

Apocalyptic Literature: The Revelation

Background

1. Authorship: John, the son of Zebedee, author of the 4th Gospel and the three epistles.
2. Date and Place: A.D. 95-96 from the island of Patmos.
3. Recipients: Christians of Asia Minor suffering under the persecution of the Roman Emperor.
4. Purpose: To offer comfort and hope to an oppressed community of Christians.
5. Genre: It blends apocalyptic (1:1), prophesy (1:3), and epistle (1:4, 11).

Keys to Interpretation

1. Recognize it is the literature of a minority community in their experience of powerlessness. It is basically a justification of God in the face of powerlessness and oppression.
2. See it in its proper theological construct: Providence → Eschatology → Apocalyptic
3. Interpret symbols symbolically. Forcing a literal interpretation would make most of the book nonsensical. To force a literal sense on every word is a certain recipe for hermeneutical disaster. (see 1:9-20; 5:6)
4. Cultivate Imagination – A purged and refurbished imagination is a useful tool of interpretation.
5. Begin by focusing on the ancient background rather than modern situation. Note Hal Lindsey, who opines that Origen, Jerome, and even Luther and Calvin "knew little about prophecy," but that Revelation was written to allow "end-time interpreters" (like himself) to unlock its meaning (*New World Coming*, 1984, 21). For Lindsey, in order to understand Revelation, you need a newspaper in one hand, a Bible in the other, and one eye on CNN. But this mentality violates the most basic rule of interpretation: it could not mean something that it could not have meant to the original audience.

Approaches

1. Preterist/Past History

Holds that the key to understanding the book is understanding it in its historical context.

2. Idealist/Symbolic

This view holds that while the precise historical circumstances of Revelation pertained to the Roman world at the end of the 1st century A.D., it nonetheless has a kind of universal and timeless message for God's dealing with humanity in all generations.

3. Futurist

Rather than look to the original audience and setting for understanding, this view argues that beginning in Revelation 4-22, John's vision awaits fulfillment.

4. Eclectic – There is value in each of the approaches above.

Structure

- I. Introduction (1:1-8)
- II. John's Heavenly Vision of Christ (1:9-20)
- III. Letters to Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
- IV. Vision of the Heavenly Throne-Room: The lamb receives the sealed book (4-5)
- V. The Seven Seals (6:1-8:1): Interlude in ch.7
- VI. The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19): Interlude in ch.10
- VII. The Saints Versus the Unholy Trinity (12-14)
 - A. The woman, her seed, and the dragon: Satan thwarted (12)
 - B. The two beasts: Rome imperial power and local priests of emperor cult (13)
 - C. Victory of the Martyrs (14)
- VIII. The Seven Bowls (15-16)
- IX. Fall of Babylon (17-19)
- X. The Victory of the Saints (20-22)*A tale of two cities, Babylon and the New Jerusalem

Jezebel who "calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols," (Rev 2:20).

(4) Basic Teaching

The twin pillars of the Nicolaitan's teaching involved eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods and promoting sexual immorality. The two were closely linked in the ancient world, and it was certainly so at Ephesus. Worship at the temple of a pagan deity often involved both eating meat that was sacrificed to the deity and having sex with priestesses at the temple. We also know the teaching was prevalent throughout Asia minor, for John mentions it in the letter to Ephesus (2:6), Pergamum (2:15), and possibly Thyatira (2:20).

b. Condemnation (2:4-5)

3. Call to Hear (2:7a)

4. Promise to Those Who Conquer (2:7b)

B. Letter to the Church at Smyrna (2:8-11)

1. Opening (2:8)

2. Words of Commendation (2:9-10)

3. Call to Hear (2:11a)

4. Promise to Those Who Conquer (2:11b)

C. Letter to the Church at Pergamum (2:12-17)

1. Opening (2:12)

2. Words of Commendation/Condemnation (2:13-16)

a. Commendation (2:13)

b. Condemnation (2:14-16)

3. Call to Hear (2:17a)

4. Promise to Those Who Conquer (2:17b)

D. Letter to the Church at Thyatira (2:12-17)

1. Opening (2:18)

2. Words of commendation and condemnation (2:19-25)

a. Commendation (2:19)

b. Condemnation (2:20-23)

Jezebel

Like the church at Pergamum, the church at Thyatira tolerated false teaching in the form of a woman named Jezebel. Only a handful of women play anything more than a supporting role in the Old Testament. Jezebel stands out, however, as a representative of all that is evil and rejected in Israel. Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, married Ahab, son of Omri, who became king of the northern kingdom of Israel in 874 B.C. And so, Jezebel becomes queen of Israel (1 Kings 16:29-31). The problem is Ahab and Jezebel were radical idolaters, worshiping and serving Baal and Asherah. And "Ahab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him" (1 Kings 16:33). This brought Ahab and Jezebel into serious conflict with Elijah and other prophets. The conflict came to a climax when Elijah challenged Ahab to gather the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, "who eat at Jezebel's table" and meet on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:17-19). After Elijah's complete domination, Ahab reported it to Jezebel, to which

The Seven Churches at a Glance

Text & Church	Commendation	Condemnation	Promise to Those Who Overcome
Rev 2:1-7 Ephesus	Works, labor, endurance, and an intolerance of evildoers and false teachers; Hatred of Nicolaitans' work	Losing the love they had at the first	They will eat from the tree of life
Rev 2:8-11 Smyrna	Endure tribulation, poverty, and slander from the members of the synagogue of Satan	None	Receive the crown of life; escape from 2 nd death
Rev 2:12-17 Pergamum	Although they dwell where Satan's throne is, they are faithfully enduring. Antipas is the only martyr among the seven churches.	Some are embracing false teaching, namely the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.	Receive the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name inscribed
Rev 2:18-29 Thyatira	They have love, faith, service, and patient endurance. They are progressing in works produced by faith.	They tolerated the false teaching of a prophetess nicknamed Jezebel and are learning the deep things of Satan.	Rule with Christ over the nations and receive the morning star
Rev 3:1-6 Sardis	A few have not soiled their garments. They are worthy and would walk with Jesus in white.	They have a name, "living," but they are dead. Their works are incomplete. They need to "Wake up!" If not, Jesus is coming as a thief.	Clothed in white, and their name will not be blotted out of the book of life
Rev 3:7-13 Philadelphia	They have great missionary opportunity and zeal, although they are opposed by the "synagogue of Satan." They have kept God's word and have not denied his name. They will be vindicated by God. They will be kept from the hour of trial.	None	They will be made a pillar in the temple of God and God will inscribe his name on them.
Rev 3:14-22	None	They are lukewarm and Jesus is about to vomit them out; They are wealthy but it has led to self-sufficiency and arrogance.	A seat with Christ on his throne.