



INTRODUCTION

We are launching into a series on Revelation. The goal of the series is not to explain everything in the book, but to teach us **how to approach the book**.

A reaction of many people at the mention of Revelation is that it's very confusing and it's better to spend our time somewhere else. I would like to give **three reasons why it is critical** we give some serious attention to this book:

- 1) It is **canonized into Scripture**. Since it is part of the Bible, it contains important information God wants us to know.
- 2) This revelation is the **crown of our Christian hope**. No matter what comes down the pike, if we have a balanced understanding; we can honestly say, "I know it's ok, because I read the final chapter!"
- 3) It is tool of **deeper understanding**. If we **learn how to approach this book** and dig out the truth, we will be able to glean from any Scripture.

More than any other book of the Bible this one has suffered ridiculous interpretations. And it seems to be full of indecipherable truths. But, is that true?

The name, "Revelation," in Greek is **apokalupsis**, meaning "an uncovering" or "unveiling." Not only should it be possible to

understand, it was written to openly reveal what was previously unknown. In fact, to the original readers it was meant to be understood in casual hearing. **"He who has an ear, let him hear."** Rev 2:7

...So why do we have such a hard time with it? Here are some basic reasons:

- **WE ARE REMOVED FROM THE WORLD IN WHICH IT WAS WRITTEN**

Even if you are not a history buff, think of what the world was like at the time of John's revelation.

Christianity was still a **branch of the Jewish faith**. It was approached from a Jewish perspective. A revelation would be explained in a Jewish way.

The civilized world as a whole, was **Greek in reasoning and language**. So the intellect behind the book would be colored by Greek influence.

The civilized world as a whole, was under **Roman government and military occupation**. Rome was the current events of the day.

- **WE ARE REMOVED FROM THE SITUATION IN WHICH IT WAS WRITTEN**

What was happening at the time? There are two schools of thought on when this book was written. -One, as late as **96 A.D.**; the other, as **early as 64-68 A.D.** Personally, I lean to the earlier dates, just because it fits more pieces of the puzzle.

So, we know this: The church in Jerusalem was undergoing such severe persecution, that people were fleeing everywhere. The Jewish authorities were hunting them down as heretics of a dangerous false Messiah. The gentile governments were looking at them with a curious suspicion. They were hearing rumors of eating a body and drinking blood. And even

worse, these people refused to worship the Emperor. At the time of the writing, or what was soon to come; the Emperor Domitian would call himself "August" meaning "Savior" or "Lord."

For the believers themselves, most were convinced Jesus would be coming back at any moment, and they were hanging on by their fingernails. So, in the face of severe testing, and crumbling church standards God has John, a respected prophet, send this letter to the churches in Asia Minor (*modern Turkey*) telling them events that would shortly unfold.

The commentary of Dr. Harold Lindsell puts it like this:

To these persecuted and harried Christians in the churches of the Roman province of Asia, John addressed this strange and wonderful book, stressing the Lordship of Christ, the overruling sovereignty of God, and his eventual, final victory over the forces of sin and evil.

That's the first thing we need to keep in mind: This book was written to these people in that day to be understood in the context of their situation.

- **WE ARE REMOVED FROM THE LANGUAGE**

The language of Revelation is written in a style called, "Apocalyptic literature." It was not new at the time, we find traces of it through the Old Testament. A prime example is Daniel explaining the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, even though Daniel's interpretation came 700 years earlier, it deals with the same subject. But here's an important difference: Daniel is told, "... therefore seal up the vision, for it refers to many days in the future." ~Dan 8:26

While John is told, "Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand." ~Rev 22:10

Even though this style of writing had a long history, "apocalyptic" writing really hit its zenith from 200B.C. to 200 A.D., when persecution was at its worst. **So what are the earmarks of this kind of writing?**

First, it is **highly symbolic**, and the hearer expects it to be. In Revelation we have a number of strange sounding creatures carrying out all kinds of acts. But that's not all that uncommon even in our day. For example, if it's getting near election time and you see a cartoon showing an elephant fighting a donkey, what do you think? (*Republicans and Democrats*) Do you expect to see an actual elephant and donkey fighting when you go vote?

In the writing, we find **symbolology in numbers**. The number 12 and multiples of 12 show up repeatedly. Thinking like a Jewish Christian, where do we find 12? There were twelve tribes, Jesus chose twelve apostles; for one thing, it would seem to be a symbol of God's people.

The number 7 comes up. It is a number of infinity; it is a symbol of what is universal.

In Roman and Hebrew writing, there were really no numbers, numbers were designated by letters. A modern day equivalent would be; A=1, B=2, and so on. A romantic Roman example was found in Pompeii. On a wall was written, "*I love her whose number is 545.*" By decoding the sum, you could guess the lady's name.

Colors are used, and we can still identify with them today. -White for pure; red for blood or suffering; yellow or pale for sick, black for death.

There is the use of allegories: Objects representing more abstract concepts. For example; the forehead symbolizing reason or thinking; the right hand representing work or

livelihood; scroll for information or understanding; horse for authority or martial strength; jewels and crowns for reward or achievement. The point being, ***the physical object is known to represent something beyond the literal.***

So, if we want to anchor the writing into the real intention of the writer, we have to understand; first- ***it is rich in symbolism and allegory***; and second- ***what those symbols represent to the writer***, that is John, who in all likelihood, is a Jewish Christian.

Even knowing this...

HOW DO WE APPROACH THIS BOOK?

There ***are four main schools of thought***. There's the "***preterist***" view. That view holds that the events of the book were fulfilled in the first century. It was written primarily to encourage the original readers. *Today, the value for us is in teaching the necessity of staying true to God.*

Of course, ***the problem*** with holding solely to this view is; everything hasn't happened yet. So there's a disproportionate gap in the middle.

Then there is the "***historicist***" view. It holds that the book is a panoramic view of the church through history. It finds in the book, the rise of Catholicism, Islam, the World Wars and such, ending in the return of Christ. *As such, it is an encouragement to Christians, no matter what point in history we live.*

The problem with holding only to this view is that you have people assigning symbols to all kinds of times and events.

There is the "***futurist***" view. Apart from a few chapters, it depicts events that happen immediately before Christ returns. *The value of the book is mainly to Christians living at the*

return of Christ; a kind of heads up on what's coming down.

The problem with holding only to this view is; the picture keeps getting repainted for whatever point in time we're living. For the 16th century Catholics; Revelation referred to that "heretic", Luther and his reformers. It told of the chiasm of Protestantism and how it would eventually be overcome.

During the cold war, Gog and Magog (Rev 20:8) involved the Soviet Union sweeping down into the Middle East for oil and world domination. When computers rose to public focus, the "mark of the beast" became computer chips under the skin. It's all very exciting, but very narrow in focus. It's looking at the panorama of God's plan through the blinders of our culture and time.

Then there is the "***idealist***" view. This view claims that the book doesn't deal with any specific historical situation. It simply enforces the principle that good will ultimately triumph over evil. *And this view is relevant to people living in any age of history.*

I am firmly convinced that the Bible is above all things, is a book of spiritual, eternal principles. And undoubtedly, the book of Revelation is chalked full of them. However, there is absolutely no real evidence to back the idea that Revelation is totally figurative.

If we are to understand this book, we must put into play, elements of all these views, but not become a slave to any of them.

Let me give an example:

The book states repeatedly, these events will ***unfold shortly***. It was meant to be an encouragement and a warning to the original hearers. So, unless that is historical fact, the book is: **a. mistaken b. totally false c. misleading at best.**

So let's go to the time shortly after this letter was circulated. The time is around 65 A.D. Things are getting very restless in Judah as the Romans are pressing to have their religious



symbols imposed on the Jews. Over the next few years, there are a number of serious uprisings. Rome begins to systematically crush the Jewish territory.

By 70 A.D., things are getting very brutal and very desperate. A small army of Jewish bandits are allowed to enter Jerusalem. And the first thing they do when they get inside is to bar the gates. In the course of an hour no one was able to get in or out. Those inside were stuck there for whatever would ensue. What happens first is, the populace is subjected to nightly rapes, robbery, and ultimately starvation at the hands of the bandits inside. By now the legions of Titus, 80,000 men strong, have laid siege to Jerusalem. Now, there is no possibility of escape.

The horror goes on for months until the city is reduced to cannibalism. People sneak outside the walls at night, just to get a mouthful of grass. If the Romans catch them, their bellies will be cut open for personal valuables they are rumored to have swallowed.

Finally, the Romans break through. -The last of the bandits fall back to the Temple. There is

bitter fighting, room by room, until the last fall to the Romans in the Holy of Holies. The Temple is demolished to the last stone by the Romans, making sure this never happens again. All that remains is a small section of an outer wall. Out of an entire city, only 700 Jewish survivors are taken back to Rome.

Forty-two years before this happened Jesus spoke these words:

Matt 24

2. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, **not one stone shall be left here upon another**, that shall not be thrown down."

...

15. "Therefore when you see the **'abomination of desolation'**, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand),

16. "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

17. "Let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house.

18. "And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.

19. "But woe to those who are pregnant and to those with nursing babies in those days!

-Forty-two years earlier; an exact warning. The book of Revelation echoes these words of Jesus. And they were written within 6 to as little as 2 years before this horror took place.

What that tells us is the ***prophecy of the book is exactly right***, because things have ***already happened*** just as it says. But we would never have the assurance of that fact unless we saw it in the context of its time, history, and situation.

However, even though the prophecy shortly began to unfold, just as it said; it obviously ***hasn't finished yet***. There are elements of ***history*** in the prophecy, and there are elements of the ***future***- we need to recognize both.

CONCLUSION

So if we make the effort to take a balanced view of this last book of the Bible; what's in it for us?

There is ***hope and assurance***. If some has already taken place, exactly as stated, then there is no reason to doubt what is yet to come.

There is the ***promise of deeper understanding***. If we can place this unique book of the New Testament into balanced understanding; we will be ready to tackle any book ***at a deeper level***. ...And last and most important...

The book ***highlights a humbling and profound truth***: God's plan is ***far bigger than we are***. It can't be limited to our little point in time. It can't be boxed in by our present understanding, culture, current events, or technology. A century ago, who would have thought a literal Israel would ever exist? Before gas fueled our nations, the Middle East was just an impoverished backward area. Who would have dreamed a literal Babylon that is, Iraq could possibly be part of this revelation?

"Revelation", apokalupsis, means "unveiling." In short if we make the effort of this journey, we will come out the other side with ***a new dimension of understanding***.

And since that is what God calls us to do; I would encourage all of us to do it.

