

The Revelation of Jesus Christ:

Going Beyond Literary Analysis

Introduction: This prophetic book is not just about historic, current or future events, it is the “unveiling of Jesus Christ”. Our aim in this study of Revelation is not just to become smarter or more Biblically astute but to fall more deeply in love with Jesus. Our aim is bridge the gap that exist not only between our understanding and the truth of the Biblical text, but also, the much greater chasm between our heart and heaven. To study any portion of scripture without the stated goal of becoming more worshipful is an exercise of both futility and vanity. We must see the scripture as a compass that directs us to the God of the scripture and as we do so, we are assured that our hearts will come alive in our pursuit of truth. Biblical study has many academic elements but it is a unique discipline in and of itself. By default, the student of scripture must submit their intellect to the God, who alone gives understanding. As we begin our study of Revelation, let’s begin by inviting the Holy Spirit to grant us entrance into the mind and heart of God.

From Thomas Nelson Study Bible:

“Just as Genesis is the book of beginnings, Revelation is the book of consummation. In it, the divine program of redemption is brought to fruition, and the holy name of God is vindicated before all creation. Although there are numerous prophecies in the Gospels and Epistles, Revelation is the only New Testament book that focuses primarily on prophetic events. Its title means “unveiling” or “disclosure.” Thus, the book is an unveiling of the character and program of God. Penned by John during his exile on the island of Patmos, Revelation centers around visions and symbols of the resurrected Christ, who alone has authority to judge the earth, to remake it, and to rule it in righteousness.

The title of this book in the Greek text is Apokalypsis Ioannou, “Revelation of John.” It is also known as the Apocalypse, a transliteration of the word apokalypsis, meaning “unveiling,” “disclosure,” or “revelation.” Thus, the book is an unveiling of that which otherwise could not be known. A better title comes from the first verse: Apokalypsis Iesou Christou, “Revelation of Jesus Christ.” This could be taken as a revelation which came from Christ or as a revelation which is about Christ—both are appropriate. Because of the unified contents of this book, it should not be called Revelations.”

General overview

I. Authorship

Four times the author identifies himself as John. From as early as Justin Martyr in the second century a.d. it has been held that this John was the apostle, the son of Zebedee. The book itself reveals that the author was a Jew, well versed in Scripture, a church leader who was well known to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and a deeply religious person fully convinced that the Christian faith would soon triumph over the demonic forces at work in the world. In the third century, however, an African bishop named Dionysius compared the language, style and thought of the Apocalypse (Revelation) with that of the other writings of John and decided that the book could not have been written by the apostle John. He suggested that the author was a certain John the Presbyter, whose name appears elsewhere in ancient writings. Although many today follow Dionysius in his view of authorship, the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view.

II. Date

Revelation was written when Christians were entering a time of persecution. The two periods most often mentioned are the latter part of Nero's reign (a.d. 54–68) and the latter part of Domitian's reign (81–96). Most interpreters date the book c. 95. (A few suggest a date during the reign of Vespasian: 69–79.)

III. Occasion

Since Roman authorities at this time were beginning to enforce emperor worship, Christians—who held that Christ, not Caesar, was Lord—were facing increasing hostility. The believers at Smyrna are warned against coming opposition, and the church at Philadelphia is told of an hour of trial coming on the world. Antipas has already given his life along with others. John has been exiled to the island of Patmos (probably the site of a Roman penal colony) for his activities as a Christian missionary. Some within the church are advocating a policy of compromise which has to be corrected before its subtle influence can undermine the determination of believers to stand fast in the perilous days that lie ahead.

IV. Purpose

John writes to encourage the faithful to resist staunchly the demands of emperor worship. He informs his readers that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. Satan will increase his persecution of believers, but they must stand fast, even to death. They are sealed against any spiritual harm and will soon be vindicated when Christ returns, when the wicked are forever destroyed, and when God's people enter an eternity of glory and blessedness.

V. Literary Form

For an adequate understanding of Revelation, the reader must recognize that it is a distinct kind of literature. Revelation is apocalyptic, a kind of writing that is highly symbolic. Although its visions often seem bizarre to the Western reader, fortunately the book provides a number of clues for its own interpretation (e.g., stars are angels, lampstands are churches, "the great prostitute," is "Babylon", and the heavenly Jerusalem is the wife of the Lamb.

VI. Distinctive Feature

A distinctive feature is the frequent use of the number seven (52 times). There are seven beatitudes, seven churches, seven spirits, seven golden lampstands, seven stars, seven seals, seven horns and seven eyes, seven trumpets, seven thunders, seven signs, seven crowns, seven plagues, seven golden bowls, seven hills, and seven kings, as well as other sevens. Symbolically, the number seven stands for completeness.

VII. Interpretation

Interpreters of Revelation normally fall into four groups:

1. **Preterists** understand the book exclusively in terms of its first-century setting, claiming that most of its events have already taken place.
2. **Historicists** take it as describing the long chain of events from Patmos to the end of history.
3. **Futurists** place the book primarily in the end times.
4. **Idealists** view it as symbolic pictures of such timeless truths as the victory of good over evil.

Beyond Literary Analysis

I. What's is God's purpose in giving us the the book of Revelation?

A. God desires to be known by His people. The scripture reveals a deep desire in the heart of God to be known and for us to share in His glory. (John 17:20-26) Without a full disclosure of who God is, we are forced to live in the world of fantasy and mystery. The great miracle of the incarnation along with the life and testimony of Jesus Christ gives us a "visible image of the invisible God". Imagine trying figure out what God is like without the gospel accounts. Jesus said to His disciples, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father". In the same way, the Revelation of Jesus Christ gives us understanding of wrath, justice, mercy, redemption and hope.

II. Major Themes: Redemption, Wrath and God's Faithfulness

John's original intended audience were the 7 churches in Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The prophetic word begins with a confrontation in the church. This is a crucial observation. It reveals to us that before God unleashes His wrath on the world or restores all things, as read from Peter's epistle, Judgement must begin in the house of God.

III. Ephesus: (2:1-7) The lesson in the letter to Ephesus teaches that truth and love must go hand-in-hand. A church that upholds doctrinal purity at the expense of showing love is just as flawed as a church that upholds congregational harmony at the expense of truthful teachings. Instead, Jesus reveals that a church fashioned in His image must teach God's Truth in love.

IV. Smyrna: (2:8-11) Smyrna was home to a large Jewish community hostile to Christians. The Bible notes that slanderous accusations by Jews against Christians had led to Christian persecution by Roman authorities (Acts 14:2, 17:13)

- Christ's revelation to the church of Smyrna commends the community for its material poverty but its spiritual wealth, and acknowledges its wrongful persecution. Christ does not reprimand this church but warns of impending imprisonment for some of its members, urging them to remain faithful "even to the point of death" and remember the promise of their "victor's crown"

- Like the church of Smyrna, Christians are persecuted worldwide in obvious and insidious ways. This letter warns all Christians that although we may suffer greatly, the length of tribulation will be short compared to the promise of eternal life.

V. Pergamos: (2:12-17) The city of Pergamum was renowned for its pagan practices. The letter to the church of Pergamum lauds the congregation for upholding its faith despite the city's pervasive pagan influences. The letter then addresses the church's sin by denouncing some of its members for following false teachings that brought about religious and moral compromise.

- The Lord calls on the community to repent or risk the judgment that will emanate from the "sword of His mouth"

- Like the Christians in Pergamum, it's easy to normalize the non-Christian behavior of those around us and allow that behavior to dilute our values. But the Bible urges us to "not conform to the pattern of this world" but be transformed by the renewal of our mind in accordance with God's Word

VI. Thyatira (2:18-29) Thyatira was a wealthy commercial city. Jesus' letter to the church of Thyatira praises it for growing in faith and service. The church's downfall was its devotion to a false prophet that led some members to commit idolatry and immorality. Although the false prophet remained unrepentant, Jesus affirms that the congregation can still repent by turning away from the prophet's ways. The Lord reminds us in this revelation that He will repay each of us according to our deeds. The payment for sin is death. Those who persevere in faith, however, will receive a share of Christ's messianic authority over all nations and triumph over death.

- Just as some in the church of Thyatira were led astray by a false prophet, Christians today fall prey to cult leaders, occult practices, and other false teachings. To share in Christ's victory, we are to avoid these "so-called deep secrets" of Satan and hold firm to Christ's teachings.

VII. The Church of Sardis: (3:1-6) The Church that is Spiritually Dead. Sardis was a city that had endured two surprise attacks despite its fortifications. Our Lord faults the church of Sardis for maintaining an outward appearance of being "alive," while actually being spiritually dead. Alluding to the city's history of prior surprise attacks, Jesus warns the congregation to "wake up" and repent, lest he "come like a thief" to bestow His judgment. Those in the church of Sardis who heed Christ's warning will be "dressed in white," a symbol of purity and victory, and will be acknowledged in Heaven's Book of Life

- Today, Christians can fall into the trap that ensnared the church in Sardis if we merely go through the motions of practicing our faith without really feeding our spirit. We can avoid becoming "the living dead" by engaging in our faith through Bible study, prayer, and fellowship.

VIII. The Church of Philadelphia: The Church that Patiently Endured Despite Weaknesses (3:7-13) Philadelphia was home to a synagogue community hostile to Christians. Christ praises the church of Philadelphia for remaining faithful in the face of trials despite their limited strength. Jesus does not reproach the church of Philadelphia but he condemns its persecutors. Christ promises that if Philadelphia's congregants remain faithful to Him, He will protect them from the "hour of trial" and make them pillars in God's heavenly temple

- The message to Philadelphia shows us the blessings that come when we maintain our faith despite life's tribulations. In fact, those who persevere despite weaknesses will stand strong as pillars in Heaven.

IX. The Church of Laodicea: The Church with a Lukewarm Faith (3:14-22)

Laodicea was a prosperous industrial and commercial center. Jesus' letter to the church of Laodicea wastes no time denouncing the congregation for its lukewarm faith, threatening to "spit" the congregation out of His mouth. Christ scolds this church for allowing its economic prosperity to cause it spiritual bankruptcy and reveals that, despite its economic wealth, only He can provide spiritual wealth. Those in Laodicea's church who open the door to Christ will share in His Heavenly banquet and have the right to sit with Him on His throne.

- Like the church of Laodicea, it's easy to become complacent in our faith during times of abundance. Christ warns us in this revelation that he will "spit out" lukewarm disciples. Instead, Jesus urges us to keep seeking the Lord's face even after His hand has bestowed riches in our lives.