

Faith in Time of Crisis: Introduction to the Book of Revelation

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February 1974



Photo date and location unknown

To begin to understand the book of Revelation, we must first come to understand the specific type of literature to which it belongs, that of apocalypticism. This is a form which is mainly Jewish and Christian in origin, but sometimes used in Persian and Mohammedan writings as well. A definition for apocalypticism given in the Interpreter's Bible is as follows:

... the eschatological belief that the power of evil (or Satan), who is now in control of this temporal and hopelessly evil age of human history in which the righteous are afflicted by his demonic and human agents, is soon to be overcome and his evil rule ended by the direct intervention of God, who is the power of good, and who thereupon will create an entirely new, perfect, and eternal age under his immediate control for the everlasting enjoyment of his righteous followers from among the living and the resurrected dead.

This definition gives us some clues as to the components of apocalyptic writings. They are always eschatological or prophetic, dealing with the last things, with death and the end of this present age and with life in the age to come.

Because of this, it should be differentiated from much of the Old Testament prophecy, such as Joel, Amos, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and most of Isaiah. These books deal more with this life and this age of human history, rather than with the next life and the age to come. Therefore, they would not qualify as apocalyptic. Likewise, most passages dealing with the "kingdom of God," as taught by the Pharisees, John the Baptist, and Jesus, do not come under apocalyptic literature since they too deal more with this age, not an entirely new age to be created by God.

Two opposing powers

Another characteristic of apocalyptic writings is that they are always dualistic. This is not the dualism of Gnosticism, however—a dualism of spirit and matter, or of soul and flesh. It is rather a dualism of two opposing, supernatural powers, both personal and cosmic. This dualistic concept apparently originated in Persian writings. In these early sources, the dualism is very marked. The battle rages between Ahriman, the evil god, and Ormazd, the good one. They are nearly equal to one another in power, comparable to the darkness and the light.

In Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, we see a slight difference. Evil is represented by Satan, called by any number of different names. He is in direct opposition to the power of righteousness, God. In this case, however, the power is not equally distributed. Rather, it is clear that God is the superior being.

His evil opponent is merely being allowed to rule for a limited period of time. The Interpreter's Bible goes on to say, "This dualism is extended so that the supernatural and human followers of Satan and God are arranged in opposing camps. For Satan has his angels, demons, and human agents who do his will, afflicting and persecuting the righteous; while God has His angels, and at times a Messiah, together with those who are His devoted worshippers and followers."

Because of the belief in two distinct and opposing powers, the necessity for two separate ages also arose. The present age, under the control of Satan, is of necessity evil, temporary, limited, and irredeemable in character. In contrast, the age to come, under God's own direction, will be perfectly righteous, timeless and eternal. Although this present age was initially good, as described in stories of the Garden of Eden, because of the sin of Adam and Eve, God found it necessary to abandon this age to Satan and his followers. Under Satan's rule, this age has become progressively more and more evil and corrupt. At the point at which the world can become no worse, when it has reached the ultimate evil and corruption, the apocalypse or revelation is given.

Not only is there a concept of "two ages," but also that of "two worlds," the present world and the world to come. In part, in the Greek, there is one word which may be translated as either "age" or "world" and sometimes as both. The present world consists of the visible cosmos (the earth and the skies) and the underworld. It was originally good, because it was the creation of God. However, under Satan's rule, it has become evil and must either be entirely replaced with a perfect world or the New Jerusalem, or else must be purged and remade so that it becomes suitable for the new age.

The plight of the righteous

Apocalypticism attempts to give not only an explanation for evil and suffering, but also to propose a rather dramatic solution. God has temporarily abdicated and has left this world to Satan and his evil agents. The righteous are oppressed, persecuted, and even martyred by the unrighteous. Of course, these unrighteous powers vary. In Christian literature, the Gentiles are the unrighteous forces or the heathens. In Mohammedan works, the evil powers are, of course, the Christian Crusaders.

One quickly realizes that the overpowering forces of evil are arrayed against the righteous and that there is very little that the righteous can do to improve their situation. Their only hope lies in remaining completely loyal and faithful to God. This righteousness involves not only moralistic or ethical teachings, but also a complete loyalty to the cultic and ritualistic requirements of religion. In Daniel, this entailed strict adherence to the law of the Torah. In Revelation, however, the requirement is perfect loyalty to God and Christ.

This loyalty was to be demonstrated by refusal to worship the emperor or the state in any manner, even if it meant death. The teachings here are not highly ethical or moralistic. They are very direct and simple, even compared with the teachings of Jesus.

Other elements in apocalypticism

The new age is always marked by the restoration of this world to its original purity or the replacement of it with God's perfect "new world." God will no longer be above this world, but will be present in it, dwelling forever with His faithful followers in peace and joy. The fate of the unrighteous varies, but in most apocalyptic writings, they are sentenced to eternal punishment for their sins.

One final feature of apocalypticism is its determinism, or the idea of predestination. This belief implied that all that has happened in history has happened because God has willed it, in accordance with His time schedule. In this plan is the salvation of the chosen or of the "righteous," who are usually the author and his advocates. There are sometimes secondary elements which are added to an apocalyptic work. One of these is a vision of things to come. This is often just a literary device to give the writing impressiveness. At other times, when the writing was truly based on a vision, great care was taken to discover or determine whether the source was really divine.

Another detail sometimes added was pseudonymity. This was the practice of giving the name of a well-known figure to a literary work to gain prestige or the basis of the name. Also, there was the concept of the Messiah, obviously present in Christian apocalypticism. It also sometimes appeared in Jewish writings, and is definitely secondary since it is so easily omitted in many writings. Other secondary characteristics are angelology and demonology, elaborate imagery numerology, astrology, and often a judgment scene.

Purpose of Revelation

The author of Revelation expected that his book would be read aloud to the seven churches addressed, and possibly other churches as well. He also desired to have it accepted as a book of prophecy, on a level with the prophetic books of the Old Testament.

There is little doubt that when it was first written and read to the churches, they had little difficulty in understanding and appreciating the message. However, when the time and situation which had inspired its writing had passed, then its acceptance as scripture came into question. After many disputes, it was accepted into the New Testament canon, but difficulties still arose. It was no longer an historical record, but rather a prophecy of what was yet to come.

It is obvious to most scholars that Revelation was written at a time when the Christians of Asia Minor were greatly persecuted for their refusal to worship the Roman deities. The Jews alone had been granted exemption from this worship, because of their ancient customs and ethnic religion. At first, the Christians were included in this exemption. However, by the end of the first century Christianity was recognized as a separate religion, distinct from Judaism, and in fact, primarily non-Jewish. Therefore, their refusal to participate in this emperor worship had resulted in repression, persecution, and even death. A number of Christians, rather than facing the consequences of standing firm, became apostate, leaving the Christian Church.

It was in answer to this situation that John wrote Revelation. He distinguished between the two opposing sides: between the worship of God and the worship of Caesar or between devotion to God and loyalty to the state. He wrote to make even death look so attractive and rewarding that Christians would accept any punishment rather than be disloyal to God and Christ.

Date

In determining the date of Revelation, then, the date of this persecution must be established. Scholars have suggested various dates from early in the reign of Nero (54 A.D.) to the reign of Trajan (98-117 A.D.). By the process of elimination, the date of 81-96 A.D. is given as the date for the writing of Revelation, during the reign of the emperor Domitian. Domitian, for both personal and political reasons, was very concerned with the establishment of the imperial cult. He is historically recorded as having an arrogant personality, even to the point of megalomania.

He faced great opposition from both the Roman aristocrats and the Stoic philosophers, both of which were very influential groups of people. In order to maintain his position, then, Domitian had to be very zealous in stressing his claims to divinity. Accepting that there is valid evidence for the Domitian persecutions, we arrive at a date shortly after late 93 A.D. or early 94 A.D. This would also correlate enough with history to allow for Revelation's apparent references to or acquaintance with Paul's letters to the churches.

Who wrote Revelation?

The next question concerns the authorship of Revelation. One of the original suggestions, as early as Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century, was that John the Apostle was the author of Revelation. This belief is still held today by many conservative Christians. However, early in the second and third centuries this origin was questioned. Revelation was not being widely accepted as apostolic. Internally, even, its evidence did not support apostolic authorship.

First of all, the author, John never calls himself an apostle and never claims any apostolic authority. In verse 21: 14, he seems to imply the end of the apostolic age and that he himself is not an apostle. In verse 18-20, he speaks very objectively of the apostles, as if he were not one of this select company. There is no indication that John had ever seen Jesus, or heard him, or followed him. His language and implications are more that he had never known Jesus in the flesh.

The next logical question, then, is whether or not Revelation was written by someone else in the name of the apostle? This does not appear too probable, since, as we have just shown, the author makes no attempt to prove his apostleship. He claims to be neither one of the 12 nor an earthly companion of Jesus.

So, if it is not pseudonymous, then the author's name must really be John. But which John? John was certainly a common name. All we know is that he was connected with Christianity in Asia Minor, possibly with the church at Ephesus. He also was a known confessor, one who had openly, without regard for the consequences, testified to his faith before the Roman authorities. This had resulted in his being in exile on the island of Patmos. At the same time, this act had resulted in a greater prestige and authority for his work.

Written in the imagery of the Time

Another significant feature of Revelation is the somewhat neglected fact that John used a large number of references to astrology. Astral speculation was widespread among those in the Mediterranean world, among both the learned and the more ignorant. The Emperor Domitian himself was a student of this pseudo-science. John apparently introduced those astral concepts and symbols quite knowingly and

deliberately. Revelation is not at all Hellenistic. Most of its imagery is Jewish (similar to I Enoch, II Esdras, II Baruch, and the Apocalypse of Abraham as well as the prophetic books of Isaiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel). A little Christology transforms it into a Christian document.

John was an exceedingly practical person. He was dealing with a very critical issue, and wanted his readers to make no concessions in their devotion to God alone. He wanted to prevent believers from leaving Christianity because of the persecutions threatening them. It is, therefore, rather conclusive that, although his message had to be somewhat symbolic to prevent him from arousing the Romans, most definitely he did not want to hide his message, but wanted it clearly understood by his readers. The only explanation is that his readers in Asia Minor were very well acquainted with the apocalyptic ideas, concepts, symbols, and imagery so characteristic of Revelation.

They easily understood and appreciated what John wrote. If modern readers of Revelation had the same background of information as the original readers, there would be little difficulty in interpreting it, and no need, perhaps, for a commentary. What, then, is the value of Revelation? For its own time and readers, it had great value in enabling them to withstand the persecution under the Roman Empire. It supplied them with the support they needed to remain loyal and faithful to the Christian religion. Today, it is a valuable monument to all people of faith in time of crisis. It is a testimony to their courage and steadfastness, as pioneers of Christianity in conflict with the forces of paganism and idolatry.

The literary structure of Revelation is somewhat involved, the main body of the letter being divided into groups of sevens: seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpet woes, seven bowls. If we were to compare Revelation with other apocalypses available, we would discover that there is none which shows as careful a literary structure. It is complex, yet unified, in composition. The many sources used are carefully woven together to present a unified whole. This whole clearly reveals John's style, thought, and purpose—from the beginning to the end. To conclude, we will deal with a brief summary of the contents of the book of Revelation.

Brief summary of contents

Following a brief introductory assertion that it is indeed divine in origin, the Revelation of John contains a general letter to the persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. John then identified himself as one who was living in exile for his own loyalty to God and Christ.

In the next two chapters, John addressed each of the seven churches individually. To each one he sends exhortations to remain strong in their faith, even in the face of great danger. He also addressed to each one a particular reward which was awaiting them if they did persevere. To Ephesus he offered "to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God"; to Smyrna that they would not be hurt by the second death; to Pergamum, "the hidden manna, and a white stone, with a new name which no one knows except him who receives it"; to Sardis "to be clad in white garments" and not to have their names blotted out of the book of life; to Philadelphia, to be made a "pillar in the temple of God"; and to Laodicea to "sit with Christ" as he rules with God. Each church is promised that there will be a blessing and glorious immortality for those who remain loyal to God, even if they must become martyrs.

Chapter four is a picture of God as the almighty and majestic sovereign who is temporarily removed from the affairs of man which seem to be under the control of Satan. It reminds its readers that God is mighty and powerful and that He will ultimately be victorious over the forces of evil and will end Satan's rule. Then John painted another glorious picture. This time it is of Christ, the Lamb, God's instrument in bringing Satan's rule open the seals on the book of doom and release the series of disasters which will punish the wicked.

As the seals are broken, plagues are released upon the earth consisting of wars, famine, and pestilence. The martyrs cry out to God to avenge them, but they are told to wait. With the opening of the sixth seal, a series of cosmic phenomena are released—an earthquake, the sun is darkened, the moon becomes like blood, stars fall from heaven; the sky disappears; and every mountain and island is moved. Then there are two interludes in which the martyrs are sealed and appear before the throne of God, being granted rewards for their faith and service to God.

After the seventh seal is opened, there is a period of relative quiet and calm for a period of time. Then, the seven trumpet woes are revealed. This involves another series of plagues. Four of these plagues are revealed, and then there is an interlude which describes an eagle pronouncing a three-fold warning concerning those three plagues still to fall. The next two involve locusts and invading horsemen.

And then, again, there are two interludes: one in which John eats the scroll of doom, and one in which he envisions two "heavenly witnesses, possible Moses and Elijah. The final trumpet announces that God is preparing to assume power over the world, to institute His kingdom, and to begin His eternal reign with Christ.

The 12th chapter opens with another series of visions, this time involving the dragon's kingdom. These visions describe the birth of the Messiah, Michael's triumph over the dragon, the dragon pursuing those who would bear testimony to Jesus and keep the commandments of God, a beast rising out of the sea, ruling for a short while, and another beast rising from the earth to deceive mankind.

In Chapter 14 there is quite a different series of visions, a series which contrasts the worshippers of the beast and the worshippers of the Lamb. Next is the fourth series of plagues, followed by seven visions of the fall of Babylon (sometimes interpreted as Rome) and the rejoicing at the glory which is God's and the marriage supper of the Lamb which is to take place.

There is one final series of visions which describes the defeat of Satan and the end of his age of evil. This is accomplished in struggles between the beasts and their followers and Christ, coming on a white horse, with his army of martyrs. Satan is bound for 1000 years, during which time Christ reigns with the martyrs. At the end of this thousand years, Satan is released for a short time and the final battle with evil takes place against Gog and Magog. At this point, Satan himself, the source of all the evil which occurred in this age, is cast down into the like of fire.

This marks the beginning of God's new, perfect age. Heaven and earth disappear, the second resurrection takes place and the final judgment; and the new heaven and the new earth appear. Finally the New Jerusalem is described in all its glory. Within the city is found the new Garden of Eden. Through the garden flows the river of life with the tree of life on both sides of the river.

The conclusion of the book is an epilogue which reviews many of the points of Revelation. It is a final exhortation and the final promise of blessing:

Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. (19:9)

Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years. (20:6)