The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday PM Bible Study

**Introduction Part 1**

**Authorship**

The author of this book identifies himself simply as “John” (1:1, 4, 9-10; 22:8). He is also identified several times as a prophet (1:1-3, 10-19; 4:1-2; 17:1-3; 21:9-10; 22:6-7). There is some difficulty in knowing exactly which John this is. Most agree it is the apostle John (the disciple whom Jesus loved) who penned the Gospel and Epistles.

This is most likely the case since John was an eyewitness of the majesty of our Lord (1 Jn. 1:1-3) and he lived during the 1st century where persecution of the saints was on the rise. The John in Revelation is experiencing this persecution (1:9). Themes from the gospel and epistles of John are prominent in the Revelation and such would indicate an authentic authorship from the apostle.

**Occasion/Purpose:**

As we have discussed previously in the excursus on apocalyptic literature, the primary reason for penning this book is the sporadic and increasing persecution of the saints (2:3, 10, 13, 19, 25; 3:8, 10-11). Admittedly, however, the purpose goes well beyond this. The book is primarily addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor. The book clearly indicates the theme of persecution within these churches but also the saints’ struggle with compromising their faith.

John writes this at a time where many false teachers and enemies of God have crept in the churches seeking to draw them away from God and to compromise their faith. This is seen a handful of times in the letters to the seven churches (2:2, 6, 9, 13-15, 20-24; 3:9). As persecution increased, so did the temptation to deny Jesus, compromise the faith or engage in a mixture of both resulting in a false pretense of Christianity.

There are many other passages throughout the book that touch upon the idea of persecution and enemies seeking to diminish and destroy Christ and Christianity (12:6, 14-17; 13:1-18; 17:6) but the larger point that the author seeks to convey is that of being steadfast and clinging to the faith.

It would be easy for many to have one foot in and one foot out due to the rise in hostility against Christianity and many Christians had succumbed to this (3:1-3, 15-19). It would be easy for someone to give up Jesus if it meant that they could have a better quality of physical life. Yet, the author’s purpose was to make it abundantly clear that those who follow the enemies and oppressors will be judged and destroyed (14:9-13, 17-20) but those who persevered would see God and be granted life everlasting (2:11, 17; 3:5, 21).

*“John’s purpose was to jolt these Christians back into the reality of their faith and the seriousness of their sin by telling them they could not loyal to two masters but only one”* (G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*). A watered down, introverted, selfish faith would group the saints together with the beast in the horrific judgment of God. Saints must at all costs remain faithful to the resurrected Jesus and His cause or suffer the penalty for anything short of perseverance and endurance.

**Major Interpretative Views of the Revelation:**

**Preterist**

Preterists believe the message of the book was fulfilled during its historical setting. There are two preterist views. The first looks at the message of the book being fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem ca. 70 A.D. This view paints the Jews as enemies against the Christians who aid Rome in the persecution of the saints. This view limits the message to 70 A.D., and it has little or no value to audiences after that time including us.

The second view suggests that the message of the book pertains to the fall of the Roman Empire which is the persecutor of the saints during this time period. Thus, its purpose is to encourage believers throughout the reign of the Roman empire to be faithful and they will attain their reward. Like the first view, it has little or no value to audiences after its historical fulfillment.

**Futurist**

As the name suggests, those that interpret the message of Revelation from a futurist perspective suggest that the details in the book have not yet come to pass and will take place at a time yet in the future. As with the preterist approach, there are two futurist perspectives.

The first understands the message from Rev. 4:1-22:5 as very literal and pertaining to a time immediately before the end of the world or Christ’s second coming. This is also called dispensational futurism. These kinds of futurists interpret the book very literally and conclude the following:

1. That ethnic Israel is restored to Canaan
2. The church is raptured
3. There is a seven-year tribulation
4. The reign of the antichrist
5. A group of nations gathered to fight against Jerusalem
6. Jesus’ second coming
7. Jesus reigns for 1000 years
8. Satan rebels and dominates at the end of the millennial reign
9. Christ reigns forever with the saints

The most obvious error with this view is that it has no value to the audience the book is being written to. There is little or no comfort to suggest that the book is concerned with something to happen at a time yet very distant in the future. Internal evidence also suggests this view is wrong (Rev. 1:1, 3; 22:6, 10).

The second futurist view often called modified futurism does not hold as strictly to a literal interpretation of the message. It adapts to most of what is said including that most of its events are yet to take place. Modified futurists tend to flip-flop quite a bit. Again, this view would necessitate that the 1st century audience is neither comforted or given a message of much value.

**Historicist**

Advocates of this view trace the message of this book through the course of historical movements over the centuries and identify major historical figures as fitting the description of the antichrist or beast in the book of Revelation. Historicists believe Revelation prophesies concerning the papacy, Charlemagne, Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, Napoleon as well as many others.

G.K. Beale adds, *“This view tries to identify historical movements too specifically and limits the prophecies of the Apocalypse to Western church history, leaving aside the worldwide church. Proponents of this view living at different periods of church history cannot agree with one another, since they limit the meaning of the symbols only to specific historical referents contemporary with their own times”* (G.K. Beale, The Book of Revelation). Again, there is little or no value for 1st century folk.

**Idealist**

The idealist view suggests that the message of Revelation is a figurative illustration of the conflict between good and evil, God and Satan. Mounce says, *“Its proponents hold that Revelation is not to be taken in reference to any specific events but as an expression of those basic principles on which God acts throughout history”* (Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*).

Idealists hold that Revelation is a timeless symbolic message of the constant struggle between the forces of good and evil and as such there exists no final consummation process in history. It does not view the book as pertaining to any specific historical setting (Rome, Jerusalem etc.). As a result, some comfort is given to 1st century readers but not much specifically related to their historical dilemma.

**Eclecticist**

Eclecticists combine bits and pieces from the major views to appropriately interpret the message Jesus had John write down. This is a combinatory and a hybrid view of the book. As such preterists are correct in saying Revelation pertains to a specific historical setting (Jerusalem, Rome etc.) but it goes well beyond that.

Historicists are correct in showing that the message has transcended the 1st century and has been shown to hold meaning to believers throughout the centuries following its origin. Futurists are right in pointing out some events have not yet taken place but woefully fall short in other areas. Idealists hit the nail on the head with the notion that the message is emphasizing the conflict between good and evil, yet they make an erroneous mistake by dismissing the thought of a consummation at the end of time.

Mounce sums it up this way:

*“…it is readily apparent that each approach has some important contribution to a full understanding of Revelation and that no single approach is sufficient in itself. It is vitally important to see with the preterist that the book must be interpreted in light of the immediate historical crisis in which the first-century church found itself. The author employs a literary genre that grew out of his own cultural and linguistic milieu. His figures of speech and imagery are to be interpreted in the context of his own historical setting. They are not esoteric and enigmatic references to some future culture totally foreign to first-century readers (e.g., hydrogen bombs, satellite television, and the European Common Market). With the historicist it is important to notice that the philosophy of history revealed in the Apocalypse has found specific fulfillment in all the major crises of human history up to the present day. With the futurist we must agree that the central message of the book is eschatological, and to whatever extent the End has been anticipated in the course of history, it yet remains as the one great climactic point toward which all history moves. This age will come to an end. Satan and his hosts will be destroyed and the righteous will be vindicated. These are historical events that will take place in time. And they are future. With the idealist one must agree that the events of history give expression to basic underlying principles. God is at work behind the scenes to bring to pass His sovereign intention for the human race. To whatever extent the idealist rules out a consummation, it is difficult to see from history alone any cause for optimism. It is the end that gives meaning to the process”* (Mounce, The Book of Revelation.)

This view is by no means perfect, but it is the most appropriate in light of much study and research. It is the one we will seek to employ as we study through this book. May God help us and guide our minds that we right decipher His word.

**Language:**

The language of Revelation is highly symbolic and figurative. It may fall under the same umbrella as poetry, prose, plays and other literary works which convey its message via the figurative medium. As such we must look at the whole and not just the minute details, consider the themes and not just the words and harmonize these together for a successful interpretation of the message.

**Sources:**

Beale, G. K. (1999). *The Book of Revelation: A commentary on the Greek text*. NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

Mounce, R. H. (1977). *The Book of Revelation*. NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub.