

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

OPENING STATEMENTS

- A. Most of my adult academic/theological life I have had the presupposition that those who believe the Bible take it “literally” (and that is surely true for historical narrative). However, it has become more and more obvious to me that to take prophecy, poetry, parables, and apocalyptic literature literally is to miss the point of the inspired text. The author’s intent, not literalness, is the key to a proper understanding of the Bible. To make the Bible say more (doctrinal specificity) is as dangerous and misleading as to interpret it in such a way as to make it say less than was intended by the original, inspired writer. The focus must be the larger context, the historical setting, and the intention the author expressed in the text itself and in his choice of genre. Genre is a literary contract between the author and the reader. To miss this clue is surely to lead to misinterpretation!

The book of Revelation is surely true, but not historical narrative, not meant to be taken literally. The genre itself is screaming this point to us if we will only hear it. This does not mean that it is not inspired, or not true; it is just figurative, cryptic, symbolic, metaphorical, and imaginative.

- B. Revelation is a uniquely Jewish literary genre, apocalyptic. It was often used in tension-filled times to express the conviction that God was in control of history and would bring deliverance to His people. This type of literature is characterized by
1. a strong sense of the universal sovereignty of God (monotheism and determinism)
 2. a struggle between good and evil, this age and the age to come (dualism)
 3. use of secret code words (usually from the OT or inter-testamental Jewish apocalyptic literature)
 4. use of colors, numbers, animals, sometimes animals/humans
 5. use of angelic mediation by means of visions and dreams, but usually through angelic mediation
 6. primarily focuses on the end-time (new age)
 7. use of a fixed set of symbols, not reality, used to communicate the end-time message

Some examples of this type of genre are:

1. Old Testament
 - a. Isaiah 24-27, 56-66
 - b. Ezekiel 37-48
 - c. Daniel 7-12
 - d. Joel 2:28-3:21
 - e. Zechariah 1-6, 12-14
2. New Testament
 - a. Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21, and I Corinthians 15 (in some ways)
 - b. II Thessalonians 2 (in most ways)
 - c. Revelation (chapters 4-22)
3. non-canonical (taken from D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, pp. 37-38)
 - a. I Enoch, II Enoch (the Secrets of Enoch)
 - b. The Book of Jubilees
 - c. The Sibylline Oracles III, IV, V
 - d. The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs
 - e. The Psalms of Solomon
 - f. The Assumption of Moses
 - g. The Martyrdom of Isaiah
 - h. The Apocalypse of Moses (Life of Adam and Eve)
 - i. The Apocalypse of Abraham
 - j. The Testament of Abraham
 - k. II Esdras (IV Esdras)
 - l. Baruch II, III

- C. These apocalyptic works were never presented orally. They are highly structured, literary works. The structure is crucial to a proper interpretation. Part of the planned structure of the book of Revelation is the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. With each cycle the judgment increases: seals, 1/4 destruction; trumpets, 1/3 destruction; bowls, total destruction. At the end of each cycle the Second Coming of Christ occurs: seals, 6:12-17; trumpets,

11:15-18; bowls, 19:1-21. This shows that the book is not chronologically sequential, but a drama in several acts which foresees the same period of time in three progressively violent OT judgment motifs.

There are seven literary sections plus a prologue and an epilogue

1. 1:1-8 (prologue)
2. 1:9-3:22
3. 4:1-8:1
4. 8:2-11:19
5. 12:1-14:20
6. 15:1-16:21
7. 17:1-19:21
8. 20:1-22:5
9. 22:6-21 (epilogue)

It is obvious that the number “seven” plays a large part in the structure of the book as can be seen from the seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Some other examples of “seven” are

1. 7 lampstands, 1:12
2. 7 spirits of God, 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6
3. 7 stars, 1:20; 2:1
4. 7 thunders, 10:3
5. 7 beatitudes, 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9
6. 7 kings, 17:10
7. 7 plagues, 21:9
8. 7 connections to animals
 - a. 7 horns. . . 7 eyes, 5:6
 - b. 7 heads. . . 7 diadems, 12:3; 13:1
 - c. woman on beast with 7 heads, 17:3,7,9
 - d. woman sitting on 7 mountains, 17:9

D. The interpretation of this book is most susceptible to theological bias. One’s presuppositions drive the interpretation of the ambiguous details. These theological presuppositions function on several levels

1. the origin of the symbols
 - a. Old Testament allusions
 - (1) the OT themes like creation, the fall, the flood, the exodus, restored Jerusalem
 - (2) hundreds of allusions (usually not quotes) from the prophets
 - b. inter-testamental Jewish literature (Enoch, Baruch, Sibylline Oracles, II Esdras)
 - c. first century Greco-Roman world
 - d. ancient near eastern cosmological-creation accounts (especially Rev. 12)
2. the time frame of the book
 - a. first century
 - b. every century
 - c. last generation
3. systematic theological grids
 - a. a millennial
 - b. post millennial
 - c. pre millennial
 - d. dispensational pre-millennial

In light of hermeneutical divergence (the different approaches to interpretation) and inappropriate dogmatism (the know-it-all attitude), how should an interpreter proceed? First, let us admit that modern western Christians do not understand the genre and do not recognize the historical allusions that first century Christians would have immediately understood. Second, let us admit that every generation of Christians has forced the Revelation into its personal historical setting and all have been wrong so far. Third, let us read the Bible before we read the theological systems. Look for the literary context of each vision/oracle and state the central truth in one declarative sentence. The central truth will be the same for every generation of believers while the specificity of the details may be relevant for only the first and/or last generation of believers. The details may be relevant, but history, not theology, will reveal their purpose. Fourth, let us remember that this book is primarily a word of comfort and encouragement to faithfulness amidst the persecution of believers by unbelievers. This book is not meant to answer the curiosity of every generation of believers, nor outline a detailed plan of end-time events. Fifth, it is safe to affirm that fallen human society is on a collision course with the kingdom of God. It will appear at first that the world has won (like Calvary), but wait; God is so sovereign, He is in control of history, of life and death. His people are victorious in Him!

- E. Despite the difficulty and ambiguity of interpretation, this book has a message and is an inspired word from God to His people in every age. It is worth the extra effort necessary to study this unique book. Its strategic position in the NT canon speaks of its capstone message. In his brief commentary on Revelation Alan Johnson says, “Indeed, it may well be that, with the exception of the Gospels, the Apocalypse contains the most profound and moving teaching on Christian doctrine and discipleship found anywhere in Holy Scripture. Neither the fanaticism of some who have fixed their attention on prophecy rather than on Christ, nor the diversity of interpretive view-points should discourage us from pursuing Christian truth in this marvelous book” (p. 9).

Remember, these are truly the last words of Jesus to His church! The modern Church dares not ignore or minimize them! They are to prepare believers for persecution and conflict in light of God’s sovereignty (monotheism), the reality of the evil one (limited dualism), the ongoing results of the fall (human rebellion), and God’s promises to redeem mankind (unconditional covenant cf. Gen. 3:15; 12:1-3; Ex. 19:5-6; Jn. 3:16; II Cor. 5:21).

AUTHOR

- A. Internal evidence of John the Apostle’s authorship
1. Author named himself four times as John (cf. 1:1,4,9; 22:8)
 2. He also called himself
 - a. a bond servant (cf. 1:1; 22:6)
 - b. a brother and fellow-partaker in tribulation (cf. 1:9)
 - c. a prophet (cf. 22:9), and called his book a prophecy (cf. 1:3; 22:7,10,18,19)
- B. External evidence of John the Apostle’s authorship from early Christian authors
1. John the Apostle, son of Zebedee
 - a. Justin Martyr (Rome A.D. 250) in *Dialogue with Trypho* 81
 - b. Irenaeus (Lyons) in *Against Heresies* IV:14:2; 17:6; 21:3; V:16:1; 28:2; 30:3; 34:6; 35:2
 - c. Tertullian (North Africa) in *Against Praxeas* 27
 - d. Origen (Alexandria) in
 - i. *On the Soul*, L:8:1
 - ii. *Against Marcion*, II:5
 - iii. *Against Heretics*, III:14, 25
 - iv. *Against Celsus*, VI:6, 32; VIII:17
 - e. The Muratorian Canon (Rome A.D. 180-200)
 2. Other Candidates
 - a. John Mark - This was first mentioned by Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (A.D. 247-264), who denied the authorship of John the Apostle but still held the work as canonical. He based his rejection on vocabulary and style as well as the anonymous nature of John’s other writings. He convinced Eusebius of Caesarea.
 - b. John the elder - This comes from a quote in Eusebius from Papias. However, Papias’ quote probably used this title for John the Apostle rather than its asserting another author.
 - c. John the Baptist - (with later editorial additions) has been suggested by J. Massyngberde Ford in the Anchor Bible commentary, based primarily on John the Baptist’s use of “lamb” for Jesus. The only other occurrence of this title is in Revelation.
- C. Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria (A.D. 247-264), was the first to express doubts (his book has been lost, but he is quoted by Eusebius, who agreed with him) about John the Apostle’s authorship, based on (1) John the Apostle does not refer to himself as John in the Gospel nor his letters, but Revelation is from “John”; (2) the structure of Revelation is different from the Gospel and the letters; (3) the vocabulary of Revelation is different from the Gospel and the letters; and (4) the grammatical style of Revelation is of inferior quality to the Gospel and the letters.
- D. Probably the most serious modern challenge to John the Apostle’s authorship comes from R. H. Charles in *Saint John*, Vol. I p. xxxixff).
- E. The majority of modern scholarship has rejected the traditional authorship of many of the NT books. A good example of this trend related to Revelation might be Raymond E. Brown, a renowned Catholic Johannine scholar. The introductory volume of the Anchor Bible Commentary series says, “written by a Jewish Christian prophet named John who was neither John, son of Zebedee, nor the writer of the Johannine Gospel or of the Epistles” (p. 774).

- F. In many ways authorship is uncertain. There are striking parallels with the Apostle John's other writings and also striking differences. The key to understanding this book is not in its human author, but in its Divine author! The author believed himself to be an inspired prophet (cf. 1:3; 22:7,10,18,19).

DATE

- A. This is certainly integrally linked to authorship
- B. Some possible dates
1. The traditional date is during Domitian's reign (A.D. 81-96) because it fits internal evidence of persecution
 - a. Irenaeus (quoted by Eusebius) in *Against Heresies*, V:30:3. "It (this persecution) was seen not very long ago, almost in our generation, at the close of the reign of Domitian"
 - b. Clement of Alexandria
 - c. Origin of Alexandria
 - d. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, iii:23:1
 - e. Victorinus, *Apocalypse* x:11
 - f. Jerome
 2. Epiphanius, a third century writer, in *Haer.*, 51:12, 32, says that John wrote it after his release from Patmos which was during Claudius' reign (A.D. 41-54).
 3. Others supposed it to be during Nero's reign (A.D. 54-68) because of:
 - a. the obvious background of Emperor cult persecution
 - b. *Caesar Nero*, written in Hebrew, equals the number of the beast, 666

RECIPIENTS

- A. From 1:4 it is obvious that the original recipients were seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia. These churches are addressed in such a way as to imply the travel route of the bearer of the letter.
- B. The message of Revelation uniquely relates to all churches and believers who are experiencing persecution from a fallen world system.
- C. As the canonical conclusion to the NT this book is a message of consummation to all believers of all ages.

OCCASION

- A. The setting was persecution caused by the separation of the local churches from the legal protection Rome accorded to Judaism. This division occurred officially around A.D. 70 when the rabbis from Jamnia instituted an oath formula which demanded the members of the local synagogues to curse Jesus of Nazareth.
- B. Roman documents indicate that Emperor worship became a major conflict with the church from the reigns of Nero (A.D. 54-68) to Domitian (A.D. 81-96). However, there is no documentation of an official empire-wide persecution. Apparently Revelation reflected the exuberance of local Emperor worship cults in the Eastern Provinces of the Roman Empire (cf. "Biblical Archaeology Review," May/June 1993 p. 29-37).

THE SYNTAX

- A. There are many grammatical problems in the Greek text.
- B. Some possible reasons for these problems
1. John's Aramaic thought patterns.
 2. He had no scribe on Patmos to write for him.
 3. The excitement of the visions was overwhelming.
 4. They are purposeful for the effect.
 5. The genre (apocalyptic) was highly figurative.
- C. Similar grammatical idiosyncrasies are found in other Jewish apocalyptic writings.

CANONICITY

- A. It was rejected early by the Eastern Church; the book does not appear in the Peshitta (fifth century Syriac).
- B. In the early fourth century Eusebius, following Dionysius of Alexandria in the late third century, said Revelation was not written by the Apostle John. He listed it as one of the “disputed” books but included it in his canonical list (cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, III:24:18; III:25:4; and III:39:6).
- C. The Council of Laodicea (about A.D. 360) omitted it from the list of canonical books. Jerome rejected it as canonical but the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) included it. Revelation was admitted by means of the advocacy of the Eastern Church in a compromise which included Hebrews (which was advocated by the Western Church).
- D. We should acknowledge that it is a presupposition of believers that the Holy Spirit guided the historical process in its inclusion of the Christian canon.
- E. The two major theologians of the Protestant movement rejected its place in Christian doctrine
 - 1. Martin Luther called it neither prophetic or apostolic, in essence rejecting its inspiration.
 - 2. John Calvin, who wrote a commentary on every book of the NT except Revelation, in essence rejected its relevance.

HISTORICAL THEORIES OF INTERPRETATION

- A. It has been notoriously difficult to interpret; therefore, dogmatism is inappropriate!
- B. The symbols are drawn from
 - 1. Old Testament apocalyptic passages in
 - a. Daniel
 - b. Ezekiel
 - c. Zechariah
 - d. Isaiah
 - 2. inter-testamental Jewish apocalyptic literature
 - 3. the first century Greco-Roman historical setting (especially Rev. 17)
 - 4. ancient near eastern mythological creation accounts (especially Rev. 12)
- C. In general there are four main-streams of interpretation
 - 1. PRETERIST - this group sees the book as primarily or exclusively related to the first century churches in the Roman Province of Asia. All the details and prophecies were fulfilled in the first century.
 - 2. HISTORICIST - this group sees the book as an overview of history, primarily of Western civilization and in some sense the Roman Catholic Church. Often the letters to the seven churches of chapters 2 and 3 are used as a description of certain periods of time. Some see these as temporally synchronous and others as chronologically sequential.
 - 3. FUTURIST - this group sees the book as referring to the events immediately preceding the Parousia (Second Coming of Christ) which will be literally and historically fulfilled.
 - 4. IDEALIST - this group sees the book as totally symbolic of the struggle between good and evil which has no historical significance.

All of these have some validity, but they miss the intentional ambiguity of John’s choice of genre and imagery. The problem is balance, not which one is correct

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

- A. The purpose of Revelation is to show God’s sovereignty in history and the promise of the culmination of all things in Him. The faithful are to remain in faith and hope amidst the persecution and aggression of this fallen world system. The focus of the book is the persecution and faithfulness of believers in the first century and in every century. Remember, prophets spoke of the future in an effort to reform the present. Revelation is not only about how it will end, but how it is going. In his article in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol. I entitled, “The Eschatology of the Bible,” Robert L. Sancy said, “the biblical prophets were not concerned primarily with the time and chronological arrangement of future events. For them the spiritual state of their contemporaries was the point

of importance and the great eschatological visitation of God for the judgment of unrighteousness and the blessing of the pious was interjected for its ethical impact in the present” (p. 104).

- B. The general purpose is summed up well in the brief introduction to the TEV and NJB translations
1. TEV, p. 1122, “The Revelation to John was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. The writer’s main concern is to give his readers hope and encouragement, and to urge them to remain faithful during times of suffering and persecution.”
 2. NJB, p. 1416, “The Bible is summed up in the message of hope and the rich symbolism of this book. It is a vision of rescue from the trials which beset God’s people, and a promise of a glorious future. The message is expressed by means of imagery which draws on the whole of the Bible, so that every feature, animals, colors, numbers, is evocative and full of overtones to a reader familiar with the OT. In this way it is a secret and allusive revelation of what is to come, though the natural symbolism of the great acts of worship and the final vision of the messianic splendor of the new Holy City are clear enough. There was a tradition of such writing in Judaism from Daniel onwards, to strengthen God’s people in persecution with assurance of eventual deliverance and triumph.”
- C. It is crucial that the interpreter give the redemptive theme priority.
1. God has brought individual, corporate, and cosmic salvation through Christ.
 2. God’s redemption is both spiritual and physical. The Church is saved, but not safe! One day She will be!
 3. God still loves fallen, rebellious, self-centered humanity. The wrath of God in the seals and trumpets is for redemption (cf. 9:20-21; 14:6-7; 16:9,11; 21:7; 22:17).
 4. God not only restores fallen mankind, but also fallen creation. Evil at every level will be purged!
- D. This book must not be seen as a chronological chart of the events, times, and manner of the Second Coming. It has often been interpreted as the “secret” to western history. Every generation has forced its histories into the apocalyptic symbols; every one has been wrong so far.
- The details of these prophecies will be much more obvious to the last generation of believers suffering under the Anti-Christ. A literal interpretation has caused this book to be ignored by some (Calvin), depreciated by others (Luther, “neither apostolic nor prophetic”), and overemphasized by others (millennialists).

BOB’S KEYS TO INTERPRETATION

- A. We need to take into account the Jewish background
1. OT apocalyptic genre is a highly symbolic literary type
 2. Numerous allusions are drawn from the OT (of 404 verses 275 include allusions to OT texts); the meaning of these symbols have been reinterpreted in light of the first-century Roman situation.
 3. Prophetic foreshadowing takes current events to foreshadow eschatological events. Often these first-century historical fulfillments point to ultimate end-time historical fulfillments.
- B. The overall structure of the book helps us to see the author’s purpose
1. The seals, trumpets, and bowls cover the same period of time. Revelation is a drama in sequential acts.
 2. The temporal Messianic reign is preliminary to the eternal reign of the Father (cf. I Cor. 15:26-28). The Heavenly Kingdom supercedes the earthly one.
- C. The historical context must be taken into account in any interpretation of the book
1. The presence of Emperor worship
 2. Local persecution in the Eastern Provinces
 3. The Bible cannot mean what it never meant. The interpretation of Revelation must be related to John’s day first. It may have multiple fulfillments or applications, but they must be grounded in the text and time of the first century.
- D. The meaning of some of the cryptic terms has been lost to us due to our cultural, linguistic and existential setting. Possibly the end-time events themselves will shed light on the proper interpretation of these symbols. Be careful not to push all of the details of this apocalyptic prophecy. Modern interpreters must seek the major truth in each of these visions.
- E. Let me summarize some of the key interpretive elements
1. The historical origins of the symbolism

- a. OT themes
 - b. OT allusions
 - c. Inter-testamental apocalyptic literature
 - d. Greco-Roman first century setting
 - 2. The author's ways of defining his symbolism
 - a. Conversations with angelic guides
 - b. The hymn of heavenly choirs
 - c. Author himself states the meaning
 - 3. The structure of the book (especially the parallel between the seals, trumpets, and bowls)
- F. Further help
1. My two favorite commentators on Revelation are George Eldon Ladd and Alan F. Johnson. They do not agree. There is so much disagreement among godly, educated, sincere scholars that a word of caution is appropriate. Let me quote Alan Johnson in his *Commentary on Revelation* from Zondervan:

“In view of the elaborate use of imagery and visions from 4:1 through the end of Revelation and the question how this material relates to chapters 1-3, it is not surprising that commentators differ widely in their treatment of these chapters. One problem is that of interpretation: *What* do the imagery and visions mean? Another problem involves chronology: *When* do these things take place? Furthermore, does John interpret his frequent Old Testament images in exact accordance with their Old Testament sources, or does he freely reinterpret these images? What is symbolic and what is literal? Answers to such questions will determine the interpreter's approach. Since few of these questions are capable of dogmatic answers, there is a need for tolerance of divergent approaches in the hope that the Spirit may use open-minded discussion to lead us further into the meaning of the Apocalypse” (p. 69).
 2. As far as a general introduction to Revelation's relationship to the OT, I recommend John P. Milton's *Prophecy Interpreted* and John Bright's *The Authority of the Old Testament*. As for a good discussion of Revelation's relationship to Paul, I recommend James S. Stewart's *A Man In Christ*.

READING CYCLE ONE (see p. vi)

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the entire biblical book at one sitting. State the central theme of the entire book in your own words.

1. Theme of entire book
2. Type of literature (genre)

READING CYCLE TWO (see pp. vi-vii.)

This is a study guide commentary which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the entire biblical book a second time at one sitting. Outline the main subjects and express the subject in a single sentence.

1. Subject of first literary unit
2. Subject of second literary unit
3. Subject of third literary unit
4. Etc.