

Understanding the Book of Revelation

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Introduction

Revelation is unlike any other New Testament (NT) book. It appears to begin in much the same way but then in chapter 4 a vision with weird yet wonderful images, strange symbolism and complex numerology is related. 'This vivid and often bizarre symbolism has led many contemporary writers into either indefensible literalism or highly imaginative subjectivism'.¹ While some revel in the challenge to explain every vision in detail so as to predict the future, others avoid Revelation all together or just read the first three chapters and then stop.²

Yet it is a book that promises blessing to those who hear and heed the words of prophecy (1:3, 22:7). Presumably the first readers understood this book with all its imagery and were blessed rather than confused.³ The reader of today must approach the book through the eyes of the first readers.⁴ But at the same time it is a book for the Christians of all ages. The promise of blessing remains for those still reading it today- the time has not come- it is still near (1:3).

This book was not readily accepted into the NT canon, at least in the Eastern Church, partly because of the way it was interpreted by Montanists in second century.⁵ Luther was not fond of Revelation and Calvin wrote no commentary on it.⁶

Historical setting.

Author

The early church identified the author with John the apostle. Despite differences in the Greek between John's Gospel and Revelation, this identification is still widely accepted.⁷ John ministered in Ephesus and was probably well known to all the churches to which he wrote. He was on the island of Patmos, probably in exile, when he received this revelation.

Date

Most scholars date Revelation within the reign of the Roman Emperor, Domitian (81-96AD). The churches are called to perseverance, even to the point of death (2:10), indicating persecution was present and continuing.⁸ Such persecution fits best (but not

¹ Mounce p12

² Barnett p3, Goldsworthy p155 - 'either it (Revelation) is almost totally neglected or it is elevated to a prominence shared by no other biblical book'.

³ Morris p1093-'The author could assume his readers would detect his allusions, and therefore felt no need to make explanations'.

⁴ Hendriksen p8-10 - 'what possible good would the.. persecuted Christians of John's day have derived from specific and detailed predictions regarding European conditions which would prevail some two thousand years later'

⁵ Barnett p4, Guthrie 1962 p251. Tenney p16

⁶ Guthrie 1987 p14, Wilcox p23

⁷ Barnett p32, Guthrie 1962 p255

⁸ Antipas was put to death in Pergamum (2:13)

conclusively) within the reign of Domitian who took the title 'lord and god', and enforced emperor worship.⁹

Purpose

Revelation was written to encourage and exhort Christians in the churches to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. The Roman Emperor demanded worship which was due to God alone, putting great pressure upon the churches (chs. 2- 3, 6:10).¹⁰ But these difficulties they were facing 'are part of a sovereign plan that will culminate in their redemption and the vindication of their faith through the punishment of their persecutors'.¹¹ The intention is to 'motivate saints to worship God and reflect his glorious attributes through obedience to his word' (22:9).¹² They are urged to be faithful witnesses and endure with patience (2:3, 13:10, 14:12). This is the way to overcome (12:11).

Some in the church, however, were compromising with the world, following false prophets (Jezebel) and teachings (Nicolaitans). This book was a reminder to them of the coming judgment of God upon idolaters who worship anyone other than God. Let them hear, let them understand - 'he who has ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'.¹³ They must repent.

Literary Genre

Exegetical methods appropriate for other NT books are not necessarily applicable because of the type of writing found in Revelation.¹⁴ The first question to be answered when coming to the book and seeking to understand it is -what genre of literature is this. Moreover 'it is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means'.¹⁵

Revelation is introduced as the revelation (Greek: *apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ (1:1). It is also referred to as a prophecy (1:3, 22:18). We also find the format of a letter, familiar to us from the NT letters. This unique combination of three literary genres makes exegesis difficult but not impossible.¹⁶ All three genres must be taken into account in attempting to interpret the text.

A letter

John wrote to seven named churches in Asia with a typical Pauline greeting 'grace to you and peace' (1:4). He includes an individual note, containing detailed knowledge of these

⁹ Barnett p29-30, Guthrie 1962 p270, Wilcock p22, Suetonius *Domitian 13* p309

¹⁰ Bauckham 1993b p34 'Rome absolutized its power, claiming for itself the ultimate, divine sovereignty over the world'

¹¹ Beale 1999 p311

¹² Beale 1999 p174

¹³ Beale 1999 p177 - 'the hearing formula at the end of each letter anticipates the visionary parables in chs.4-22'

¹⁴ Thomas p38 disagrees. He writes "apocalypse is prophetic in nature as is the rest of the NT.. so a normal grammatical-historical methodology is the natural and necessary interpretive framework'.

¹⁵ Mounce p12

¹⁶ Goldsworthy p160 identifies a fourth genre - 'hymns of praise'. Bauckham 1993b p2 says 'Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia'.

historic churches, as an introduction to the ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ’ he is sending to them. Any interpretation of Revelation must therefore recognize it as a letter written in the first century and account for the interpretation of the original recipients.¹⁷

A prophecy

Revelation is called prophecy (1:3, 22:10). John records his own prophetic commissioning (10:8-11) in a manner similar to that of Ezekiel (Ezek.2:9-3:3). OT prophecy is marked by the ‘thus saith the Lord’ formula, and a call to repentance; similar characteristics are found in 1:8, chs 2-3 and elsewhere (e.g. 13:9-10, 14:13b, 16:15).¹⁸ OT prophecies usually included both historical and eschatological aspects.¹⁹ ‘John not only writes in the tradition of the OT prophets but understands himself to writing at the climax of that tradition... as fulfilled in the victory of Lamb, the Messiah Jesus’.²⁰ Although John never actually quotes the OT he alludes to it in 278 of the 404 verses in the book.²¹ He draws upon the prophetic writings of Daniel and Ezekiel in particular.

An apocalypse.

‘Prophets foretold the future that should arise out of the present, while apocalyptists foretold the future that should break into the present’.²² The latter wrote of a catastrophic intervention of the sovereign God into human history to destroy opposing powers of evil and bring deliverance to the people of God. Apocalypse generally unveiled a heavenly or transcendent reality, often regarding the future, through the agency of angels and using symbolism.

Apocalyptic writings are found in Daniel and other non-canonical books.²³ There is a whole class of Jewish writings called ‘apocalyptic’ which date from 200BC to 100AD.²⁴ While today’s reader must understand that John writes in the apocalyptic tradition, it must also be remembered that he also departs from this tradition. For example, most apocalypses are pseudonymous but John uses his own authoritative name, while acknowledging ultimate authority resides in Jesus Christ (1:1).²⁵

John’s apocalypse is about eschatological judgment and salvation. Taken in a vision to God’s throne room in heaven he learns of the divine purpose- for the future of the world and its people.²⁶ This vision is set against the prevailing world view in which Rome

¹⁷ Goldsworthy p157

¹⁸ But unlike OT prophecy John does not write in a national context.

¹⁹ Guthrie 1962 p295

²⁰ Bauckham 1993b p5

²¹ Thomas p40

²² quoted in Mounce p20

²³ Some regard Ezekiel as the father of apocalypse, a literary genre which arose when Israel had no independent future as a nation.

²⁴ Wilcock p20.

²⁵ Morris p1093

²⁶ Bauckham 1993b p7

dominated and seemed insuperable. It is the task of the modern reader to seek to interpret this apocalyptic writing from the perspective of the first readers.²⁷

Symbolism is a feature of apocalypses that must be accepted in coming to this book. Some symbols can be found in the OT (e.g. ‘throne’ in Ezekiel 1:26 and Daniel 7:9), some may be contemporary and others new.²⁸ Symbolism such as calling Rome the ‘sea beast’ and the ‘harlot’ may have been for reasons of security, but most likely because the subject matter is eschatological.²⁹ Symbols can be very precise yet at the same time are never exhausted. Any interpretation that ignores this symbolism will be a misinterpretation.³⁰ Attempts at a literal reading of 144,000 people (ch. 7) and a 1000 year reign of Jesus (ch. 20) are well known failures at interpretation.³¹

In particular the numbers used throughout the book cannot be taken literally any more than the weird images of dragons, and multi headed sea beasts. For example:

- Seven represents fullness or completeness. So the seven churches represent the whole church in history and space. The seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls, represent the completeness or totality of God's judgment.
- Three and a half is half of seven, so three and a half years (42 months or 1260 days –eg. 11:2, 3, 12:6, 13:5) ‘points to a period in human history which will come to its end unlike God's eternity’.³² It is the same as the ‘little while’ (6:11, 12:12, 17:10) which assures the church that her time of trial is not indefinite, just delayed.³³
- Four is the number of the world as in the ‘four corners of the earth’. The first four judgments in each cycle affect the world (6:8, 8:7-12, 16:2-9).³⁴
- The number twelve and its multiples refer to the redeemed people of God as indicated in the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles in the NT.
- One thousand days represents a long period.

Structure

Revelation, though complex in structure, must be taken as a unit. It must never be thought that some parts refer exclusively to the first century and others parts to exclusively other historical periods. The book was read and understood as a whole by the first readers, and must be done so today.

²⁷ Barnett p36, Goldsworthy p162- warns that if the background information still fails to yield a clear meaning then we must let the ‘clearer texts takes precedence over the more obscure’ and not ‘allow a point of doctrine to be established on an apocalyptic vision’ that is contrary to rest of the NT.

²⁸ Tenney p13

²⁹ Barnett p6

³⁰ Bauckham 1993b p22

³¹ Thomas p37 - holds to a literal 1000 years as being ‘fair and consistent’. ‘To interpret otherwise marks an end to all definite meaning in plain words’.

³² Barnett p7

³³ Bauckham 1993b p158- the logic of delay is that of God's patience and grace. He gives people time to repent.’

³⁴ Bauckham 1993b p66

Many scholars derive a three-fold structural basis from 1:19: things which you have seen; things which are (ch. 2-3); and things which will take place (ch. 4-22).³⁵ However this verse indicates a twofold division, present and future, and is not to be taken as programmatic.³⁶

There are many literary indicators in the text, such as repeated phrases, that are often taken as section markers.³⁷ But there is also a complex pattern of interlinking between sections. The most plausible outline divides the book into either seven or eight sections.³⁸

1:1-3:22 consisting of 1:1-8 prologue, and 1:9-3:22 seven letters
 4:1- 8:1 seven seals including 4:1-5:14 throne room in heaven
 8:2-11:14 seven trumpets
 11:15-14:20 seven signs or conflict with evil
 15:1-16:21 seven bowls
 17:1-19:10 Babylon the harlot
 19:11-21:8 transition from Babylon to the New Jerusalem
 21:9-22:21 New Jerusalem and 22:6-21 epilogue

The next question to arise is how these sections are related to one another. Are they chronological, thematic or both. Different answers to this question have lead to four principal interpretations of Revelation.

Futurist.

This view takes the sections as chronological, and regards all from 4:1 as still future, referring to the end of the Age.³⁹ Some understand the rapture of the church in 4:1 so that all that follows occurs after the church age. The millennium (ch. 20) is a literal future period of Christ's reign on earth. This was known as 'chiliasm' in the early church but nowadays as 'dispensationalism'. The symbols are all taken literally. This view does not take into account the understanding of the first readers.⁴⁰

Preterist.

This contemporary historical view interprets everything exclusively from the standpoint of the first century church. Accordingly all was fulfilled at the fall of Jerusalem (AD70) or the fall of Rome (AD476), so there is no prophetic message for today.⁴¹ But latter parts of the book, the final destruction of evil and eternal reign of God, could not have been understood as fulfilled at that time. In general liberal scholars endorse this view.⁴²

³⁵ Thomas p44

³⁶ Mounce p82- The first 'and' is 'exegetical and introduces two additional clauses which make more specific what John is to write'. See the NIV translation.

³⁷ Tenney p32

³⁸ Beale 1999 p114, Bauckham 1993a p21-22

³⁹ see Barnett p34, Beale 1999 p116, Mounce p42

⁴⁰ Mounce p43 – 'It would be little comfort for a first century believer facing persecution to learn that after seven long church ages (the seven letters) Christ would return and punish the enemy.'

⁴¹ Barnett p33, Guthrie 1962 p295, Mounce p41

⁴² Morris p1094

Historicist.

This view seeks to interpret the book as a 'chart of the whole of history from Christ's first coming to his second and beyond'.⁴³ It is flawed by great subjectivity and lack of agreement in deciding which historical events are being referred to. Some Reformers liked to identify papal Rome with the beast.⁴⁴

Idealist

Also called timeless symbolic, this view sees no reference to specific events but only basic principles on which God acts through history.⁴⁵

While none of these views is entirely satisfactory, each does add something towards our interpretation.

Parallelism or progressive recapitulation views the various sections of the book as parallels rather than chronological.⁴⁶ The pattern of consummative judgment followed by salvation is repeated throughout, not only at the end (20:11-15).⁴⁷ This is not to deny a progressive intensification of the judgments emanating from the throne of God (4:5, 8:5, 11:19,16:18-21). Again the 'it is done' in 16:17 can be compared with 21:6.⁴⁸

The Millennium is somewhat of a touchstone regarding how different people interpret Revelation. This is unfortunate because it is referred to in only one passage (20:1-10) and is not a central theme of the book.⁴⁹ The broad positions taken, which are related to methods of interpretation, are:

- Premillennial - a millennium (literal) will occur after the second coming of Christ.
- Postmillennial- the millennium (symbolic) occurs towards the end of the church age, after which Christ returns.
- Amillennial or 'inaugurated millennial'⁵⁰ - the millennium (symbolic) started at Christ's resurrection and will be concluded at his final coming.

It must be remembered that there is only one 'parousia' or second coming of Christ, and Rev. 20:1-10 must be approached in the same way as the rest of visions as symbolic not literal in nature.⁵¹

Key Symbol- throne

⁴³ Wilcock p23

⁴⁴ Morris p1095- it must also be asked why the historical application is 'confined to Western Europe'.

⁴⁵ Mounce p43

⁴⁶ Barnett p9, Goldsworthy p209,257, Hendriksen p19- 'Each section gives a description of the entire gospel age, from the first to the second coming of Christ', Wilcock p175 says the return of Christ has been described at least once before chapter 20.

⁴⁷ Beale 1999 p121,132- e.g. 18:14-18, especially vs. 18 describes the final judgment and coming of the kingdom of God and Christ; and the fall of Babylon in 14:8, and 18:2, 21 describes the same cataclysmic event.

⁴⁸ Bauckham 1993a p7 finds a parallelism here ('it is done') between the end of the sequence of judgments (6-16) and the end of the descent of New Jerusalem (19:11-21:8).

⁴⁹ Barnett p145, Goldsworthy p163, Wilcock p179

⁵⁰ Beale 1998 p356

⁵¹ Barnett p22, Bauckham 1993b p108, Beale 1998 p357, Goldsworthy p292ff, Wilcock p177,

The throne of God and the Lamb is a symbol that is central to the whole book, occurring 34 times from the first to the last chapter, including 17 times in chapters 4-5.⁵² Chapters 4-5 form the introduction to the remainder of the book's visions and also 'draws up into itself the major themes of 1-3' (see 3:21).⁵³ In fact the throne is a symbol that spans all of Scripture. It is a symbol found in the apocalypse of Daniel 7 and in Ezekiel 1 where it is related to the presence of God within the Temple. The throne symbolizes the universal sovereignty of God and the glorified Christ over heaven and earth (5:13). It is the control centre from which all the judgments originate and salvation flows.⁵⁴ Readers are drawn up with John in this vision to see all that is happening on earth from a heavenly perspective.⁵⁵

Christ on the throne

The great paradox of Revelation is the image of the Lamb on the throne which represents the victory of God.⁵⁶ While the visions tell much about the future cosmic battle or war, they are firmly anchored in the decisive victory of God over evil through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This book therefore is consistent with the rest of the NT in declaring the gospel, albeit in a somewhat unusual form.⁵⁷

In the throne room scene John was told 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has prevailed' (5:5).⁵⁸ The conquest is past (aorist tense of the verb *nikan*). What John sees is 'a Lamb as though it had been slain'. The conqueror is in fact the Lamb of God (John 1:29) slain on the Cross. John is not told what has been conquered, indicating that the conquest is absolute and unlimited (also 3:21). All that is opposed to God's rule has been defeated once and for all by the sacrifice of the Son of God.

Key theme- worship

To worship God, and God alone, or to worship Caesar, that is the question- the question before John's first readers and his readers today.⁵⁹ God alone is worthy of worship (19:10, 22:9). Worship of any created thing or being, including angels or Roman emperors, is idolatry.⁶⁰ Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb sharing the throne with the Almighty, is also worshipped while maintaining exclusive monotheistic worship. In the heavenly throne room all creatures present are fully engaged in worship of the one sitting on the throne (ch. 4-5, 14:7, 19:1-8, 22:9b). The transcendent beauty and majesty of God, and knowledge of God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer, evoke such worship.

Conclusion

⁵² Bauckham 1993b p31, Beale 1999 p172, Guthrie 1987 p116, Kistemaker p185

⁵³ Beale 1999 p151

⁵⁴ Hendriksen p84 'This vision of the universe governed by the throne (Rev. 4 and 5) precedes the symbolic description of the trials through which the Church must pass.'

⁵⁵ Bauckham 1993b p7, Hendriksen p84

⁵⁶ Goldsworthy p169 calls it the central paradox of the gospel

⁵⁷ Barnett p18, Goldsworthy p162

⁵⁸ Barnett p17 says this is perhaps the very centre of Revelation's message, Goldsworthy p169 agrees

⁵⁹ Barnett p13, Bauckham 1993b p35 - 'The issue of true and false worship is fundamental to John's prophetic insight into the power structures of the world his readers lived in'.

⁶⁰ Barnett p163

The reader of the NT gets a shock soon after entering this closing book of the canon of Scripture because of the different literary genre encountered. But it must not be regarded as an appendix, nor must it be elevated to a position of controlling interpretation of the rest of Scripture. The shock, which arises from the bizarre images and array of numbers, will be lessened if it is read in the context of the whole of the Bible. It is in fact the climax of Biblical theology.

This apocalyptic prophecy of Jesus Christ was sent as a letter to be read in historic churches undergoing persecution, and must be understood as such. Any passage must be understood in the context of the whole letter and vision.

The vision of heavenly realities was an exhortation to Christians to remain patient and faithful because they were in fact victorious in the Jesus Christ. The slain Lamb has already won the battle over evil. It was also a warning to 'compromisers' in the church to repent because of the coming judgment. Such exhortation and warning is needed just as much in the church today where compromise with the world because of persecution, false teaching or plain temptation is widespread.

Synopsis

Revelation is a different literary genre to other NT books so care must be taken in exegesis and preaching from the text. To understand the genre of 'apocalypse' we must study similar literature in the OT where comparable symbols are found (e.g. Ezekiel and Daniel). Yet Revelation is also prophecy with reference to the future, the 'parousia' and coming of the new heaven and new earth at the end of the Age. Revelation is also a letter written to churches in Asia in the first century and must be interpreted as such.

The book can be subdivided into seven or eight sections. These sections reveal a parallelism or progressive recapitulation structure, rather than a strict chronological sequence of events. While some events in the vision are still future, the message of the gospel, namely victory through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is central to the entire book. The consequences of that historical victory, symbolized in the slain Lamb upon the throne, are played out in the visions of the book. These feature judgment upon evil and the wicked who compromise in worshipping worldly powers, but salvation for those who persevere in faithful witness and exclusive worship of the triune God.

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