

## **The Book of Revelation**

### **Session 1: Introduction**

No book of the Bible has drawn more attention and caused more confusion than the Book of Revelation. Within its allegorical and historical details many people have sought to find new meanings and, largely, interpret the text for their own purposes. As we venture into the depth of this book, we also must exercise caution that we too do not fall prey to the same temptations, namely, to figure out the end times, to judge the world or people based on the implications of the book, and to interpret the book for our own means. At the end of this session I will briefly describe some of the interpretive methods used to understand this book. Revelation, however, does not have only one interpretation but layers of meaning. In John's characteristic style he can intend several meanings in just a few words. The Book speaks for itself: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it." (Revelation 1:3)

History of Revelation:

The reception of Revelation in the early centuries of the church was divided. Although written in the 90's by the Apostle John, the church fathers wavered in their acceptance of this book. Several of the leading heretics of the first four centuries used this book as leverage for their heretical ideas leading many of the church fathers to be leery of this text. Nevertheless, even with widely varying opinions on its authenticity as Scripture, the church largely accepted it as Scripture since its completion by the turn of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Some people proposed a different book as the final book of Scripture that was softer in tone and simpler in interpretation. But that book did not garner much acceptance. Reading Revelation during liturgies of the early church gained the support necessary to see the beauty and validity of this book.

According to Revelation, this book was a series of prophesies given to John. Little is known about the life of John. Shortly after his tour of preaching the message of Jesus, he was exiled to the Island of Patmos, which is 40 miles off the coast of Ephesus. Exile was a common punishment by the Roman government as a way to silence those who are preaching against the government or causing trouble. John is the only apostle who was not martyred in the early church. While on the Island of Patmos John received these visions that he wrote down concerning the church at that time with an allegory to what is to come (Revelation 1:1).

Scholars have debated the author of this text. Some state that John is simply a pseudonym for the actual author and that John himself did not write this text. Most scholars agree that someone named John did actually write this text. Whoever this John is, he follows strongly in style to the other Johannine texts: The Gospel of John and the 3 letter of John. These similarities suggest that the Apostle John who wrote the other Johannine texts is the same person who wrote the Book of Revelation. Through a more careful literary analysis, some modern scholars argue that the John of Revelation is different from the John of the Gospel. John of Revelation tends to use more Hebrew and Aramaic idioms and seems to be more well-versed in the Old Testament than John of the Gospel. These differences led some scholars to suggest that there are two John's who wrote these texts. The other main line of evidence is that John does not name himself as an

apostle in the Book and instead states that he is a prophet. Whatever side of the fence you may fall on in this discussion is largely inconsequential for understanding the Book. Either way, one of Jesus' disciples named John prophesized this important Biblical text.

### Literary Structure of the Book of Revelation

The topic of the structure of the book is immensely important. The book's title gives away so much meaning and recolors the book in many ways. The original title of the book, and its Greek title, is "the Apocalypse." No title could be more misleading to a modern audience which led to the change from "apocalypse" to "revelation." Greek speaking people of the first centuries of the first millennium would not be confused by such a title. An apocalypse is an "unveiling" or a "revealing." Anyone reading or hearing that title would understand immediately that this book is going to unveil or reveal something about the mystery of God or God's actions in the near future as indicated by Revelation 1:3. They would not assume what we hear today of end-times and the destruction of the world. This more destructive understanding of the word "apocalypse" is purely modern. If we want to grasp the meaning of this book we too must think of it in terms of the original Greek understanding of "unveiling" or "revealing."

The Book of Revelation fits into a genre of literature called Apocalyptic literature. In the Scriptures we have four principle examples of apocalyptic literature: The Book of Daniel, The Book of Zephaniah, the Book of Joel, and the Book of Revelation. All of these books have the same basic characteristics: allegorical meanings, revealing the nature of God, and use of cryptic imagery. Apocalyptic literature is challenging for a few reasons. The principal reason for its cryptic style is two-fold. If I were writing about the nature of God, who is beyond imaging and cannot be depicted, I would be very cautious to explain too much. If I gave information about seeing God, every Jewish person would know that I am a false prophet, convict me of blasphemy, and then kill me. Similarly, if I predict something is going to happen and it doesn't, then I am declared a false prophet and will be put to death as a false prophet. These two reasons are largely based on the cultural situation and paint a picture of apocalyptic literature as a human institution or by human ingenuity. The second reason why apocalyptic literature is allegorical or shrouded in confusing images is because God's will is shrouded in mystery. I would struggle to paint a picture of God's will and the finality of the world in any human language, thus Revelation needs to be shrouded in that mystery and interpreted with caution. Nevertheless we must recognize the challenges that come with apocalyptic literature. 1. The author is trying to explain a mystery that is beyond our imagining. 2. The imagery may not make sense to subsequent generations and must be understood both in light of the author's time and in ours. 3. It is not for us to know the time and season but to listen attentively to the meaning.

Outside of the scope of apocalyptic literature, Revelation has a structure of its own. In contrast to the other books of the New Testament, Revelation has a very clearly delineated structure that gives motion and direction to the book itself. Revelation begins with the announcement to the Asian churches of impending problems. It quickly shifts from the seven Asian churches to the beginning of the end starting with seven seals, the seventh seal opening the seven trumpets, the trumpets end with the seven bowls. These groups of seven build the progression of the book and the progression of God's revelation. Although it seems like Revelation progresses in series, the

progression of book is closer to concentric circles or analogous to climbing a mountain. Each of the sets of seven are like three cycles around the mountain with the seventh of each set leading to the final conclusion. Thus the seventh of each set culminates in the final revelation of God and the restoration of the entire world in Christ. Within these motifs are several characters who explain these events: the beast, the dragon, the woman, and the child. The whole book earns for the final revelation and the final restoration: all visions tend towards it, all events are driven to it.

The last introduction to the literary style of the Book of Revelation centers on John's style. All the Johannine writings share one similar characteristic: the range of meaning. John's Gospel is an excellent example of this range of meaning that can be contained within a book of Scripture. In John 3 we meet the woman at the well. The well has several meanings: a place to get water, a place to quench one's thirst, the stagnancy of the people of Israel, the people of Israel, the place to meet a wife, and the encounter with new life. The simple object of a well not only contains this much meaning but John intended for us to see all these possible meaning through the use of this object. This concept dominates the Book of Revelation. In each passage we will be challenged with finding the range of meaning that John intends through these visions to help us understand God's action and prepare for his coming. Many of these allusions are rooted in Old Testament stories and images, which means that if you want to understand the Book of Revelation, you need to know the Old Testament well.

#### Method of Interpretation

Unlike other books of the Bible, many methods of interpreting the Book of Revelation emerged among scholars. Each of these have their value and limitations. Given what I said above, we should not assume any one interpretive method is sufficient for this book but that many of them work together to show the true meanings contained within its text.

#### The Historical Interpretation

John wrote this book in a historical time-period with historical figures and special places in mind. This is a given. We should not begin to interpret this book without first beginning to understand the historical setting of the Book of Revelation. From the first chapter we meet the seven churches of Asia, these are real places. John mentions Ceasar Nero (13:18) in a subsequent chapter, he is real person. Anyone trying to interpret this text without first understanding the historical setting will be misled. Although the historical setting is vital to understanding John's words, it is limited due to the manifold way that John writes. John takes a historical situation, place, or person and then adds additional layers of meaning to that person, place, or situation to explain his vision. We cannot accept a purely historical model of understanding the book.

#### The Preterist View

Much like the historical interpretation the Preterist View states that John *only* wrote for the people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century; his entire book is designed to help people understand the events and situations of 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. In some ways this view is true. John is writing to people of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, he is writing in a historical context with people and situations needing explanation, and he is interpreting the signs of the times. The limitation of this view is that these events didn't

happen as written. God didn't restore the world as interpreted, God didn't reveal himself and end the world as stated, and God didn't end the Roman empire. So, does this mean that John was wrong? He correctly interpreted the signs of the times as he saw them with a prophesy about a future yet to happen. The preterist view is limited by its scope. Revelation can be interpreted both in its own time of the 1<sup>st</sup> century as well as in each subsequent century.

#### The Futurist View

The Futurist View is the exact opposite of the Preterist View. Where the Preterist View focused on the events of the 1<sup>st</sup> century as the lens through which to interpret this book, the Futurist View focuses on a future through which these events will come true. If they didn't come true in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, then they must come true in a future century. This view lends to many of the widely varying interpretations we see today. Many people use this view as a way of denouncing sects of Christianity, as authority to depose leaders, as a way to interpret events, and as a way to show God's curse or favor. I hope you see the dangers in all of these methods of using this view.

#### The Idealist View

No one theme dominates the Book of Revelation like the fight of good against evil: the dragon fought against God's people, Michael fought the dragon, the woman hid from the dragon, the dragon was cast down, God is victorious in the end. The Idealist View paints the Book of Revelation as a story showing the fight of good against evil. Its just that simple. All historical situations are simply the same fight characterized in the same general fight.

#### Typologies:

In combination with and in contrast to the various views listed above are general typologies that will dominate the Book of Revelation. The Passover and the Liturgy. This one theme is front and center throughout most of the book. The elders are worshipping, the feast happens at the end, the Passover from this world to the next, the liberation of the people like in the Exodus.

Numerology. Numbers play a huge role in both understanding and interpreting this book. Seven is a number of completion. Ten is also a number of completion but also connected with the five books of the law (5 x 2). Four is the number of eternity or a long time. 3 ½ is connected with the amount of time in exile as well as half of seven. Carefully read and interpret the numbers.