

As we embark on what I expect will be a lengthy, but Lord willing, profitable study on the book of Revelation, we make note of the fact that back between October of 2000 and January 2002, we did a study of this book, so why look at it again now?

I asked myself that question, and came up with 5 main reasons:

- After 9 years, we are in a better position theologically to understand it.
- The events depicted in chapters 4ff are even closer to us now.
- In preparing for a Wednesday night series on the Doctrine of Hell, I had to refer to Revelation so often with regard to final judgment, that I was intrigued by the idea of looking at Revelation in greater depth than previously.
- Many people now in our Sunday School class were not here between 2000 & 2002, so for them, this will be a fresh study.
- The exponential rise of Islam has forced me to take another look at what “Babylon” may signify in Revelation, and it really brings a lot of questions into the mix with regard to many of the things said in Revelation that have traditionally been assigned to the Roman Catholic Church or an Ecumenical Church as the worldwide religious enemy of people in the end times.

This is a book that frightens a lot of people. One prevailing notion is that it is so difficult to understand that it is best left alone, yet this is the only book of the entire Bible that promises a blessing (twice) to those who read it – cf. Rev. 1:3; 22:7. It is admittedly tough to understand some portions of it, and the application of solid hermeneutical principles is an absolute necessity in interpreting it, or one could wander off into any number of incorrect directions, as many surely have. ①

As in all Bible interpretation, the best route to take is to take the text literally, unless there is compelling evidence to interpret the passage as an allegory, symbolism, a type, prophetic, metaphorical or some other type of literature. Quite often when the text is meant to be symbolic, the writer will tell us outright, as John does in Rev. 11:8. Notice how he describes Jerusalem (“where also their Lord was crucified”) as “prophetically Sodom & Egypt” (HCSB) – (KJV – “spiritually”; NIV – “figuratively”; ESV – “symbolically”).

Many people also think that Revelation is a book that hides things in riddles or symbols, but it is actually a book that reveals many things that have been hidden – cf. Rev. 10:7 (“God’s hidden plan”). If God’s purpose is that we will be blessed by reading this book, then He wants us to understand it – He is not trying to confuse us. Another name for this book you may also have heard is “The Apocalypse”, which is a Greek word meaning “to uncover, to reveal, to take the cover off”. It is found in I Pet. 1:7 where it is translated, “revelation” ; and in I Cor. 1:7, translated “revelation” ; and in Rom. 8:19, where it is translated as “revealing”.

And what does it reveal? What does it uncover? Well, many things, many things. As we look at this book we will find that it reveals warnings to the church about its besetting sins. It reveals instruction to the church about the need for holiness. It reveals the amazing power and glorious overcoming strength of Christ and the Christian over sin and Satan. It reveals the ultimate triumph of believers who are killed for the cause of Christ. It reveals the glory of worship. It reveals the end of human history. It reveals the final political set up of

the world. It reveals the triumph of God's saving purpose. It reveals the career of Antichrist and the final battle of Armageddon and the alignment of the nations of the world. It reveals the need to fight the forces of evil patiently. It reveals the glories of Christ's Kingdom on Earth and in the new heaven and the new Earth. It reveals the triumph ultimately of God's saving purposes, no matter what Satan endeavors to do. It reveals the victory of Christ over all powers, human and demonic. It reveals the final end of Satan and the final end of sin. It is the opposite of a puzzle, it is the opposite of a mystery, it is not a covering, it is not a hiding, it is an unveiling. And so we say its essential nature is that it is the revelation and that word is chosen very carefully by John. It is the apocalypse, the unveiling, the disclosure of details heretofore hidden from human view. The history of the end of the universe and how it will take place and what will come after that.ⁱ

Revelation consists of 22 chapters, 404 verses, and of these, 278 allude to OT passages or verses, more than any other NT book, yet amazingly, not a single word for word quote from the OT is found in Revelation. Most of the allusions to the OT are from the books of Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel and the Psalmsⁱⁱ. There are also a number of parallel passages to texts from Matthew 24-25 - Jesus' Olivet Discourse.

Numbers play a prominent role in Revelation as well. For example, the number 7 is used 54 times, and seems to carry the meaning of completeness or perfection. The number 12 is also found numerous times. See the addendum at the end of this lesson for more details of the numbers used in Revelation. One of the most famous numbers associated with this book is 666, which interestingly, is found only once.

The central theme of the book is the Lord Jesus Christ. He appears in 8 different images:

- The risen, glorified Son of God among the 7 churches.
- The Lamb in heaven, with authority to carry out judgment on men.
- He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.
- He comes to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
- He is the Christ.
- He is the judge on the Great White Throne, seated at the right hand of the Father.
- He is the Lamb on the Throne of God and of the Lamb.
- He is Jesus, the root and offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.

②

Although these are the major images of Jesus in the book, He appears under numerous names and titles – see the addendum.

Revelation is a book of much prophecy – it describes future events and this is where much of the fascination for it comes from. From chapter 4 onward, it is virtually all prophetic, revealing events on earth, events in heaven, events in space, events in the oceans and rivers, in the spirit realm, in the Millennial Kingdom and in eternity future. It describes itself as a prophecy in Rev. 1:3; 22:7,10,18,19.

Before we arrive at the prophetic parts of Revelation, which is the bulk of the text, we are made aware of 7 letters which Jesus sends to 7 churches in the Roman province of Asia – now modern day Turkey. We'll find as we study these churches that they actually existed when John wrote the book, and that their features represent not a chronological report of how church history has unfolded (as some interpret them), but a demonstration of features – both good and bad – found in all churches around the world at any given time. As such, the things said to these 7 churches and promised to them can be said to be a message to churches in any time period, even today. Some have more

prevalent features worthy of rebuke, some of commendable attributes, and some have a balance of these things.

Another interesting feature regarding the church is its' notable absence on earth during the events depicted from Rev. 4 on. The word, "church" is not used after chapter 3 until Rev. 22:16. This is significant and that fact will be included as part of our evidence when we look at the Rapture of the Church, which is never specifically mentioned in the book of Revelation, but which is a significant aspect of the end times which must be examined in order to understand what is happening on earth during the Tribulation being depicted in Revelation. We will also spend time in Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Zechariah as we go through the book.

Although the Church is not mentioned in Rev. 4-22, Israel is mentioned on virtually every page. It is my contention, and I believe it will be readily apparent as we study the book that it is this generation of Israel that Paul refers to in Rom. 11:26, when he says, "And so all Israel will be saved...". The main evangelism arises from 144,000 Jewish converts in this book alongside 2 OT prophets who will perform incredible signs and wonders from Jerusalem until they are killed by the wicked on earth, but they are resurrected after that and are taken up into heaven in the sight of all on earth. The Tribulation period is called the "Time of Jacob's Trouble" (Jer. 30:7); "the day of their calamity" (Deut. 32:35; Obadiah 13); "the day of the vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2); "A time of trouble" (Dan. 12:1; Zeph. 1:15); & "the day of wrath" (Zeph. 1:15); and it is said that Jacob (Israel) will be saved out of it, not kept from it.

Probably the most memorable feature of Revelation is the series of judgments or plagues which come to earth in the form of 7 Seals, 7 Trumpets, 7 Bowls, and 7 Thunders (which John is not allowed to describe for us – Rev. 10:3-4) from Rev. 6:1 – 16:21. The variety, scope and severity of these judgments is astounding and all combine to reveal God's final offer of the Gospel alongside a 7 year long bombardment of all those things that men on earth trust instead of God. ③

Angelic beings play a large role in Revelation as well, and are depicted in all but 4 chapters, being mentioned 67 times in the book. In fact, this book, written by John is supernatural in a way no other book of the Bible is – it is delivered by angels – cf. Rev. 22:16; 1:1.

One feature of Revelation that seems to jump off of the page to me is the Sovereignty of God. Although angelic beings, and in some cases, satanic or demonic beings are behind the horrifying events that define the judgments, the text is clear to demonstrate that it is God who is extending the authority for these beings to accomplish their tasks and they have divine limits set on them too. Note Rev. 9:3-5; 13:5,7,15; 16:19; 17:17, etc. This should be of great comfort to us as believers because this book is describing the end of history and shows Christ as absolutely and unquestionably victorious. God has to be sovereign and in complete control of these events or He cannot promise the victorious end that John has recorded here for us.

Well, these have been some random thoughts to get us started on our quest, so let's focus on some specifics we" need to see before we get too far into the text itself.

The Writer

There is very little disagreement amongst conservative scholars as to the authorship of Revelation, although there is considerable controversy over when it was written, which we will look at shortly. With few exceptions (2 of which are Dionysius AD 247-264; & Eusebius – based on weak theories and possible ulterior motives questioned John’s authorship), the Church Fathers all agreed that John the Apostle was the writer of this book.

There is plenty of internal evidence for it. Some examples are: only John’s Gospel and Revelation refer to Christ as “the Word” (JN 1:1; Rev. 19:13); and only John uses the imagery of “the Lamb”, “the water of life”, “he who overcomes”, etc. The vocabulary used in Revelation is strikingly similar to John’s Gospel and his 3 letters. Examples: the Greek “*arnion*” or “Lamb”, is used 30 times in Revelation, and only 1 other time in the NT – JN 2:15. The Greek “*bronte*” or “thunder” is found only 2 places outside of Revelation in the NT and both relate to John – Mark 3:17, “sons of thunder” said of James and John, and JN. 12:29. It is found 10 times in Revelation but nowhere else.

Grammatical similarities are also part of the evidence as the structure of the sentences and paragraphs in both John and Revelation point to the same author. Not only the grammar, but the style of writing indicate the same author too. There are lots of other similarities in concepts, wording or syntax, Christ’s titles, descriptions of relationships, etc. which we see as we encounter them. There also are some differences which critical scholars pick up on to attempt to say that John the Apostle did not write Revelation too, but these are not serious enough to dislodge the positive evidence.

Unlike the Gospel of John, where he never names himself, but refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, he does name himself in Revelation 5 times – note (1:1,4,9; 21:2; 22:8). It almost seems when John does name himself here that he is doing so because he is incredulous that he has been counted worthy to have been given these visions. The evidence overwhelmingly supports John the Apostle as the writer of Revelation. ④

Date of the Book

When we examine the date of the book, we do encounter some controversy. Much of this controversy arises from the clash of 2 systems of biblical interpretation – Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism. Covenant Theologians (CT’s) want to date Revelation prior to AD 70 because they believe that Revelation, although written prophetically by John, is historical & not future to us. To them, all the judgments depicted therein occurred in relationship to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70 by the Roman army under General Titus. The underlying reason that CT’s want to interpret Revelation this way is because they believe that the Church has replaced Israel and national Israel being the main player in a yet future Apocalypse poses a real problem for their theology. Therefore, for them, there is no 1,000 year Millennial reign of Christ, despite what we read in Rev. 20, no Rapture of the Church and any descriptions of Israel in Revelation have to do with the Church, even though John calls it Israel.

Dispensationalists on the other hand, have no such axe to grind and are quite content to see Revelation as yet future to us, and are thus free to interpret it literally. It is plainly

obvious to all who read Revelation with an open mind that the scope of the judgments far exceeds anything that happened in Jerusalem anytime in the past, and is in fact, global and even galactic in its' scope. If the events depicted in Revelation occurred in AD 70, we would not be here. It should also be painfully obvious that Jesus did not return to earth at that time in the manner depicted in Rev. 19, and is not yet physically among His people here on earth. A writing date in the mid AD 60's simply does not fit the facts as presented in this book. Scholars operating under a literal hermeneutic put the writing of Revelation at around AD 95.

Irving Kristol made this profound statement that fits this context of understanding a book like Revelation: *"When we lack the will to see things as they really are, there is nothing so mysterious as the obvious."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Here is some of the evidence that supports a writing date of AD 95:

- The differences of the 7 churches as described in chapters 2-3, compared to the conditions of those same churches as portrayed by Paul (Ephesians, Colossians, I & II Timothy), all sent in the AD 60's provide strong evidence for a date of 95 for Revelation. The spiritual deterioration described by John in Revelation would have taken years to develop.
- The timing of John's arrival in Asia is another factor to consider. According to the best historical evidence, John did not arrive in Asia until about AD 65. This did not give him time to replace Paul as the respected leader of the Asian churches and to have been exiled to Patmos prior to Nero's death in AD 68.
- An earthquake destroyed Laodicea in AD 60-61. It had long term effects on that region, and it was under re-construction for years beyond the 60's. The possibility of the existence of a viable city, never mind an apostate church within that city during then 60's is highly unlikely.
- According to historian / Church father Eusebius, John was banished to Patmos (an island penal colony where political agitators were sent) by Emperor Domitian in AD 95, and was released 18 months later under Nerva, so this was, to anyone's knowledge, the only time he spent on Patmos, and he clearly states that this is where he wrote from in Rev. 1:9.

Therefore, the traditionally accepted date of AD 95 remains the best option. By AD 95, John would have been in his 80's. In the Gospels, he was young, perhaps even a teenager and this is 62-63 years later, so he is writing this book as a wisened, experienced and mature believer and Apostle.

The Main Interpretation Methods of Revelation

Preterist

In this view, the one most often espoused by A-Millennial and Post-Millennial theologians, the prophecies of Revelation have already occurred in what is, to us, the ancient past, not many years after the words were written down by John.

They key on verses like Rev. 1:1 , "things which must shortly take place" & 1:3, "for the time is near". They do not allow for the fact that God has a completely different view of time from the one we have and "shortly" for Him could be 1,000's of years.

Thus, John saw the events as future to him, but for us, it has already occurred. Some preterists think that Christ's coming is yet future, while others believe that everything in revelation reached its' fulfillment in AD 70. This view thus sees Revelation as describing conditions in the first century Roman Empire.

The Historicist View

This is said to be the historic Protestant view of Revelation^{iv}, seeing it as a prewritten record of the course of world history from the Apostolic era until the end of the world. Fulfillment is therefore considered to be a progressive thing, and has been unfolding now for about 2,000 years.

The Spiritual, Idealist or Symbolic Approach

This view attempts to find no individual fulfillments of the visions, but takes Revelation to be a dramatic depiction of spiritual realities – ie.) the conflict between Satan & Christ; or the saints & the Antichrist. The fulfilling of the visions is representatively expressed as historical events throughout time, not in 1 time specific fulfillments. It can thus be rendered relevant to any era of Christianity. Only Christ's return is seen as an event that is not historically repetitive.

The Futurist Approach

This approach says that the majority of the prophecies in Revelation have never been fulfilled and await future completion. Futurists interpret the application of everything after chapter 4 to a brief period of time (7 years) before Christ returns. Of all the 4 main views, this approach alone assumes a literal hermeneutic unless the context warrants a deviation from that interpretive plan. ⑥

These are the 4 main ways that people interpret this book. We will be following the 4th view – the Futurist Interpretation – because it follows the text literally and there is therefore no need to spiritualize the text or shift current events into the flow of thought so that they match bible passages, even when it is quite a stretch to try to match them up. For example, in the Historicist view, the fallen star following the 5th trumpet in Rev. 9:1 is said to be Mohamed.^v

The only way we can safely stay in touch with the text and see the book as John meant people to see it is to interpret it literally, as a prophecy of the end times, just before Jesus returns to earth to wrap up history and usher in the Millennial Kingdom, and eternity.

As we compare Scripture to Scripture, we will find that Rev. 4:1 – 19:21 covers a period of 7 years, known as the Tribulation period, or “the Time of Jacob's Trouble” or “The Great Tribulation” (reserved for the final 3 ½ years). In these chapters we will meet the Antichrist, the False Prophet, angels, demons, and more.

More importantly, and especially, we will come face to face with the one being revealed – it is after all, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”. We will revel as believers as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, our own Lord & Saviour, Jesus Christ is revealed to the world finally as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as He brings the earth, the universe and His entire creation under His submission in righteous judgment and in grace.

This is the last book in the canon of Scripture, and a number of memorable contrasts are presented between this book and the first one, Genesis.

- In Genesis, heaven and earth are created
- In Revelation, heaven and earth are consumed

- In Genesis, sin enters along with the curse
- In Revelation, sin and the curse are defeated

- In Genesis, we see the dawn of Satan
- In Revelation, we see the demise and judgment of Satan

- In Genesis, the tree of life is taken away
- In Revelation, the tree of life is regained

- In Genesis, death enters
- In Revelation, death is banned forever

- In Genesis, sorrow begins
- In Revelation, sorrow is banned
- In Genesis, paradise is lost
- In Revelation, paradise is gained

- In Genesis, the Saviour is promised
- In Revelation, the saviour reigns forever

Earlier, I mentioned the prevalence of the number 7 in Revelation. Why is that so? Why 7? The first mention of 7 in the Bible is found in Gen. 2:3-4. Seven means complete, perfect or fullness achieved. The 7's in Revelation are telling us that this is it – the last book, the last scenes of history, perfect judgment, completed justice, etc. Note Rev. 22:19-19. Do not add to it – this is complete. ⁷

Next lesson, we'll begin to look at the text verse by verse.

ⁱ John MacArthur, excerpt from a sermon entitled “Back to the Future Part I”, preached Nov. 1991, accessed at www.gtyresources.org on 3/2/09

ⁱⁱ Robert Thomas; Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary; p. 40; Moody Press; 1992

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Master's Seminary Journal by S.Lewis Johnson Jr. – pg. 42, in “Paul, Israel & God”; Spring 2009 issue; Pg. 42.

^{iv} Steve Gregg, Revelation – Four Views – A Parallel Commentary; Thomas Nelson; 1997; p. 2;

^v Robert Thomas, IBID, pp. 30-31.