

## **The Revelation: Images of Judgment and Hope**

- The book of Revelation, compared to the rest of the New Testament, feels as though you are entering a foreign country. Instead of narratives and letters containing plain statements of fact and imperatives, you enter a book full of angels, trumpets, and earthquakes; of beasts, dragons, and bottomless pits.
- There are a few hermeneutical problems with the book of The Revelation. We know that The Revelation is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit, but when we come to the book to hear the Word, we don't know what to make of it:
  - o Sometimes the author speaks forthrightly, for example, Rev. 1:9. Another example is his writings to 7 churches in known cities with recognizable 1<sup>st</sup> century problems.
  - o At the same time, however, there is a rich, diverse symbolism, some of which is manageable (Judgment in the form of an earthquake, 6:12-17), while some is more obscure (the 2 witnesses; 11:1-10).
- Most of the problems stem from the symbols, plus the fact that the book deals with future events, while at the same time it is set in a recognizable first century context.
- The problems are also related to the way that John sees everything in light of the Old Testament, which he cites or echoes over 250 times, so that every significant moment in his narrative is imaged almost exclusively in Old Testament language.
- Revelation is a difficult book to read. As with the difficult passages in the Epistles, one should be less than dogmatic here, especially since there are at least 5 major schools of interpretation, not to mention significant variations within each of the schools.
- Before any hermeneutical suggestions are attempted, exegesis is extremely important.
- Many popular books have been written about the book of Revelation, but unfortunately, in most cases, these popular books do not do exegesis at all. They jump immediately to hermeneutics, which usually takes the form of fanciful speculations that John himself could never have possibly intended or understood.

### **The Nature of The Revelation**

- As with most of the other Biblical genres, the first key to the exegesis of the revelation is to examine the kind of literature that it is. In this case, however, we face a different problem, for the Revelation is a unique, finely blended combination of three distinct literary types: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.
- The basic type – apocalypse – is a literary form that does not exist in our own days.
- We have a basic understanding of what an epistle or a narrative, a psalm or a proverb, is, but we simply have nothing quite like the apocalyptic form of writing.

- It is especially important in this case to have a clear picture of the literary type we are dealing with.

### ***The Revelation as Apocalypse***

- The Revelation is primarily an apocalypse.
- It is the most special apocalypse out of dozens that were known to Jews and Christians about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. The other apocalypses are not canonical, yet they all, including the Revelation, have some common characteristics.
- These characteristics are as follows:
  1. The taproot of apocalyptic is the Old Testament prophetic literature, especially as it is found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and parts of Isaiah. As with some prophetic literature, apocalyptic was concerned about coming judgment and salvation. But apocalyptic was born either in persecution or in a time of great oppression. Therefore, its great concern was no longer with God's within history. The apocalyptists looked exclusively forward to the time when God would bring a violent, radical end to history, and end that would mean the triumph of good and the final judgment of evil.
  2. Unlike most of the prophetic books, apocalypses are literary works from the beginning. The Prophets were basically spokespersons for Yahweh, whose spoken oracles were later committed to writing and collected in a book. But an apocalypse is a form of literature. It has a particular written structure and form. John, for example, is told to "write, therefore what you have seen" (1:19), whereas the prophets were told to speak what they were told or had seen.
  3. Most frequently the "stuff" of apocalyptic is presented in the form of visions and dreams. And its language is cryptic (having hidden meanings) and symbolic. Therefore, most of the apocalypses contained literary devices that were intended to give the book a sense of hoary (old and gray) age. The most important of these devices was pseudonymity, that is, they were given the appearance of having been written by ancient worthies (Enoch, Baruch, et al.), who were told to "seal it up" for a later day, the "later day" of course being the age in which the book was now being written.
  4. The images of apocalyptic are often forms of fantasy rather than of reality. By way of contrast, the nonapocalyptic prophets and Jesus also regularly used symbolic language, but most often it involved real images – for example, salt (Matt 5:13), vultures and carcasses (Luke 17:37), senseless doves (Hosea 7:11), half-baked cakes (Hosea 7:8), et al. But most of the images of apocalyptic belong to fantasy-for example, a beast with seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 13:1), a woman clothed with the sun (12:1), locusts with scorpions' tails and human heads (9:10), et al.
  5. Because they were literary, most of the apocalypses were very formally stylized. There was a strong tendency to divide time and events into neat packages. There was also a great fondness for the symbolic use of numbers. As a consequence, the final product usually has the visions in carefully arranged, often numbered sets. Frequently these sets, when put together, express something (e.g. judgment) without necessarily trying to suggest that each separate picture follows hard on the heels of the former.

- The Revelation of John fits all these characteristics of apocalyptic but one. The Revelation is not pseudonymous. John felt no need to follow the regular formula here. He made himself known to his readers and, through the seven letters, he spoke to known churches of Asia Minor, people who were his contemporaries and companions in suffering. Moreover, he was told not to “seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near” (22:10).

### ***The Revelation as Prophecy***

- Another reason why John’s apocalypse is not pseudonymous is probably related to his own sense of the end as already / not yet. He knew that the end had already begun with the coming of Jesus.
- Crucial to this understanding is the outpouring/coming of the Holy Spirit. The other apocalyptists wrote in the name of the former prophetic figures because they lived in the age of the “quenched Spirit”, awaiting the prophetic promise of the outpoured Spirit in the coming age. They lived in an age when prophecy had ceased (400 years of silence), where John belongs to the new age; the age of the Spirit. He as “in the Spirit” when he was told to write what he saw (1:10-11). John calls his book “this prophecy” (1:3; 22:18-19).
- What makes John’s apocalypse different, therefore, is this combination of apocalyptic and prophetic elements. The book has most of the literary characteristics of apocalypse: born in persecution; intends to speak about the end with the triumph of Christ and His church; and is a carefully constructed piece of literature, using cryptic language and rich symbolism of fantasy and numbers. On the other hand, John clearly intends this apocalypse to be a prophetic word to the church. His book was not to be sealed for the future (like most apocalypses). It was a word from God for their present situation (remember, prophecy’s first intension is to speak forth God’s word in the present, a word that usually had as its content coming judgment or salvation.

### ***The Revelation as Epistle (Letter)***

- This combination of apocalypse and prophetic elements has been cast in the form of a letter.
- Read 1:4-7 and 22:21, you will notice that all the characteristics of the letter form are present. In its final form, the Revelation is sent by John as a letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor.
- The significant of this is that, as with all epistles, there is an occasional aspect to the Revelation. It was occasioned at least in part by the needs of the specific churches to which it is addressed. Therefore, to interpret, we must try to understand its original historical context.

### **The Necessity of Exegesis**

- The lack of sound exegetical principles has caused so much bad, speculative interpretation of the Revelation to take place.
- Following are some basic exegetical principles to remember when studying the Revelation:
  1. The first task of the exegesis of the Revelation is to seek the author’s, and therewith, the Holy Spirit’s original intent. The primary meaning is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have

been something his readers could have understood it to mean. The original readers had a greater advantage over us in that they completely understood their own historical context (which caused the book to be written in the first place), and they had a greater familiarity with apocalyptic forms and images. They also had a thoroughgoing acquaintance with the Old Testament that most contemporary Christians lack, so that would immediately have recognized and understood John's echoes and allusions to the Old Testament. Since the Revelation intends to be prophetic, one must be open to the possibility of a secondary meaning inspired by the Holy Spirit but not fully seen by the author or his readers. However, such a second meaning lies beyond exegesis in the broader area of hermeneutics.

2. One must be especially careful to not overuse the concept of the "analogy of scripture" in the exegesis of the Revelation. This means that scripture is to be interpreted in the light of other scripture. We must not make other scriptures the hermeneutical keys to unlock the Revelation. We must do an exegesis of the Revelation itself to be able to do correct hermeneutics. Although one recognizes John's new use of images from Daniel and Ezekiel or sees the analogies of apocalyptic images from other texts. One may not assume that John's readers have read Matthew or 1 and 2 Thessalonians and understood certain keys to understand John's letter.
3. Because of the apocalyptic / prophetic nature of the book, there are some added difficulties at the exegetical level, especially when it comes to imagery. Here are some suggestions in this regard.
  - a. *One must have a sensitivity to the rich background of ideas that have gone into the composition of the Revelation.* The main source of these images is the Old Testament, but John has also derived images from apocalyptic and even from ancient mythology. But it's important to remember that these images do not necessarily mean what they meant in their original sources.
  - b. *Apocalyptic imagery is of several kinds.* In some cases the images like the donkey and elephant in American political cartoons are constant. The beast out of the sea, for example is a standard image for a world empire, not an individual ruler. Other images are fluid, like the "Lion" of the tribe of Judah turns out to be in fact a "Lamb" (Rev. 5:5-6). The woman in ch. 12 is a positive image, while the woman in ch. 17 is evil. Some images clearly refer to specific things, like the 7 lampstands in 1:12-20 are identified as the 7 churches and the dragon in ch. 12 is Satan. Other images are probably just general, for example, the 4 horsemen of ch. 6 probably don't represent any specific expression of conquest, war, famine, and death, but rather represent this expression of human fallenness as the source of the church's suffering (6:9-11) that in turn will be a cause of God's judgment (6:12-17).
  - c. *When John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding other images.* There are 6 such interpreted images: the one like the son of man (1:13) is Christ (1:18); The golden lampstands (1:20) are the seven churches; the seven stars (1:20) are the seven angels, or messengers, of the churches (unfortunately, this is still unclear because of the use of the term "angel" which may in itself be yet another image); the great dragon (12:9) is Satan; the seven heads (17:9) are the seven hills on which the woman sits (as well as the seven kings, thus becoming a fluid image). The prostitute (17:18) is the great city, clearly indicating Rome.

- d. *One must see the visions as wholes and not allegorically press all the details.* In this matter the visions are like the parables. The whole vision is trying to say something; the details are either (1) for dramatic effect (6:12-14); or (2) to add to the picture of the whole so that the readers will not mistake the points of reference (9:7-11). Thus the details of the sun turning black like sackcloth and the stars falling like figs probably do not “mean” anything. They simply make the whole vision of the earthquake more impressive. However, in 9:7-11 the locusts with crowns of gold, human faces, and women’s long hair help to fill out the picture in such a way that the original could hardly have mistaken what was in view – the barbarian hordes at the outer edge of the Roman Empire.
4. John expects his readers to hear his echoes of the Old Testament as the continuation – and consummation – of that story. For example, the presentation of Christ begins with a doxology to Him in 1:5-6 that echoes the sacrificial systems and uses the language of Exodus 19:6 to refer to the church as the new people of God, redeemed by Christ. This is followed by the announcement of His coming, which is a collage from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10. The picture of Christ that follows is based primarily on Daniel 10:6 but is a superb collage of that passage with Daniel 7:9, 13; Isaiah 49:2; Ezekiel 1:24. The revelation of Christ climaxes (ch. 5) as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Gen 49:9), the “Root of David” (Isaiah 11:1), turns out to be the Lamb (from the Passover and sacrificial system). The 7 trumpets (Ch. 8-9) echo several of the plagues that fell on Egypt (Exodus 7-10), while the final judgment of Rome in ch. 17-18 is expressed in language and pictures from the several prophetic judgments on Babylon and Tyre in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – and Rome itself is called Babylon. Good exegesis of the Revelation requires one to be constantly aware of these Old Testament echoes, since the context of these echoes gives you clues as to how John intends his own images and pictures to be understood.
5. One final note: Apocalypses in general, and the Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed chronological account of the future. John’s larger concern is that, despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church.

### The Historical Context

- To begin exegesis of the Revelation it’s important to reconstruct the situation in which it was written. To do this well you should read it all the way through in one sitting.
- Read the big picture. Don’t try to figure out everything; just try to get a feel for the book and its message.
- As you read be making some notes about the author and his readers. Then go back a second time and specifically pick up all the references that indicate John’s readers are companions in his sufferings (1:9).
- When reading the 7 letters note 2:3, 8-9, 13 3:10, plus the repeated “to those who are victorious.” The 5<sup>th</sup> seal (6:9-11), which follows the devastation wrought by the 4 horsemen, reveals martyrs who have been slain because of the “word” and the “testimony” (exactly why John is in exile 1:9).
- This is important to understanding the historical context and fully explains the occasion and purpose of the book. John himself was in exile for his faith. While John was “in the Spirit,” he came to realize that

their present suffering was only the beginning of woes for those who would refuse “to worship the beast.”

- The main themes are abundantly clear: The people of God and the state are on a collision course; and initial victory will appear to belong to the state. Thus he warns the people of God that suffering and death lie ahead; indeed, it will get far worse before it gets better (6:9-11). But this prophetic word is also one of encouragement – for God is in control of all things.
- One of the keys for interpreting the Revelation is the distinction John makes between two crucial words or ideas – “tribulation” and “wrath”.
  - o Tribulation (suffering and death) is clearly a part of what God’s people were enduring and were yet to endure.
  - o God’s wrath on the other hand, is His judgment that it to be poured out on those who have afflicted God’s people and have disobeyed God. It is clear from every kind of context in the Revelation that God’s people will not have to endure God’s awful wrath when it is poured out on their enemies, but it is equally clear that they will indeed suffer at the hands of their enemies.

#### **The Literary Context**

- To understand any one of the specific visions in the Revelation it is important not only to wrestle with the background and meaning of the images (the content questions) but also to as how this particular vision functions in the book as a whole.
- In this sense the Revelation is more like the Epistles than the prophets. The prophets are a collection of individual oracles, not always with a clear functional purpose in relation to one another. When it comes to the Epistles, one must “think paragraphs,” because every paragraph is a building block for the whole argument.
- The Revelation is a creatively structured whole, and each vision is an integral part of that whole.
- The Revelation is the only one of its kind in the New Testament.
- The basic structure of the Revelation is clear and not an object of debate; differences come in how one interprets the structure.
- The book unfolds like a great drama in which the earliest scenes set the stage and the cast of characters, and the later scenes presuppose all the earlier scenes and must be so understood for us to be able to follow the plot.
- Chapters 1-3 set the stage and introduce us to the most significant characters: 1. John (1:1-11); 2. Christ (1:12-20); 3. The Church (2:1-3:22).
- Chapters 4-5 further help to set the stage; with breathtaking visions, we are told that God reigns in sovereign majesty.

- Chapters 6-7 begin the unfolding of the actual drama itself. Three times throughout the book visions are presented in carefully