

“THE REVELATION OF JOHN, I.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 1:1-8

Introduction

The Revelation to John of Jesus Christ. There is nothing else like it in all the Bible. Why are we so curious about it and yet so afraid of it? Why do people read it and say they can't understand a word of it but then go back to have another go at it?

There are obvious reasons why the book is neglected, after all it's full of mystery and confusion. We feel very inadequate and ignorant when we read Revelation. We are out of our depth and above our pay grade here. There is a sense that when we read Revelation we feel like we are in a foreign country and they are speaking a foreign language.

Plus there are so many conflicting interpretations, no less than five major schools of interpretation, and if the scholars are conflicted and confused, then what hope is there for us. John Calvin wrote great commentaries on every book of the NT except Revelation. If he wouldn't tackle it why should we?

Some neglect the book because of the mistaken assumption that one has to be a great scholar to figure it out and this book beyond the reach of the average Christian reader. But even the simplest Christian, even a child with the Holy Spirit can gain much hope and help from every part of God's Word. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for training in truth and righteousness. This is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Yet the mystery is part of Revelation's appeal and beauty. We are talking about things here too glorious for normal prose. We are going to see crowns and thrones, gold and silver, exquisite jewels and precious stones. We are going to hear angelic choruses and mighty trumpet blasts. We will tremble as we feel the violent clashes of great armies and giant beasts. The sizes and numbers of everything will stagger our imaginations.

We will encounter an explosion of symbols and graphic imagery to dazzle the eyes, a virtual cornucopia of music, color, texture, along with tastes and smells enough to engage all our senses.

How fitting that the final book of the Bible that tells of final things yet to be revealed should stir and capture our imaginations and carry us into another dimension, well beyond our secular time-space existence.

This isn't the never-never land of Peter Pan and countless other fantasy stories, this is the ever-
ever land of our majestic and sovereign God and His kingdom and realm, the great throne room
in the great celestial city of the new Jerusalem. This is a picture of heavenly glory, of things yet
to come.

No other book in the Bible has a verse like verse three:

Revelation 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are
those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

So why have I neglected this book for so long and why am I taking up the book of Revelation in
the thirtieth year of my ordination to pastoral ministry?

My neglect has been in part due to a sense of inadequacy for such things, and perhaps there is
wisdom in waiting to come to it with the maturity of years and experience and not the whims of
youthful arrogance. And no I am not saying I have it all figured out now. Along the way I will
tell you when I am not sure what something means.

My neglect in part has also been because I have sensed in some people too much concern over
the future and not enough concern over present duty. Some people are so caught up in
prophecy and Israel and predicting the future and trying to figure out what the symbols are
pointing to and who the antichrist is that they neglect what is clearly commanded about life here
and now.

But inadequacy and excesses and abuses shouldn't cause us to neglect any one part of God's
great truth to us and this book is meant in large part to give hope to His children and encourage
them in difficult days.

If Revelation is the ocean then the first three chapters are like wading in up to your waist. But
at chapter four all of a sudden we find our self in over our head and sinking fast. Many sermons
have been preached on the first three chapters, but after that it thins out pretty fast.

And not with good reason, there is depth beyond fathoming out there. We are going to have to
learn how to swim well if we are going to make any head way in these deep waters.

I want to offer a couple of swimming lessons before we jump in to the actually text. There is no
question that the style of apocalyptic writing is very strange to our modern ears. So let me hold
out some hope for us in this daunting undertaking.

The first key to understanding Revelation is to understand what kind of literature it is and right
away we run into a unique problem. In the Bible we have histories, poetry, prophecies, gospels,
and letters. Revelation is three kinds of literature in one. It is a revelation in apocalyptic style,
it's a prophecy and it's an epistle, a letter.

First, The book of Revelation is a revelation. It not a mystery, it is a revealing, an uncovering, an unveiling. Apocalyptic means unveiling in Greek. Revelation means unveiling in Latin. It is meant to be understood, not misunderstood. It is meant by God to reveal truth, not obscure it. He didn't give it to tickle our ears, He gave it to encourage and strengthen our hearts.

This book is the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is one revelation not revelations. It's not the revelation of John, but the revelation to John about Jesus and what Jesus is now doing in our world in order to bring His kingdom to its final consummation, to its promised final glorious conclusion. It's all about Jesus.

God showed John something and then told John to show us.

Second, Revelation is a prophecy, the only prophetic book in the NT. It gives us a glimpse of what is coming, of what remains to be fulfilled of the great promises of God. It's a prophetic word to the church about a coming judgment and salvation. There is a second coming, Jesus is coming again in glory.

There is a difference between prophecy and apocalypse.

Revelation is a prophecy that is written in an apocalyptic style.

Prophecy shows what is to come using earthly imagery, sights and sounds that are familiar to the listener, vultures, salt, half-baked cakes, plumb lines, vineyards, etc.

Apocalypse shows what is to come using heavenly imagery, sights and sounds that are foreign to the listener, dragons, beasts with seven heads and ten horns, a woman clothed with the sun.

Apocalyptic literature is found in Daniel, Ezekiel and parts of Zechariah and Isaiah.

Key characteristics of apocalyptic literature are that it's highly symbolic, using unique and figurative language. It's communicated through unique messengers, visions, angels, trumpets and other supernatural means.

Apocalyptic writing always deals with the future. It always contains a great conflict between good and evil, light and darkness. The evil and darkness will persist until God intervenes and destroys evil.

We must be careful not to think that because it's written the way it is that it's fanciful or fairytale like or unreal. The form and style don't mean it isn't true. Truth can be proclaimed in many various ways, histories, narratives, poetry, song, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic literature. This is the Word of God, the message behind the symbols is true even if there aren't any real seven-headed beasts.

Revelation is a prophecy about final things written in a very symbolic or apocalyptic style.

Third, Revelation is an epistle. It's a letter written by John to seven churches at a specific time in history and for a specific occasion. The occasion was the Roman persecution. The readers understood what John wrote, they got the message. So in order to keep us from going off the wrong track we will need to keep the authors intent and the historical context in mind. We have to keep asking how would a Christian living in Asia Minor at the end of the first century have understood what John wrote.

Some guidance and rules for interpreting and understanding apocalyptic literature.

It can't mean to us what it never meant to them.

They read it with understanding. These words were not strange to their ears, most of the symbols and images and numbers were drawn from the OT. Of the 404 verses of Revelation, 278 have allusions to the OT.

Furthermore symbols are not to be pressed too hard, or made to mean all they possibly could mean.

Those who say the symbol of the eagle represents the United States violate this rule in interpretation. The hail stones are not bombs and the locusts are not helicopters.

Through the centuries books have been written giving explicit detail that the symbols refer to Napoleon or to WWI or Hitler and Mussolini, or to Russia and China.

But what comfort and help would a book be to persecuted Christians in the first century if all the details were predictions concerning life in Europe two thousand years later? (See Hendriksen, p. 14).

Prophecy and visions are not so much about giving us a timeline for tracking history or to be a chronological order of epic events, as they are for warning and encouragement for God's people, to stir up hope and faith and repentance. They are given in times of great persecution and unrest. They give great promises, but no promise of when they will be fulfilled.

Acts 1:7-8 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

A distinction must be made between which symbols are to be interpreted literally and which spiritually or figuratively. There shouldn't be two schools of thought or interpretation, one for literalist and one for spiritualists.

If a literal interpretation creates an impossibility; if it creates a contradiction in Scripture; if it is inconsistent with plain understanding then it must not be pressed.

What is clearly symbolic and figurative must not be taken literally.

Revelation is difficult. It's always difficult to understand unfulfilled prophecies until they are fulfilled. Books with titles like "Revelation Made Easy" lack a proper humility.

The Jews had a hard time understanding the seed of woman who would bruise the head of the serpent or the seed of Abraham that would bless all the nations. All the Messianic prophecies were misunderstood by the Jews before Christ came who was the fulfillment of them all.

In the same way we will often misunderstand or misinterpret the unfulfilled NT prophecies.

So does this mean that such efforts are vain or useless or fruitless? No. The OT prophecies were useful to the people of the OT, they kept faith and hope alive through trying times. In the same manner the Apocalypse, though misunderstood in some details, offers the church in the last times much hope of enemies being defeated and final triumph assured.

We don't have to understand every detail to profit spiritually from reading Revelation. Remember all Scripture is profitable and inexhaustibly deep and rich. There are new blessings in store every time we read it which is why we benefit when we read through the Bible every year.

It can and should be read to our spiritual benefit, for a special blessing awaits those who do. This special blessing is not restricted to those who understand every part, but to those who accept it by faith.

It is given to us to show us what God wants us to know about what is to come to pass.

Application and conclusion.

If you are a Christian this book is for you. It's another of God's gifts to encourage your faith and strengthen your heart and give you courage and boldness in these last days.

Don't get lost in the details, stay focused on the main thing, on the grand story and the great victory that is coming.

We will have ambiguity about how the future will unfold, but there is to be no ambiguity that God is in control and everything will happen in His time and according to His will.

Revelation is not a detailed chronological account of how history is going to unfold. Revelation transcends that kind of concern. Rather it's a message that God is in control of history and of the church and all that happens in them. Even though the church will experience suffering and

death, God will see that it emerges triumphant in Christ. All that happens in Revelation points to a judgment and a victory over enemies.

It's the closest thing to a picture book in the Bible and it should be read to children of all ages especially before they get too sophisticated. Every child knows that there are bad things in the world and that in God's world the bad things will one day be defeated.

Children, read Revelation or ask your parents to read it to you. And there is a good chance you will understand it better than they will. What is the theme of some of the greatest children's stories? Defeat evil and get the prize. Kill the dragon and get the girl.

Kill the dragon and get the girl sums up Revelation, sums up the Bible, sums up all of human history.

Jesus will kill the dragon of Satan and sin and death and He will rescue His bride, the church, from death and destruction and take her to be His forever.

Revelation is the only book of the Bible that says:

Revelation 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

Don't approach Revelation just with vain curiosity about what might happen in the future. Take it to heart. Obey the truth here just as you would what is written in the Gospels or Paul's letters.

Revelation is going to call for a response, it is meant to elicit a reaction, we will not be allowed to remain neutral.

There is a battle raging and people are either for God or against Him.

Revelation leaves us with a challenge similar to the one Joshua gave.

Joshua 24:15 ... choose this day whom you will serve.