

Revelation 1:1-3 “Apocalypse Now”

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The 1979 movie, *Apocalypse Now*, is an epic about the Vietnam War. I would not recommend it to anyone—unless one wants to view a case study in total depravity. I simply mention it because of its prominent significance in American culture. It is considered to be one of the greatest films ever made. Nominated for 8 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, Best Sound. The Director’s Poll ranks it as the 6th best film of all time. In short, a Special Forces colonel is operating in Cambodia, and has presumably gone insane. So an agency sends a Special Forces captain to “terminate his command with extreme prejudice.” But as the movie unwinds, the viewer wonders who is more insane—the colonel or the captain? The insanity of the movie depicts the whole ethos of the 1960’s counterculture. Drug-induced insanity, absurdity, meaninglessness. The opening scene of the movie captures its nihilistic message. The explosion of napalm in the jungle. The viewer watches orange hellish fire burn while the rock-band, *The Doors*, sing along, “This is the end, my beautiful friend, this is the end, my only friend.”

Well in our text today, we find another *Apocalypse Now*. Indeed, the original, the authentic version from which the movie counterfeits its name. The original *Apocalypse* doesn’t reveal nihilism, meaninglessness, but to the contrary: meaning, the very meaning of life. So that 2,000 years ago, it is *Apocalypse Now*. 2,000 years later it is still *Apocalypse Now*. When we examine the text, we learn the simple message: “Jesus is gonna win.” *Because Jesus is gonna win, you should believe in Him that you might not perish but have eternal life.*

Blessing

No book of the Bible has caught the attention of the church as much as the Revelation. In it we read about a seven-headed dragon whose tail sweeps away a third of the stars from heaven. A swarm of locusts that emerge from the bottomless abyss which blocks out the sun and darkens the Earth with shadow. A mutant beast that emerges from the sea to persecute the church. A great battle in which there is so much bloodshed that the spilled blood rises as high as a horse’s bridle. Leaving a lake of blood as far as the eye can see. Fascinating and even frightening depictions in the Revelation. Which have captured the imagination of the church unlike the content of any other book. Not just the church that is so intrigued with this last book, but the culture as well. Movies such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Pale Rider*. The recent *Sherlock Holmes* movie starring Robert Downey, Jr. When Holmes goes to visit Lord Blackwood in the dark prison. He finds the mad and evil villain reading from the *Revelation*, the mysterious passage seems to fuel his foul deeds. The Book of *Revelation* is used by the rogues to justify whatever kind of weirdness of which one can dream.

Because of the hysteria and mania surrounding this book, Reformed pastors like me just avoid it altogether. Part of the reason is pride, don’t want to appear to be another kook predicting the end-of-time or guessing the identity of the Anti-Christ. Part is practical. The last thing I would want is to split the church over eschatology. Emotionally charged subject. People become fanatical about end-of-time which can create controversy within congregation. So it is tempting for a pastor to skip the *Revelation*. The abuse and misuse shouldn’t limit the use of *Revelation*.

There is a proper use of this book. It is given for a reason. Verse 3, *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it.* Here we have an unexpected Beatitude. This book is given to be a blessing to God's people. Not to everyone in the sanctuary who carelessly hears as it is read. *blessed are those who hear, and who **keep** what is written in it.* Blessed are those who *keep* the message; who heed it. For those who do, this book contains great blessing. That is the purpose for which it is given: To impart God's blessing to those who are so desperate for it. This book is for discouraged Christians, weak faith, burned out with their own sin and failure, barely believing, totally disillusioned with life in this world and feel like there is no hope for them because they are facing death and suffering great tribulation. For these Christians, this book contains unimaginable blessing. What Jesus tells the disciples, *In the world you have tribulation, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.* Cheer, comfort, hope, encouragement for the downtrodden. *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it.* That is why we are in this book, to search for and dig out and mine the riches of God's blessing that He has in store for His downtrodden people. As a pastor, it would be unconscionable to withhold that blessing from those who so desire it.

Symbolic Interpretation

But before we can get to the blessing it would do us well to consider how to how to interpret the book. Which the prologue shows us. The name of the book gives us a big clue. Verse 1, *The revelation of Jesus Christ.* Greek word for revelation is Ἀποκάλυψις from which we get the English word *Apocalypse*. Which I prefer rather than the title, *Revelation*. For a theological reason. The whole Bible is revelation. God reveals Himself in two books: the book of nature, the book of the Bible. The book of nature is *general* revelation. The book of the Bible God is *special* revelation. All Scripture is revelation. This last book is the revelation sent to John in order to mail to the seven churches. Distinct from the rest of the revelation in the Bible. So I often refer to it as the *Apocalypse*. The name, *Apocalypse*, or *Revelation*, means to reveal or unveil. Like going to an art show in our great gallery. RJean has another exhibit. This time, the masterpiece is under a cloth. In the show, she removes the cover to unveil what had been hidden. That is what the *Apocalypse* is. An *unveiling* of that which was hidden. On the world stage of human history, the curtains are pulled back to unveil what is going on behind the scenes. The invisible spiritual forces at work in the world, God's invincible plan that is coming to pass.

The name itself, *Apocalypse*, teaches us how to read it. There is a whole type of literature named after the book. The *Apocalypse* is apocalyptic. There are different genres of literature within Scripture. Historical narrative, Hebrew poetry, parable, epistle. Each calls for its own method of interpretation. Consider Jesus' statement, "*I am the vine. You are the branches.*" What does that mean? Really? Should we interpret that literally, meaning that Jesus is a green stem with leaves on his head? No. Its a metaphor which Jesus employs to teach that we must abide in Him to have life. We must be connected to Him like a branch to a vine. We must be united to Him. We interpret that intuitively, without even thinking about it.

But when it comes to the *Apocalypse*, people want to read it with a hyper-literalism. The word "literal" itself is not helpful. Buzzword used as a litmus test by both sides, progressive and conservative, to draw battle lines. Often leads to an *over-literal* interpretation. When instead we should try to understand the literal intent of the author. We need to interpret it as God intends for

it read. His message is sometimes conveyed symbolically. That is what we have in the *Apocalypse*. It is a book of symbols, images, numbers.

For example, the number *seven* is used 54 times. There are seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, seven lamp stands, seven spirits, a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, seven hills, seven-headed dragon, seven kings, etc. Is that significant? According to the Hebrew mindset, the number seven is a symbolic number. The Hebrew word for seven is a derivative of the word for Sabbath. The Sabbath being the seventh day of the week. After God so gloriously created over the course of six days, He rested on the seventh. The number seven is a symbol of completeness, wholeness. The dominance of the number seven shows how we should read the book, symbolically. Johnson, “When we step into this book we are walking in a world of symbols” (*Triumph*, 12).

Another clue regarding how to read the book. Verse 2, *who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw*. John writes about what he *saw*. The verb is used 52 times. *I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth* (7:1). *I saw another beast coming up out of the earth* (13:1). *I saw a great white throne* (20:11). John records what he saw in these marvelous visions. The *Apocalypse* is a book of pictures, moving pictures, an ancient video. The *Apocalypse* is a book to be seen. This feature, motif is a guide to how we should interpret the book so that we can *see* its message. We cannot press the details of any one of these pictures. Don’t want to pick apart the picture so that you lose the message. When we get to the locust, we don’t ask what is the meaning of their teeth? Their hair? Instead should ask, What is the big picture as a whole? What is the main idea of this scene? So we don’t press the details with a wooden literalism. The details harmonize with the bigger picture. So should ask, What is the central thought of the picture? What is being symbolized here?

Much of what John sees are images that are pervasive throughout the prophetic visions of the Old Testament. One cannot understand the *Apocalypse* apart from the Old Testament. The Son of Man that John sees in Ch. 1—which was used in our Call to Worship—is the Son of Man that Daniel saw in his night vision—the Old Testament reading (Dan. 7). But God doesn’t merely cut and paste Daniel’s visions into the night sky for John to see. The visions are modified. So that the beast that comes up out of sea (Ch. 13) is a combination of the beasts in Daniels’s night vision. John’s visions are given to explain the visions of Daniel. John opens the scroll that Daniel sealed. John unveils that which was sealed by the prophets. The *Apocalypse* is given as a commentary to explain the visions of the Old Testament prophets about the end of the world. To understand the *Apocalypse*, one must read it in light of the Old Testament and not vice versa. So we want to read each text symbolically, looking for the big picture.

Schools of Interpretation

But how does one approach the book as a whole? In the first century, everyone would have interpreted the *Apocalypse* in the same way. But as the centuries passed, what happened? Christ delayed His coming. So there arose differing views about how to approach the book. Resulting in four major schools of interpretation. I would rather not go through them and just get to the message of the book. But I think it would be beneficial to mention them since none of us live on an island. None of us are blank slates. If one has been a Christian long enough, or even if one is still an unbeliever but has been to the movies, then your view of the *Apocalypse* has been influenced by one of these schools of interpretation. If we can become aware of our

presuppositions, our assumptions about the Apocalypse, then that will help us to approach the book in a fresh way and see its message as never before.

First, is Discovery Channel approach. The most common approach today: preterism. The preterists maintain that the events referred to in the book of Revelation are all fulfilled in the year AD 70. Future from the time from which John writes, but history for us. Nothing in it applicable to the modern reader. Not only the view of skeptics, but increasingly popular among conservative Reformed theologians albeit for different reasons. Men by whom I have been greatly influenced. Judgment, war, antichrist are all fulfilled in the first century, before or during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Nothing applies to us today except maybe Ch. 21 and 22. What remains of history then is that the gospel will go forth in great power, gates of hell won't prevail against the church. Christianity will spread around the globe. Transforming culture and usher the world into a golden age of humanity. The thought of that is exciting, very optimistic, which makes me want to buy into it. But can't. Because of the date.

Date of the book is critical. The year in which John writes. The date required to support Preterism must be an early date, before AD 70 when Jerusalem was conquered by the Roman general, Titus. But the traditional view takes a very late date for the Apocalypse; AD 95-96, late in the reign of Domitian. First, external evidence. We have the testimony of Irenaeus who records that John writes during Domitian's reign. Irenaeus' testimony is confirmed by Clement, Origin, Eusebius and Jerome. Second, the internal evidence within the book. The Apocalypse depicts universal persecution. Persecution was severe before AD 70 under Nero, but mainly confined to the city of Rome. Yet John writes to the churches of Asia (modern Turkey) that are suffering for the faith which would be more indicative of the widespread persecution during the reign of Domitian, 95-96. Other factors that favor a late date. No mention of the pioneering work of Paul among the churches of Asia which would show that some time has elapsed since his ministry ended in AD 64. The spiritual decline of church in Ephesus. Probably not so likely during Timothy's ministry or immediately afterward. Rather, it would have taken some time. The rise of the Nicolaitan sect in Pergamum assumes some distance in time from the apostolic founders of the church. The description of the church at Laodicea as rich would require a late date. The city was destroyed by an earthquake around AD 60 which consequently would have taken decades to rebuild before anyone could recover financially so as to be labeled as wealthy. Preterism fails because of the late date in which John writes, AD 95-96.

Second, school of interpretation is *historicism*. Popular in the Middle Ages. Unlike Preterism which views the events of the Apocalypse as past history, historicism sees the Book of *Revelation* as concurrent history; a historical road map from the time of Christ until one's own time. Commentators identify the emergence of the beast from the sea as the rise of Islam in 7th century; Reformers typically interpret the harlot (Ch. 17) as the Roman Catholic Church. In this manner, these interpreters plot the history of Western civilization throughout the pages of the Apocalypse and find, who? Napoleon, Third Reich. The weakness of this school is twofold. One it interprets the visions in chronological sequence. Presents some serious problems. In the sixth seal (6:13) the stars fall, yet in Trumpet 4 the stars are in the sky (8:12). Another example, the birth of the Messiah (Rev. 12) takes us back in time to events before the founding of the seven churches in Chs. 2-3.

In other words, as you read the Apocalypse, every once in a while, you feel like you are starting over. You are. There is a recapitulation, repetition within the book. The Apocalypse is a series of seven visions that span the same time from the 1st coming of Christ until the 2nd coming. Each of these seven cycles depicts the same spiritual war, each from a different perspective. We

have seven different camera angles, filming the same spiritual battle, but each from a distinct vantage point. Like replay in the football game. The replay doesn't show the game continuing. But reruns the last play from a different camera angle: 50-yard line, end zone, Goodyear blimp. The Apocalypse is a series of seven visions filming the same spiritual battle from different camera angles. First, Ch. 1-3, seven churches; second, 4-7, seven seals; third, 8-11, seven trumpets; fourth, 12-14, the seven-headed dragon and the woman; fifth, 15-16, seven bowls of wrath; sixth 17-19, the seven-horned beast and the porn star of the world; final vision 20-22. These parallel visions, the replays, are not boring reruns, there is an ascending, climactic order to them. Known as *progressive parallelism*. There is a progression in the parallel visions. Each takes us deeper and deeper into the mysterious plan of God. (Full disclosure: this is the school to which I subscribe, developed by Augustine.)

Last, futurism. The most popular in the American evangelical church. Which holds that the events in Revelation are future not only to John, but to 21st century readers as well. Ch. 4 following are all future, events which remain to be fulfilled in the generation that immediately precedes the return of Christ. On the eve of the Parousia. Granted, there are predictive elements to Revelation. It is about the future. The problem with futurism is that it fails to take into account John's original audience and therefore misses the whole point of the book. John is writing to persecuted Christians in the first century. John himself has been banished from Ephesus. Exiled to the prison island of Patmos. The ancient Alcatraz of the Aegean Sea. Would the futurist interpretation provide any consolation for John? No. Would it provide any comfort to his original readers? Imagine yourself as a persecuted, first-century Christian. Paul was beheaded. Peter crucified upside down. Nero burns Christians at night in his back yard to light up the garden. What hope would it be to know that in 2,000 years a dude named Henry Kissinger will show up? "O well now I can go on! I am so encouraged!" As a suffering first-century believer, what comfort would it be to know that in 2,000 years the U.S. will invade Iraq? "Wow, now I feel so strengthened! So edified!" Probably not. The Apocalypse isn't written to first century persecuted Christians of Asia so that 2,000 years later American Christians might play prophecy games and guess the identity of the Anti-Christ. Sorry!

Original Audience

In order to interpret the book properly, we must take into account the original audience. The persecuted Christians in the seven churches of Asia to whom John writes. We will never be able to understand it apart from the context and circumstances of the seven churches. Believers are being severely and bitterly persecuted. Some are wasting away in dingy dungeons (2:10). Antipas is slain in Pergamum (2:13). Some thrown to the wild beasts (6:8). Many are beheaded (20:4). So the Apocalypse is given to encourage and comfort these suffering Christians. To unveil God's hidden plan for the ages. To show them that things are not as they seem. Yes, when the two witnesses are slain, those who dwell on the earth will rejoice and party and make merry. But things are not as they seem. Before its over, they will beg the mountains to fall upon them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. Yes, the great porn-star toasts the beast's victory with the blood of the saints, but things are not as they appear. Before the end, she will be cast down and her smoke will rise forever and ever. The *Apocalypse* is an unveiling to show suffering Christians that things are not as they appear. They seem defeated. But not. "To them is given the assurance that God sees their tears (7:17); their prayers are influential in world affairs (8:3, 4) and their death is precious in His sight. Their final victory is assured (15:2); their blood will be

avenged (19:2); their Christ lives and reigns forever and ever. He governs the world in the interest of His church. He is coming again to take His people to Himself in ‘the marriage supper of the Lamb; and to live with them forever in a rejuvenated universe.’ (Hendrikson, *Conquerors*, 7ff). That is the purpose of the *Apocalypse*, to show that things are not as they seem. To unveil what is hidden. The false appearance of reality seemingly contradicts the reality of God so that suffering Christians *appear* defeated, but in real reality they are more than conquerors because God is on His throne and to His right hand is the Christ who is sovereign Lord of history and controls every single world event. That is the message of the Apocalypse: Unveiled Hope. The message that applies not only to first century Christian, but to suffering and downtrodden believers throughout the church age.

While in seminary, in New Testament class studying this mysterious book, Dr. Ireland told the story—perhaps autobiographical, perhaps urban legend—of some students who just finished final exams. It was a stressful week, so on Friday night they are blowing steam at the gym playing basketball. Time to close, as they are packing up to leave, they notice the janitor in the bleachers, reading the Bible. He was waiting patiently for them to finish so that he could lock up. So these enthusiastic and ever helpful seminary students walk over to investigate. The man is reading the Bible, so perhaps they could help. Seminary students read the Bible, in fact they know it all. To their delight, they discover that he is reading the Apocalypse. They just took the final exam on it. They began to impress upon him their great knowledge of the book, wax theologially about the different views of the 1,000-year reign: amillennial, premillennial, postmillennial. Then they discuss the divergent schools in the history of interpretation: Preterism, historicism, futurism. After they go on at length they finally ask him if he understands what the book is about. He replies, “Yessir. I do. Jesus is gonna win.” That is the simple message of the apocalypse. Even *Apocalypse Now*: Jesus is gonna win. Amen.