

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 1 - Introduction

John, the writer of the Book of Revelation, sets out to tell his readers something vital about the paradox of the days and years ahead: they will be the best of times, and they will be the worst of times. Some fellow named Dickens seems to have borrowed that theme several centuries later. The question we must attempt to answer (one of many we will explore) is this: was John thinking in terms of what was immediately ahead, possibly during his lifetime? Or what was far ahead.....well into an indefinite future? The answer determines if Revelation will affect us, or if its predictions already occurred in the past.

I will confess that up until only a few months ago I did not think I would ever teach the Book of Revelation. It was for the simple reason that so many commentaries had already been produced about it that I couldn't imagine what I could possibly offer that could add to what has already been said. However, so many people approached me and asked me if I would reconsider that I thought I'd at least explore the idea a bit deeper. After some additional research I determined that perhaps I *could* approach this admittedly challenging, yet fascinating, book from a different angle than has typically been done. And that angle is to better explore just where John got his ideas from, why he used the language and symbols he chose, and then once determining his sources going to those same sources (where possible) to help establish the context for John's thinking with the result being a better understanding of what the book truly intends to tell us. I'll talk more about that, later.

First let's get some of the preliminaries and housekeeping out of the way; we'll begin by identifying just who this John the Revelator is. The truth is there is no way to know for certain; all we have is a first name and no family name. Of course that likely means that this man was so well known to those of his time that no family name was needed. The consensus of Bible scholars is that this is the same John that was one of the original 12 disciples that Yeshua chose, and is the namesake of the Gospel of John as well as the 3 letters called first, second and third John. Perhaps the most conclusive piece of hard evidence to identify the writer of Revelation as John the Apostle comes from the early Church Father Irenaeus. Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp and Polycarp knew John personally as one of John's students. Polycarp says that it was John the Apostle who wrote Revelation and Irenaeus recorded this information. Further, other early Church Fathers dating to the 2nd and early 3rd centuries such as Justin, Clement, Origen, Tertullian and Hippolytus all attest that it was John the Apostle who wrote Revelation. While this may not qualify as iron clad laboratory proof, it includes the testimony of an eye witness and is the strongest of circumstantial evidence. Therefore I shall proceed with the understanding that the John of Revelation is John, the son of Zebedee, 1 of the original 12 Galilean disciplines of Christ.

While Christianity generally thinks of Paul as that Apostle who held the sole or even ultimate authority over the believing congregations of the Jewish Diaspora (those outside of the Holyland), and this because Paul saw himself (and is rightly described) as the Apostle to the

gentiles, that was not entirely the case. Other named and unnamed evangelists of Christ as Savior (almost all Jewish so far as we know) had established their own congregations in Asia and/or were received by believing congregations as having authority. So too, then, was John well known to all the Messianic congregations of Asia and as we'll see from the tone of his letters to the 7 congregations in chapters 2 and 3, he had authority and fully expected what he said to be taken seriously.

Especially during the 1st century (the time when all the writers of the New Testament lived) virtually all of the known believing congregations were Jewish synagogues and (broadly speaking) whatever gentiles who came to Christ attended those synagogues and worshipped alongside the believing Jews. Please note that I am carefully avoiding using the word "churches" to label these Messianic congregations mainly led by Jews. That is because the mental picture we draw when we think of a church is of a group of gentile believers in Christ meeting in a building constructed or purchased for that purpose. In Greek (the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament that we possess are written in Greek) the word that our English Bibles translate as church is *ekklesia*; and *ekklesia* is a rather generic word meaning assembly; or in a religious context "congregation". Church is an English word that came centuries later and was at one point substituted for the Greek *ekklesia*. Long after the Messianic movement had been taken over by gentiles and Jews were excluded, the facilities where Christians met became known by English speakers as "churches", and the overall body of Christians was labeled "the church". Thus by replacing the word *ekklesia* with "church" in our Bibles an anachronism was created. That is, a concept that did not exist in the 1st century A.D. has been injected into that era by Bible translators who came much later. So the notion of an exclusively gentile group of Christ believers called "the church" was written into New Testament history and the presence of Jewish believers and leadership evaporated. Therefore only occasionally in our study of Revelation will I use the words "the church" or "churches" as those simply aren't there in the Scriptures and it paints a less than accurate picture of what the New Testament expresses.

One of the great unsettled questions about the book of Revelation is when John might have written it. Some argue for a date before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. The argument is basically that John makes no mention of the destruction and therefore it must surely have not yet happened. Preterists argue for this early date for another reason that we'll talk about in a few minutes. Another point that is used to favor a pre-destruction date is because persecution of Christians is discussed with John as a witness to it and victim of it. Nero is infamous for his persecution of Believers during 64 -65 A.D. so it is thought that this is the persecution that affected John. However the same early Church Father Irenaeus who reported his teacher Polycarp (a disciple and friend of John) saying that John wrote Revelation also said that John had received his apocalyptic vision during the reign of Domitian who ruled from 81-96 A.D. Other early Christian writers confirmed what Irenaeus claimed. Also it should be noted that Nero's persecutions tended to be rather localized while Domitian's were Empire-wide.

The cause of Domitian's persecutions against Christians? He demanded that they practice Emperor Worship as was required of all Roman citizens, and many Believers refused. The time of Domitian's persecutions coincided with the era when gentiles were wresting control of the

Jewish Messianic movement away from Jews. Up through the time of the destruction of the Temple, gentiles who joined the Jewish-led Messianic movement were seen by Rome as having converted to a strange new sect of Judaism and thus had become Jews. Special privileges had been given to Jews under a series of Roman Emperors that had exempted them from Emperor Worship, provided they agreed to pray for the well being of the Emperor. Since for a long time the gentile Believers were seen by Rome as part of the Jewish Messianic movement (and thus were deemed Jews), then they, too, had been exempted from Emperor Worship and so were not subject to prosecution. All that changed under Domitian because by that time gentiles dominated the Messianic movement and made it clear that despite their faith in a Jewish Messiah they were definitely not Jews. Ironically, as gentiles they had no government exemption from Emperor Worship and were prosecuted when they refused, while their Jewish brothers continued unaffected as they retained their exemption. Such is the confusion that occurs during times of transition as new forces arise and new agendas collide bringing unintended consequences.

One other piece of evidence seems to put the time of the writing of Revelation well after the Temple destruction in 70 A.D. As a result of the Temple destruction Jews were mentally, emotionally and spiritually devastated. They were also afraid. So as Jewish historians, prophets, and leaders began contemplating and writing about their experiences and their future, they of course connected their catastrophe with what the Old Testament Prophets had to say, particularly those predictions of just such a destruction that mirrored that of the Babylonian exile (the Babylonian exile had never left the consciousness of Jews even 600 years after it happened anymore than the massacres of Muslims by the Christian Crusaders have never left the consciousness of modern day Islam 1000 years after they occurred). So because the Jews now feared the Roman government Jewish scribes began referring to Rome as Babylon to disguise their intent. That is, when they were prophesying against or criticizing Rome, they would not say Rome; they'd say Babylon. Therefore since John evidently refers in several places to Rome by calling it Babylon, it makes it probable that he wrote his Apocalypse well after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. when doing that became a standard practice. While I didn't always think so, the evidence now forces me to conclude that John wrote Revelation around 90 A.D. as a very old man, about 2 decades after the Temple was destroyed.

It seems that John received his visions and wrote his Apocalypse while he was in exile on the Island of Patmos. Patmos is an island located about 35 miles off the west coast of present day Turkey. It is well attested that this island was at least partly used by the Roman government as a prison island. John clearly states in chapter 1 that he been banished to this island because he was preaching the Word of God. We can take that to mean both the Gospel and the Holy Scriptures. We have no more information than that about where he was, and why he was there, when God sent these amazing visions to him. But it was common among Biblical Prophets that they received their oracles or visions from God while under duress. While some scholars, mainly agnostic and atheist Bible scholars doubt the truth of it history itself shows that it is entirely plausible that John was exiled to Patmos especially because this would have happened during the time of Emperor Domitian.

I'll take just a moment to remind you that while John's writings appear in the New Testament,

no such thought, concept, or document as a New Testament existed in John's day. So while John would certainly have been aware and no doubt had read some of Paul's letters and probably knew of at least some of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), by no means were these writings seen as inspired of God let alone as Holy Scripture. These documents indeed carried authority, but were not placed on the level of Holy Scripture by Believers. The Bible that John (and all writers of the New Testament) knew and accepted was the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible; what Christians call the Old Testament.....and nothing else. It would not be until the late 2nd century that even the thought of canonizing the writings of Paul, John, Peter, and the Gospel writers and making them into a Christian Bible was even brought up, and this by a layman; a wealthy shipping magnate named Marcion. Even though gentiles now outnumbered Jews as followers of Yeshua by dozens to one, and even though gentiles were now the leadership of the Christ movement with Jews being excluded, Marcion's idea of a Christian Bible was still seen by the gentile leadership as heretical and he was promptly admonished for such an outrageous idea. It would not be until early in the 3rd century that the believing gentile leadership was ready to reconsider and debate Marcion's proposition and the first Christian Bible was created. It contained most of the books we have in our modern New Testaments, but some like the Book of Hebrews were controversial and not accepted by all. Interestingly, Revelation was one of the first books adopted into the New Testament canon. The Old Testament was retained in its entirety.

I wanted to broach that subject with you for a couple of reasons. The first being that various eminent Bible scholars have taken very different views as to how to interpret Revelation. I'm going to go into some depth on this matter because it might surprise some of you (but probably not most of you) to know that many Bible scholars and modern evangelical denominations view Revelation as completely stand-alone, having no connection whatsoever to the Old Testament Prophets, or to anything presented in the Old Testament. In fact, while I haven't catalogued them all, from an anecdotal standpoint my estimation is that the majority of modern day Revelation commentaries take that view. Second there are several approaches so let's examine the 4 main ones taken to interpret Revelation. G.K. Beale has done a wonderful job of briefly and cogently describing each of these views and I'll borrow extensively from him.

First what is called the Preterist view; this word has the inherent meaning of things happening in the past. So the Preterist position is that Revelation speaks not to the future but to things that happened in the past. Specifically, then, for them Revelation revolves around the destruction of the Temple. In other words, it is John either truly predicting the coming destruction of the Temple that happened in 70 A.D. or he wrote it after the destruction in a style that made it appear to be prophetic. Thus Preterists insist that John wrote Revelation during the time of Nero in 64 or 65 A.D.

Preterists believe that all references to Babylon do not actually refer to Babylon or Rome, but rather refer to Israel. Thus Israel is painted in a very bad light as a nation and a people who are thoroughly rejected by God and are already judged for destruction. Thus Israel becomes the great persecutor of the Church; not Rome or Babylon. Preterists inherently believe that God is through with Israel; that God has completely and forever divorced His people Israel; and that He has replaced Israel with the Church (meaning the gentile Church). So Preterists are automatically Replacement Theology adherents and the emergence of the modern State of

Israel is an unwelcome event.

I don't intend to attack any of these viewpoints. On the other hand, I will say that the Preterist view is doctrine driven as opposed to Scripture driven. In fact, the Preterist view doesn't even align very well with recorded history.

Second is called the Historicist view. This view says that all the talk in Revelation about seal, trumpet and bowl judgments form a symbolic picture of various ages and stages of church development. Further, since this is a prevalent view in the Western Church (but far less so in the Eastern, Slavic, Coptic, or other branches of the Church) then it is common for Historicists to attach any specific Bible related historical event to some event within the Western Church. As examples: the corruption and power plays within the papacy of the Catholic Church that has occurred from time to time over the centuries and the Reformation begun by Martin Luther. Thus the signs and symbols of Revelation relate only to events that somehow involve the Western Church. Therefore over the centuries as each generation of Historicists sees events unfolding around them they connect them to signs and symbols in Revelation and find a reason to predict the imminent return of Christ in their day.

This view's major flaw, of course, is that it has always been wrong in predicting the end of the world and the imminent coming of Yeshua. Today some scholars who criticize this viewpoint of interpretation mock it as "newspaper exegesis". That is, people pick up the newspaper, see some terrible happening (today those happenings usually involve Muslims and the Middle East) and attach those happenings to something John said in Revelation. In other words, these current events are seen as prophecy being fulfilled. Although this view goes back centuries before WWI, if one is interested one can go back to Christian writings leading up to, during, and shortly following WWI that show how a large portion of Western Christians believed that the horrific events of those war-torn years were Revelation prophecy being fulfilled and that both the end of the world and the return of Christ should be expected at any moment. Many Christians committed suicide, stopped having babies, sold everything they had and went into isolation, separated themselves from their communities and unbelieving members of their families and more in what they viewed as the proper preparation for Christ's return and based it on symbols and signs found in Revelation that seemed to align with current events.

A third view of interpretation is the Futurist view. Futurists say that everything John had to say was for a time in the distant future to him (except, perhaps, for the letters to the 7 Churches of Asia). The Futurist view says John's visions should be taken fully literally AND chronologically. In other words, in the order that we find John presenting his visions in Revelation, along with the content within them, it will be the same order that these things will occur in history.....but at a time that was future to him and at least some of it still future to us. For example: according to the chronological order of John's visions Israel will come back as a nation and then following that the Church will experience the Rapture, then there will be a tribulation period lasting 7 years, afterwards the Anti-Christ will reveal himself and begin to rule, and then finally the nations of the world will gang-up to attack and destroy Israel. Next Christ returns to fight those nations and destroy them, the Millennium begins with Yeshua ruling, later Satan foments a rebellion that God puts down, and then later still we enter the eternal realm as time comes to an end.

Regarding the Futurist view, as Beale says so correctly: “In short, (for them) the Bible is interpreted by modern events first, instead of by itself”. Therefore, in the Futurist view, signs and symbols in Revelation will become real and literal objects and events, and since what John says only has relevance to the future end times, then it pertains only to Christians living in the end times. Christians living at any other time in history have no connection to the Book of Revelation.

There is a modified type of Futurist view that still claims that the Church is the true Israel but that there will be no pre-tribulation rapture. Rather Believers will remain on earth to suffer the 7 year tribulation. And there are a few other iterations of Futurism that change a few details, but we won't go there today.

The fourth predominant view is called the Redemptive-Historical Idealist view, or Idealist for short. In this view Revelation is not literal at all. It but depicts a symbolic battle between the forces of good and evil. Thus all is symbolism and allegory. The seals, bowls and trumpets are merely emblematic of various generations of human history. The letters to the 7 churches apply to all churches worldwide at any time; or they each depict characteristics present in a certain era of church development. Modern higher critics tend to adopt this view because it avoids any supernatural or prophetic entanglements. Since so many higher critics are agnostics or atheists who don't believe in the supernatural or the prophetic, then this view allows them to circumvent the sticky subject of the involvement of a god or of divine predictions; something that their fellow academics find ignorant and primitive.

We are going to proceed without adopting or rejecting any one of these named viewpoints. For one reason, scholars are fond of lumping a number of attributes together, giving the collection a name, and then fighting hammer and tong to keep it intact and pure. Thus a Bible student is required to accept one of these named views in-full or reject it in-full. I don't accept that premise. Each has something to offer but none are a perfect representation of the truth. Further, the instant one of these named views of how to interpret Revelation is adopted prior to study, then we find ourselves with a predetermined outcome. While there is no doubt that I will indeed be presenting our study of Revelation from a certain worldview, my hope is to do my best to remain intellectually honest while being spiritually sensitive and accepting Revelation as the inspired Word of God that it is. And even when we conclude (probably at least a year from now) there will still be mystery and unanswered questions. It is our job to discover how to understand it as best we can with the information we have up to this point in human history, and then to apply it to our lives as well as our expectations without trying to fit it into a manmade pattern that is necessarily at least somewhat arbitrary.

So here is the worldview that I spoke of that will be the platform from which I will teach Revelation. First and foremost the Book of Revelation is divine truth. Second, it is real; the events depicted are actual; they have happened or will happen or both. Third, the Book of Revelation does not and cannot stand alone. It is fully dependent on the Old Testament, especially on the Prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah (other prophets as well but a little less so). Fourth, the miracles spoken of and the divine power behind those miracles is real, alive, and active. If there is a fifth element of my Revelation worldview it would be that we shall take Revelation literally. However I must explain what I mean by that. Literally does NOT mean that

we are obligated to take what are clearly Hebrew expressions, metaphors or symbols word for word. Literally means (for example) that when a miracle is encountered, it is an authentic miracle. When God gives a vision, it is an actual divine vision and not the dream machinations of an overwrought or unstable person, nor is it the person (in our case John) claiming a vision but in fact it is but his own thoughts and plans. When words and commands are ascribed as coming from God or his angelic servants, they are true and actual. But literal also demands that we understand what those words meant to John in that day, at that place, in his culture and his language. This is a difficult task but we'll endeavor to do that as best as we can.

Something that often gets overlooked when we study Revelation is this: we are getting this information fifth-handed. The opening verses explain bluntly that God gave this revelation to Yeshua. Then Yeshua passed it on to one or more angelic messengers. The angelic messengers, in concert with Christ, showed it to John in the form of visions. And John wrote it all down to give it to us, the fifth in the chain. God to Christ to angelic messengers to John to all Believers. So it is truly a misnomer to call the Book of Revelation "The Apocalypse of John" as it is alternately known by. More truthfully this is Christ's, or God's Apocalypse; not John's. And if we are to understand it best that is how we must view it. John's only duty was to write down what he was told to write down, which, by the way, was completely typical of the Old Testament Prophets.

Revelation, interestingly, has not one quote from the Old Testament. Paul's letters, on the other hand, consist of nearly 50% Old Testament quotes. Why the significant discrepancy? First and foremost we must remember that Paul was an intellectual who dedicated his early life to Torah study and attended perhaps the most prestigious religious school of his day: the Academy of Gamaliel, located in Jerusalem. John on the other hand came from a family of common fishermen in the Galilee. While John was fully literate, whatever religious education he received would have been from the local synagogue (very likely at Kaphar Nahum.... .Capernaumwhich was located on the Sea of Galilee). Naturally he also learned much from the 3 years (or maybe a little less) of his personal association with Yeshua. Paul had memorized much Scripture and clearly John had not.

Nonetheless, there are many allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures throughout the Book of Revelation. In fact, for those scholars who don't discount the Old Testament completely in their assessments of Revelation, the consensus is that John has included about 500 allusions to the Old Testament that include allusions to the Torah, the Psalms, Samuel, Chronicles and other books; but primarily it is to the Prophets. These allusions are critical to understanding Revelation. John did not create Revelation in a vacuum. And the Lord did not give John visions that had no concrete context for John to be able to understand and connect with. In fact, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it has become clear that at least a few of his allusions are even to the writings of the Essenes. Peder Borgen, a renowned Bible Historian says this: "Since the Old Testament was the thought-world of Jesus, the disciples and the other first Christians, and since the Old Testament was woven into the very fabric of Jewish institutions and Jewish ways of life, it therefore determined the theological issues raised to a large extent, either negatively or positively".

Unfortunately relatively few Bible scholars acknowledge this fact, and even fewer Pastors

seem to be aware of this reality. The interpretation of the New Testament in general depends on the reader knowing about what the Old Testament Prophets proclaim, what the Torah teaches, and the history of Israel that we find in the progress of the Old Testament beginning with Abraham. It might surprise you to know that while some of the lesser known early Church Fathers such as Andrew of Caesarea, Apringius of Beja, Athanasius and a few others commented on Revelation, the first scholarly book on John's use of the Old Testament in writing Revelation didn't even occur until Adolf Schlatter's work in 1912, barely over 100 years ago! Only after another 7 decades passed did another book approaching the direct connections between the *Tanakh* and Revelation finally appear in 1984! This is how estranged the Christian world is from the Old Testament despite many who would try to deny it; and it is why most study and preaching on the New Testament is allegorical. Without the Old Testament, Revelation especially is very nearly only several chapters of frustrating gibberish that allows virtually open-ended interpretations by creative commentators.

But now a warning. Because Revelation relies heavily on the Old Testament Prophets, doing so by means of allusions rather than quotes, the task of understanding and interpreting becomes even larger. So that we're all together, let me define the term allusion. An allusion is meant to call something to mind without expressing it directly. In my lessons on Acts and Romans I told you that it was the Jewish literary norm in the New Testament era for a writer to quote an Old Testament passage, and then comment about it. But what the writer actually intended was to use the brief Scripture quotation as merely a reference to the entire context of where that quotation appeared in the Bible. The quotation was meant to call to mind an entire section of Scripture; it was not intended that only those few quoted words were the point. Why do it that way? Because there was no other method of leading a reader to a certain section of Scripture without it. There were no chapter and verse numbers in that era; such a thing wouldn't happen for nearly 1500 years! So today while I can write or speak about the Book of Ezekiel and say to you that the context is Ezekiel 37 verses 1 through 28, no such luxury of brevity was available to New Testament writers. Instead they would have to say: "And as the Prophet Ezekiel says, *Therefore prophesy; say to them that Adonai ELOHIM says, 'My people! I will open your graves and make you get up out of your graves, and I will bring you into the land of Isra'el. Then you will know that I am ADONAI- when I have opened your graves and made you get up out of your graves, my people!'*" Then a hearer or reader would recognize what part of the Ezekiel scroll the writer was referring to and remember it or look up ALL of it and that would be the broader context around which the author was writing.

However John does not use word-for-word Old Testament quotations likely for the reasons I told you about earlier: he was not a trained scholar; he was a fisherman. Although he clearly knew his Bible he would use rather easily recognizable allusions to point his readers towards certain Old Testament books and passages rather than memorized quotes. I say easily recognizable because while the Old Testament is nearly banished from many branches of modern Christianity, it was the only Bible that existed in his day. And in Jewish society learning about the Hebrew *Tanakh* (Old Testament) began at a very early age for nearly every child.

What does this mean for us? It means that we are going to take a few extensive detours to look at the books and chapters that John alludes to. We're going to especially spend time in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Isaiah because what they prophesied forms the background and context

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for what John was shown in his visions and for what he wrote down. Revelation is largely God showing John how the prophecies of the various Old Testament Prophets fit together. This also means that what we learn in Revelation may well not be exactly what you've heard more popular scholars and preachers and book writers claim is John's meaning.

While my goal is not to create controversy, it might be unavoidable in some areas. I also want to mention that I hope that you who are about to study Revelation with us have also studied the Torah with us because John has a Torah mindset (even if it might be entirely subconscious because he was raised in it). Such a mindset is woven into Revelation. So if you have not studied Torah you will be at a disadvantage. On the other hand, I am going to assume that many of you have not, and so will endeavor to briefly explain things that most Torah students already know.

I will conclude our introduction to Revelation with this thought: this book is the only book in the Bible that promises a divine blessing to any Believer who reads it and studies it. But if when reading you can't understand it, does that bring you the promised blessing? Of course not. A mechanical reading of words without comprehension is of no earthly or heavenly value. Neither does a reading in which allegory rules and the entire premise for interpretation is faulty, bring cause for God to issue that blessing to the reader. The idea is that you DO understand.....correctly. That is to be my goal and hopefully yours. With the Lord's guidance, we shall accomplish it.

Next week we will begin Revelation chapter 1.