

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

“Cracking the Code”

(Understanding Apocalyptic Literature)

When we read a book, a poem or a newspaper report, we subconsciously take into account the kind of literature we are reading. Genre (the kind or style of writing) is important and confusion in this area can lead to misinterpretation. For example, “steel sinks” would not mean the same in the classified ads as it would in a column reporting on the work of scientists. When it comes to the Bible, clearly there are different genres. We do not read Ecclesiastes the same way as we read Exodus. Take Proverbs 9:17, “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious.” That couldn’t be the eleventh commandment. If it were, it would contradict the eighth commandment, “You shall not steal.”

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is part of a genre referred to as apocalyptic literature. (The first word of the book is “Apocalypse”). This kind of literature had its heyday from about 200 BC to AD 200. Certain books in the Old Testament contain apocalyptic material (e.g. Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah). It is important that we understand the basic characteristics of apocalyptic literature so as not to make a “genre mistake.” D. Brent Sandy and Martin G. Abegg stress that “any portion of Scripture divorced from its primary culture and the intent of the author is a homeless child wandering the streets, vulnerable to violent abuses.” I am indebted to them for many of these observations.

What exactly is Apocalyptic Literature?

It is a specialized kind of prophecy. “The taproot of apocalyptic is the Old Testament prophetic literature especially as it is found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and parts of Isaiah” (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart). Like prophetic literature, it is concerned with coming judgment and salvation. But, while prophecy tends to focus on God’s activity within history, apocalyptic looks forward to a time when God will bring a radical end to history in which good triumphs and evil is judged and eliminated.

Prophetic works are usually written records of prophetic utterances, but apocalyptic works are literary works from the beginning. Usually their message is conveyed in visions and dreams. The visions are clearly symbolic and the language used is often cryptic (it has hidden meanings). Most of the images of apocalyptic are symbolic. For example, bizarre beasts, a woman clothed with the sun, and locusts with scorpion’s tails portray reality and are obviously not to be understood literally. We should not think that the prophet was being given a “sound and light show” of a modern warfare and describing this in terms familiar to him. Most of the numbers used are also symbolic. (Think of the role played by “sevens” in the Revelation).

Why Did God Use this Genre?

Why did God choose to give us portions of his word in this particular genre? I must assume that part of the reason is that it was best suited to convey the important realities associated with the consummation of the age. Apocalyptic addresses a crisis of faith. If God is in ultimate control, why does evil seem to be triumphant? Apocalyptic takes us on “a roller-coaster ride through the heavens into the future.” (Sandy and Abegg) Ultimately God intervenes, righteousness triumphs and harmony is established.

The effect of the language is dramatic. It reminds the faithful of God's greatness and his supremacy. It is comforting and inspires fresh resolve to live pure, God-glorifying lives and remain faithful, whatever the consequences.

How Should We Interpret Apocalyptic Literature?

Always remember that the meaning of any passage of Scripture hinges on what it meant when it was written. Only when we have ascertained what it meant, can we talk of what it means. And it cannot mean something different today than it first meant. We can apply it to ourselves in our situation, but it does not undergo a change of meaning in the process. The present significance of the text always grows out of what it meant originally.

- ◆ We must study biblical apocalyptic *in the light of the intent and approach of the apocalyptic literature of the time*. Remember the context of crisis that gave rise to this kind of literature.
- ◆ Remember that the purpose of apocalyptic was *not to give us a detailed roadmap of future events*. It is not intended to be “a chronological account of the future but a literary shock treatment of bold and graphic images ... to give us hope that God will win a resounding victory over all evil.” (Sandy and Abegg)
- ◆ *Apocalyptic will, of course, be full of metaphorical language*. Expect to find metaphor, hyperbole and irony. Apocalyptic is intentionally vivid. The compelling images are intended to draw readers into the story.
- ◆ Remember that *the original readers would have found the images easier to understand than we do*. This does not mean that we cannot understand them but that we need to follow the normal interpretive procedure of reading the text with the situation of the original readers in mind.
- ◆ *We should not attempt to identify the significance of every detail in apocalyptic*. Not every detail is meant to give us precise information about a particular world order. This means that we should:
- ◆ *Try to understand the main point of the text and only then proceed to the details*. Apocalyptic is impressionistic, like an abstract painting. If you stand too close to it, trying to grasp every detail, you are likely to fail to grasp what the artist intended to present. Some of the details may simply be for dramatic effect. The details need not be seen as allegorical in the sense that each represents a corresponding reality.
- ◆ It is always healthy to *confine dogmatism (if dogmatism can ever be healthy) to those things which are clear and certain* and to be more tentative about the details, especially when these make little or no practical difference.
- ◆ *It is best to keep all options open as to exactly how apocalyptic predictions will be fulfilled*. A person living in 50 BC and attempting to understand all the prophetic passages relating to the coming of Jesus would not have been able to write one of the Gospels. Once the Lord came and revealed himself, it was possible for Matthew to explain that an event in the life of Jesus occurred that the words of a particular prophet

might be fulfilled. The same applies here. We are in for some surprises. And when these occur, we shall not say: “The prophet got it wrong.” We shall say, “Ah, now we see what it meant and it’s even more wonderful than we imagined.”

- ◆ *Enjoy the full and rich symbolism of apocalyptic.* It conveys reality.
- ◆ *Revel in the “big picture”.* Think of some of the truths that are really clear.
 - God is all-powerful
 - The outcome of world history is certain.
 - Jesus holds the keys of death and Hades
 - He alone can furnish the key to the meaning and the direction of history.
 - The key to his victory is found in his identity as the Lamb.
 - He is in the midst of his church in good times and bad.
 - His return in splendour is certain and imminent.
 - In God’s time evil is judged and eliminated.
 - All the effects of the fall are reversed. In fact, we are better off as a result of redemption than we would have been had the fall not occurred.
 - His glorious kingdom lasts forever.
 - We are co-regents with him.