

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

This is a preface to a series on the letters to the seven churches recorded in Revelation 2&3. Revelations is a very neglected book apart from a few well-known verses that are often quoted from it. First century symbolism is not familiar to us. It is a book with many problems and varied interpretations. There are various schools of thought, each sure that they alone are right and everyone else is absolutely wrong. There are as many riddles as there are words.

The literature on the subject is enormous. It has been said that the Book of Revelation either finds a man mad or makes him mad! Some of the outstanding Christians have not always valued it as we would expect. Luther put James, Hebrews, 2 Peter and Revelation in a separate list at the end of his New Testament, unsure that they were from the Apostles. He said the writer should not have uttered threats against people not obeying the book when no one knows what it means. He even said that Christ could not be found in the book, though he modified this later.

Yet despite these problems it is a wonderful book full of spiritual treasures. It is a fitting climax for the Bible as its last book. It is the crown and completion of divine revelation. Its presence ensures that the Bible ends on a high note of glory, sovereignty and victory of God, triumph over evil, and the completion of God's purposes in the new heaven and new earth.

Introductory details

The author describes himself to be John. All early writers agree that he is John the Apostle, who also wrote one of the Gospels and the three Johannine epistles. Dionysus of Alexandria later challenged this in the third century, and the debate has continued to this day.

But behind the human author was the divine author, as stated in the opening words, **The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ** (Revelation 1:1,2).

Written at the time of Emperor Domitian 81-96AD, who regarded himself as a god and demanded worship from his people. Christians refused to do this and therefore were subjected to severe persecution. John writes to comfort and support and to assure his readers that God's final victory over evil is certain. God sees His people's sufferings and tears. But Christ lives and reigns forever, and blood will be avenged and enemies destroyed.

This kind of literature is apocalyptic. There are many symbols and pictures to reveal future events in which God's triumph is certain. It alludes to no less than 20 of the Old Testament books (of 404 verses, 278 have references to Old Testament teaching and phrases).

A broad analysis:

- Prologue – chapter 1
- Letters to seven churches – chapters 2-3
- Vision of heaven – chapter 4
- Seven seals – chapter 5 – 8:5
- Seven trumpets – 8:6 – 11:19
- Seven signs – chapters 12-14
- Seven last plagues – chapter 15-16
- God’s final triumph – chapter 17-20
- New heaven and new earth – chapter 21 – 22:5
- Epilogue – chapter 22:6-21

Interpretation

Revelation contains curious beasts with various heads and horns, and a third of the sea turning to blood, among many other things. There are some amazing interpretations – whose ingenuity is only matched by improbability. There are basically four schools of thought.

- (1) Preterist (“Praeter” meaning “past”). This school of thought is that the book was for the church in the first century and ends there. This is right as far as it goes, indeed it must have been meaningful to the first readers. Immediately this rejects those who find references to Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin and Russia’s next move – such references would have been meaningless to first readers.
- (2) Historicist. This school of thought views the book to be the history of the church from Pentecost to the Second Coming.
- (3) Futurist. According to this school of thought. The letters to the seven churches are periods in church history, and chapter 4 onwards are the events immediately before and after the Second Coming.
- (4) Idealist. The idealist views the symbols and pictures in the book as pictures of the struggle between good and evil, God and the devil in every age. True in the 20th century as in 1st century. History is in God’s hands, and He is going to be triumphant.

The value of the book

Perhaps elements from all these viewpoints are necessary for adequate understanding. The basic lesson is that the future belongs to Christ and not human rulers and dictators. Man’s destiny rests with Him. God is fulfilling His purposes through and in the affairs of men.

Take heart and be assured that God will have the last word. His Son is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He shall reign forever and ever. Those who do His will share in His triumph. Those who resist, rebel and spurn Him will be finally and everlastingly lost. **In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world** (John 16:33).