John (1:1) uses not only the Greek language but images and symbols that made sense in his generation, and modern prophecy teachers have often tried to jump to what it “means” without first understanding what it “meant.”

Approaches

The Idealist Approach

The idealist approach finds timeless principles in Revelation. Everyone who preaches from the book will affirm this general conviction, but in the view’s most extreme form it simultaneously denies any specific historical or future meaning for the book. Was Revelation teaching merely timeless general principles, with no concern for pressing issues at hand in the seven churches?

The Historicist Approach

Revelation provides a detailed map of history from its own day until Jesus’ future return. This historicist view of Revelation as church history dominated views about the book through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is rarely advanced today.

The Preterist Approach

Preterists read the book of Revelation the way they believe John’s original audience in the seven churches would have. In other words, they seek to apply to Revelation the same interpretive method we apply to every other book of the Bible, namely, that we should read it in its historical context. Because the most radical preterists insist, however, that the events of Revelation were entirely fulfilled in the first century, they read it in a manner that John’s original audience probably would not have.

The Futurist Approach

Futurists are certainly right to claim that some events in the book await fulfillment, such as God’s unchallenged eternal city supplanting the kingdoms of this world (21:1-22:5). But the futurist position, like the other ones, can be pressed too far; in its radical form, it “implies that the book had nothing to say to the many generations between John of Patmos and the interpreter.” Further, some pivotal clues in the book may suggest that the time frame much of the book reports is not merely a future tribulation, but also a present one.

An Eclectic Approach

Once we understand what God was saying to the churches of Asia through John, we can begin to draw analogies for how the same message is relevant to our churches today.

Symbolism

As noted above, on any view, Revelation employs much symbolism. John used symbols in order to communicate that which cannot be expressed in any other way, not to conceal something that could be said more straightforwardly. The symbolic use of numbers characterizes Revelation, as it does many other apocalypses.

Among John's contemporaries, numbers like seven and twelve often functioned symbolically. In Jewish texts, twelve most often stood for the tribes of Israel, but also functioned in various other ways. In Revelation, where twelve and multiples of twelve appear around sixty times, the number most often points to Israel.

Genre

Some have used the term *apocalypse* to refer loosely to any Jewish end-time thought, others more specifically for visionary literature, often including heavenly ascents and revelations. The apocalyptic genre flourished in early Judaism, and most scholars include Revelation in this category. In this sort of text in the most specific sense, the seer has visions and revelations – “apocalypse” literally means “revelation” – often including cosmological speculation (e.g., 1 Enoch 72-82).

Among apocalypses, John's Revelation is certainly closer to the biblical prophets than his contemporaries. A forced choice between “apocalyptic” and “prophetic” genres, however, is pointless. Nearly everything in Revelation can be paralleled in the Old Testament prophets, but the specific features that predominate are also those most common among Revelation's early Jewish contemporaries.

Revelation, like the Fourth Gospel, is full of implicit allusions to the Old Testament; indeed, it contains more biblical allusions than any other early Christian work, which some estimate appear in nearly 70 percent of Revelation's verses. But unlike John's Gospel it includes no extended quotations of the Old Testament. Many of the allusions recall also the context of their biblical source; many, however, blend various biblical allusions, and Revelation regularly recycles its images to apply them in a fresh way. (Everyone agrees, for example, that Revelation's plagues of hail mixed with fire, water turned to blood, and so forth recall the plagues of Moses' day, but also that Revelation is not simply referring to past biblical events.)

Structure

Between the letters to the seven churches and the promised future lie, in addition to scenes of heavenly worship and periodic interludes, three series of seven judgments, each ending (usually in the sixth element) with an end-of-the-age cataclysm then resolved in the seventh element (6:12-17; 8:1; 9:13-21; 11:15-19; 16:12-21).

But what is the primary period depicted in Revelation? It seems to end with the end of the age, but what is less clear is when it begins. The seals seem to fit the present age, but the clearest clue comes in 12:5-6: The period of tribulation seems to begin with Jesus' exaltation nearly two millennia ago.

The 1260 days may refer to the period between the first and second comings of Jesus, characterizing the entire church age as a period of tribulation in some sense. This would not rule out a final intensification of suffering toward the end of this period, which would be consonant with the period's eschatological character; but that is probably not the primary point in Revelation. In this case, Revelation would not directly even address the sort of future "tribulation" often discussed in modern "prophecy teaching." This is not to comment on whether other biblical passages might not address it, but to suggest that Revelation is more practically focused on the state of believers in this age, and that it is therefore a good resource for encouraging believers in this age; Christians must always be prepared to suffer for Christ.

Date and Setting

Early church fathers suggested that Revelation stems from the time of the evil emperor Domitian at the end of the first century, and that John returned from Patmos only after Domitian's death (e.g., Irenaeus, *Her.* 5.30.3; Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.18.1-3; 3.20.9; 3.23.1). Domitian's claims to deity and the centrality of his cult in Asia fit especially the later part of his reign, around the mid-90s.

Traditionally scholars have viewed Revelation as addressing oppressed Christians facing persecution from the mighty Roman state. Today many emphasize instead that the book addressed "complacent, spiritually anemic Christians." In fact, when one examines the letters to the seven churches one finds both situations coexisting in different places. Revelation speaks to churches both alive and dead, but more of the churches are in danger of compromising with the world than of dying from it. This makes the book relevant to North American Christianity today.

Message of Revelation

When we think of Revelation today, many of us think of debates on fine points of end-times events, but these details are hardly the primary message of Revelation. In fact, on some matters of detail, it is possible that most of us will be surprised. After showing how God regularly surprised his people by the way he fulfilled both Old and New Testament prophecies, one writer inquires, “Is it not possible that God could fulfill some of his predictions in ways that humans have not yet conceived?”

But as Billy Graham points out, rather than getting lost in the smaller brushstrokes, debating all the details, we need to step back and catch the majesty of the book’s “grand design.” We can acknowledge ambiguities and uncertainties and even differ from other Christians on some larger end-time scenarios, such as the nature of the Millennium; but the most important applications to our lives today are usually clear. In discussing New Testament teaching about Jesus’ return, can we miss the summons to holiness in readiness for Christ’s return, one of the most pervasive Second-Coming themes in the New Testament (Mark 13:33-37; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 5:6-7, 23; Titus 2:12-13; 1 Peter 1:7; 2 Peter 3:14; 1 John 2:28-3:3)?

What then is Revelation’s message?

- That God is awesomely majestic, as well as sovereign in our troubles
- That Jesus’ sacrifice as the Lamb ultimately brings complete deliverance for those who trust him
- That God’s judgments on the world are often to serve notice on the world that God will avenge his people
- That regardless of how things appear in the short run, “sin does not go unpunished,” and God will judge
- That God can accomplish his purposes through a small and persecuted remnant; he is not dependent on what the world values as power
- That worship leads us from grief over our sufferings to God’s eternal purposes seen from a heavenly perspective
- That proclaiming Christ invites persecution, the normal state of committed believers in this age
- That Christ is worth dying for
- That a radical contrast exists between God’s kingdom (exemplified in the bride, the new Jerusalem) and the world’s values (exemplified in the prostitute, Babylon)
- That the hope God has prepared for us far exceeds our present sufferings

- That God’s plan and church ultimately include representatives of all peoples

Revelation reminds us that we do not belong to this world and must not be seduced by what it values. John’s Revelation calls for persecuted churches to remain vigilant (2:10; 3:11) and other churches to resist compromise with the spirit of their age (2:16, 25; 3:3, 18-20).

Revelation 19:11-16

And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war.

His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself.

He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God.

And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses.

From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.

And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Keener, Craig S., *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation*, pp. 21-43