

The Apocalypse

(A Perspective on the Book of Revelation)

An Open Book

Most Christians find the book confusing! The first word in the book is *apokalupsis* meaning "revelation" (literally "to take the veil away"). In other words the book is meant to enlighten and inform us, not to confound us. All those reading and taking to heart what is written are promised a particular blessing. (1:3)

Why then do we find the book so puzzling? There are, I believe, three major reasons for this. In the first place, nineteen hundred years have elapsed since the book was first written. The original readers would no doubt have been in a better position to grasp its meaning and appreciate its relevance. Secondly, we are unfamiliar with the particular literary genre of the book. "Apocalyptic" literature portrays reality in a "coded" way through visions and symbolic numbers (e.g. Zechariah and Daniel). This genre is less direct than other prophetic literature, but is able to convey events in graphic detail. Thirdly, there have been some weird and wonderful interpretations of the book. Since the mid-nineteenth century some expositors have adopted a strongly dispensational position. They have taught that the entire book, from chapter four onwards, refers to a seven-year period just prior to the Second Coming, and has nothing to do with the church as such. This view has been popularised in some rather sensational books. It contends that the church is "raptured" before "the great tribulation" and that the rest of the book gives us a description of events that will take place during this period when the Antichrist attempts to destroy a remnant of Jewish and Gentile believers.

This particular interpretation repeatedly begs the question: certain assumptions are made and treated as established facts. Events are then fitted into the resultant paradigm. It completely misunderstands the apocalyptic genre and it does an injustice to the unity and comprehensiveness of God's unfolding plan and the place he has assigned the church in it. In a study of this nature we cannot possibly examine all the views in detail. Suffice it to say that there would have been no point in writing to Christians at the end of the first century and giving them details about events that would only occur in the twenty-first (or thirty-first) century. (This is especially true since, according to this interpretation, neither they nor we will participate in these events. We will already have been resurrected or raptured).

The Background

The churches to which the book was originally addressed lived in the Roman province of Asia. They had placed their faith in the Lord Jesus, believing him to be the Messiah of Israel and the hope of the world. For over fifty years the persecution of Christians was sporadic. Even the horrors of Nero's persecution were not as a result of a systematic campaign. But there was an ominous development. The emperor, Domitian (81-96), was encouraging the cult of emperor worship and the cities of Asia Minor were enthusiastically supporting it. This placed Christians in an invidious position.

He was insecure and paranoid about subversion in the empire. One of the ways he attempted to secure his reign was to insist that subjects demonstrate their loyalty by burning a pinch of incense on an altar erected for the purpose and declare "Caesar is Lord." In a polytheistic society, this did not pose a problem to the general populace. Once they had fulfilled this (religio-political) duty, they were free to worship any god they liked. It did pose a problem for Jews and so they were exempted from the practice. Initially Christianity was regarded by the state as a sect of Judaism, so Christians were also exempt. But by the end of the first century it had become clear that Christianity was a separate religion. Now Christians were required to make that declaration.

They couldn't do it. That's because Domitian presented himself as divine, even adopting the title "Lord and God," and requiring veneration that bordered on worship. Christians could not construe this obeisance as a political duty. When they said, "Jesus is Lord," they were affirming his sovereignty over the entire world. They remained a small minority and were experiencing persecution. It was easy for them to wonder whether they had been mistaken. Was God really in control of history? The Lordship of Jesus was certainly not recognised by their compatriots. What's more, for them there could be only one Lord (I Cor. 8:6). When they refused to say, "Caesar is Lord," they were regarded as disloyal or even subversive. They found themselves in a hostile and dangerous environment. It was easy for them to believe that they were on the losing side. The power and might of the Roman Empire was extremely intimidating. It was into this situation that the book of Revelation was written.

Authorship

The author of the book describes himself as John. Who exactly was he? Early Christian tradition is unanimous in ascribing the book to the apostle John. It is believed, on good grounds, that John spent his latter years in Ephesus, where he exercised a role of leadership among the churches. He was exiled to Patmos,

presumably because he refused to participate in the imperial cult. There he received the Revelation which he sent to seven churches in the religiously inhospitable region.

Later, in the eastern part of the church, John's authorship was contested and some ascribed the book to another John (sometimes referred to as John, the Elder). Many modern scholars accept that the John who wrote the book was not actually John, the apostle, but this other John who exercised a role of leadership in the churches in the province of Asia. The main reason for this view is that both the Greek and the thought of the Revelation are very different from the Greek of John's Gospel and the three letters of John. Since there could be several explanations for the difference in style I think we have to respect early Christian tradition, especially since one of the strong advocates of the Apostle John's authorship was Irenaeus, who knew Polycarp (the Bishop of Smyrna) well, who in turn was a disciple of John. Does it really matter? No.

"Things are not as they seem"

This is the title Darrell Johnson gave to an excellent series he preached on the book. God's people have always found it difficult to explain the presence of evil. Psalmists and prophets wrestled with the fact that injustice was rampant in God's world and often seemed to have the upper hand. (Ps. 73:1-14; Hab. 1:1-4, 12, 13) If God is both sovereign and just, why are there calamities in the natural realm and why does evil prosper? Even if we explain its existence in terms of Satan's rebellion and mankind's fall, why does the Almighty not put an end to evil once and for all? Is there a relationship between events on earth and the cosmic forces? Does Satan inspire people like Nero and Domitian, Hitler and Stalin? Are the forces of darkness orchestrating events in the Middle East? Does he manipulate movements as well as megalomaniacs? Is there "an axis of evil" in world politics today? Are anti-Christian trends in Canada part of a conspiracy to challenge God's authority? Will there be a gradual improvement in the world until the kingdom of God is ushered in or will good and evil continue to exist side by side until Jesus returns? What is the *meaning* of history and where is it heading? These are not just academic questions; they are questions that impact on us practically. When we are caught in the crossfire, when persecution rages, and when the forces of darkness seem to be prevailing, we need orientation and direction.

Well, as Darrell Johnson suggests, "things are not (only) as they seem." And Revelation lifts the veil and gives us a perspective on reality that impacts our

worldview and gives us hope. Eugene Petersen makes the valid point that there are no new teachings in Revelation. The book takes up the threads in previous books and, in a graphic way gives us a perspective not only on where things are going but also on how they are in the present. We get a vision of God's majesty and of the role of the Lamb of God in world history. Words and phrases like "Look," "throne," "Lamb" and "Do not fear," feature prominently. Symbols and numbers play an important role. The *essential* message is very, very, very clear, and that's where all expositors should start. We must not impose our own views of eschatology (teaching about the last things) on the book and devalue it into a celestial time chart.

Next week I shall provide some guidelines on interpreting "apocalyptic literature." Every part of Scripture has to be understood and read in terms of the genre (kind of literature) in which it comes to us. One of the reasons that there are "weird and not-so-wonderful" ideas about Revelation is that this most basic rule is ignored.

The Present Age

When we read any part of Scripture, we have to relate it to the big picture revealed in God's Word as a whole. Behind the human authors stands the divine Author. Since we believe in the unity of Scripture we work from the major themes of the Bible to the particular passages.

The Establishment of the Kingdom of God

When John announced the coming of the Messiah, he related his coming to the dawning of the kingdom of God - "Repent for the kingdom of God is near." (Mt 3:2) The Lord's ministry commenced with the same announcement. (Mt 4:17) He said that the kingdom of God had come. (Mt 12:28) Yet there is another sense in which the kingdom has not yet come. (Lk 11:2; Acts 14:22; II Tim 4:1) And there is a sense in which the kingdom of God is here. (Acts 8:12; 20:25; Rom 14:17; Col 1:13; 4:11) So, the kingdom **has come and it is here and it is still to come**. It is not "in abeyance," as some have said. This approach is based upon a selective appeal to some verses and an ignoring of others.

The past, present and future dimensions of the kingdom are portrayed in some of the Lord's parables. In the parable of the Weeds, the Sower (the Son of Man) sows seed (the sons of the kingdom) in a field (the world). An enemy (the Devil) sows weeds (his children) in the same field. Only at the harvest (the end of the age) are the wheat and the weeds separated. (Mt 13:36-43) The kingdom is likened to a mustard seed that seems so small but ultimately grows into a

tree. (Mt 13:31, 32) Similarly, the kingdom experiences growth out of all proportion to its inauspicious beginning. So it is with yeast. A small amount is mixed into a large quantity of flour and exerts an important influence on the whole loaf. (Mt 13:33) This reminds one of Daniel's picture of a rock cut out of the mountain that destroyed Nebuchadnezzar's impressive statue and then became "a huge mountain and filled the whole earth". Daniel explained: "In the time of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed." (Dan 2:35-44)

It is important that a book like Revelation be understood against this clear background. The dispensational approach tends to make the church a "Plan B", to which God resorted when "the kingdom" was rejected by the Jews. By ingenious and somewhat contrived reckoning, it is argued that "the prophetic clock stopped ticking" at that point (between Daniel's 69th and 70th week) and will only recommence once the church has been raptured. Not only does this ignore the consistent teaching of the New Testament about the kingdom of God, but it also fragments God's plan of salvation. God has *one* purpose in history and this involves the kingdom, which came in Jesus, which is here now and which will be established as a universal kingdom in the future. (I Cor 15:24, 25) If Old Testament prophecy means anything (not to mention clear statements in the apostolic preaching), the rejection of the Lord was foreseen and was the way in which he would create for him a people from all nations. (Acts 2:23; Eph 2:14-22; 3:4-11; I Pet. 2:9-11)

The Last Days

There is considerable confusion about the term, "the last days." Many assume that this term refers to a short period just prior to the return of Jesus. But that is not how the phrase is used in the New Testament. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy in the following terms, "In *the last days*, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit...'" and he related these words to events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:17) Paul explained the waywardness of some of Timothy's contemporaries by pointing out that "the Spirit clearly says that *in later times* some will abandon the faith." (I Tim. 4:1) The writer to the Hebrews distinguished between the time of preparation ("the past") and the time since God has spoken to us in his Son - "*in these last days*". (Heb. 1:1, 2) John described his time as "*the last hour*." (I Jn. 2:18) Peter reminded his readers that he had warned them "that *in the last days* scoffers (would) come" asking, "Where is the coming he promised?" He wanted them to understand that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day." (II Pet.3:8) It is clear that, from the perspective of God's redemptive plan, the

term "the last days" refers to **the entire period from the First to the Second Coming of Christ.**

Seeing the Big Picture

Let's take a wide-angle lens and attempt to see the main features of the book before we concern ourselves with detail. To do so we need to note the most striking teachings of the book. In an inductive approach to the study of Scripture we work from what is crystal clear to what is not so evident. Instead of getting bogged down in detail we first ascertain what can be said with certainty. The broad outlines thus derived then guide us as we attempt to understand the more obscure passages. *The good news is that the really important teachings are not difficult to understand; they are not ambiguous.* It should prove helpful to establish some basic guidelines.

- ***The Book of Revelation is rooted in the Bible and draws the strands of Scripture together into a fitting conclusion. It should therefore be interpreted in harmony with the teachings of the entire Bible.*** There are so many allusions and references to both Old and New Testament passages that it would be the height of folly to ignore the intentional association.
- ***The book was written, in the first place, to Christians living in Asia Minor at the end of the first century A. D.*** It is rooted in the events and circumstances of that time. Although its scope is the entire church age, its message should be understood in the light of conditions that prevailed at the time it was written.
- ***In the book we are presented with a series of moving pictures. The details of each of these pictures should be interpreted in harmony with the central thought of the book.*** We need first to survey the total vista and to grasp the dominant idea. Interpreters do not have *carte blanche* to impose meanings on symbols. The purpose and message of the book should determine the meaning of the symbols. Any interpreter, who interprets some of the symbols literally and others figuratively, owes us an explanation for the differentiation.
- ***The book commences with a vision of the risen and exalted Christ and concludes with his return to earth in power and glory.*** At the beginning John hears "a loud voice like a trumpet" which causes him to turn around. As he does so he sees in vision "someone like a son of man"

and hears him say, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (1:10, 12, 17, 18) At the end he again hears a loud voice saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (21:3, 4)

- ***Between these awe-inspiring scenes at the beginning and end of the book, we witness a huge cosmic conflict.*** As our attention moves between heaven and earth we see benevolent and diabolical forces locked in an all-out battle. The terrifying events occurring upon the earth are portrayed not as isolated and inexplicable happenings but as part of the over-all strategy. Instead of regarding the symbols as a coded list of consecutive events, we should think in terms of a number of episodes.

Some interpreters attempt to fit the key occurrences of history (or a part of it) into the book, regarding the symbols as a depiction of what has happened or has yet to happen. So, for example, some have seen in the symbols the rise of Islam and others the advent of the papacy. General Allenby's liberation of Jerusalem, Mussolini, and the European Common Market (among other things) have all featured. While the so-called ***Historicists*** regard the book as a symbolic description of key events between the first and second comings of Christ, most ***Futurists*** believe that the symbols relate to events that will only take place after "the rapture." Needless to say, there is huge scope for fanciful interpretation as prophetic buffs attempt to relate past, present and future events to the symbols used in the book. But this approach misses the whole point. The book of Revelation does not attempt to present a *summary* of history (or of a part of it). What it does is to give us *God's perspective* on the events of time. It therefore deals with the questions of the *meaning* and *direction* of human history.

When we read the book itself, and especially when we attempt to do so at one sitting, we are struck by the fact that it seems to contain some "constructive repetition." Instead of a chronological sequence, we encounter a number of parallel sections, each giving us a portrayal of the period between the first and second comings of Christ. So, for example, the episode in chapters 12 to 14 follows *logically* but not necessarily

chronologically upon the one described in chapters 8 to 11. We are now in a position to observe, from a positive point of view, how the book is constructed.

- ***In Revelation there are seven sections. They are parallel and each (with the possible exception of the last) spans the entire New Testament period, from the First to the Second Coming of Christ.*** Each of these sections gives us an important perspective on the entire period from the first to the second comings of Christ. Each focuses upon an important aspect of the struggle involved in the establishment of the kingdom of God. The first section specifically addresses seven churches in existence at the time of writing. While the churches do not represent consecutive periods of church history (as some have argued), the exhortations, warnings and promises apply to churches and to Christians throughout the entire church age.

- ***The sections are arranged in an ascending, climactic order. While they are parallel, there is also progress and development.*** William Hendriksen (to whom I am indebted for some of these insights) describes this as “progressive parallelism.” For example, the final judgement is first *announced*, then *introduced*, and finally *described* (6:12-17; 14:14-20; 20:11-15). Similarly, the new heaven and earth are described more fully in the final section than in the previous ones.