

“Reading Revelation” for St. Peter’s Anglican Church
Week One: Genre, Authorship, and Revelation’s Place in the Canon
Focusing on Revelation 1

What genre is Revelation?

“Misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is.” Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*

Apocalypse (Apokalypsos): Apocalypse means “revelation.” Biblical apocalypse is a genre of literature that does not strictly pertain to the end times. It refers to a general unveiling of hidden things about God’s plan of salvation, with implications for how God’s people live in their present circumstances. Ex. the book of Daniel, Isaiah 6, 1 Kings 22:19-23, Amos 3:7, much of Ezekiel. Apocalyptic literature tends to feature vivid symbols related to the Temple, liturgy, the cosmos, otherworldly beasts, and numbers.

Prophecy: Differentiating between Prophetic Literature and Apocalyptic Literature is difficult. Prophecy too speaks to present circumstances on earth from a divine perspective: international politics, social problems, invasions, the fall of dynasties, and the destruction of the Temple. Prophecy can suggest the possibility of God working within history, while Apocalyptic emphasizes the need for God to work beyond it (the difference between Isaiah and Daniel).

Pastoral Epistle: Rev is not only Prophetic/Apocalyptic, but a Pastoral Epistle, with an introduction that shares the basic elements of all Greco-Roman letters (sender, addressee, greeting). As with any letter, we need to let historical context guide our reading, since we are really just reading someone else’s mail when we read *Revelation*.

Rev is an apocalyptic pastoral epistle, meaning its primary purpose is not predicting the future, but providing God’s people with a divine perspective that gives their difficult lives in the 1st century meaning.

See The inaugural vision (1:9-20)

Daniel: The primary connection point between John’s opening vision and the OT is the book of Daniel, specifically Daniel 7.

As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne...

- See also Isaiah, Amos, and Ezekiel for visions of the throne room.

The Temple

- “You shall make seven lamps for it, and the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it.” Exodus 25:37
- “the weight of the golden lampstands and their lamps, the weight of gold for each lampstand and its lamps, the weight of silver for a lampstand and its lamps, according to the use of each in the service...” 1 Chron. 28:14

Authorship, historical setting, and place in the Canon

- Justin Martyr was the first to identify the author as an apostle (John). (100s)
- By the 3rd century AD, Dionysius of Alexandria had already discarded the notion of common authorship between Rev and John on the basis of style, language, and thought.
- Connections between John and Rev include images like the Lamb or God, living water, references to Jesus being pierced, the title of Logos, references to “beginning,” I am statements, spousal imagery for the people of God, referring to the mother as “woman,” witness/testifying, the end of the Temple, hostility to Jews, spiritual conflict, antichrists, God as light, false prophet, etc.
- It seems that the author of Rev was acquainted with John’s Gospel, letters, and/or the Johannine “school.”
- “There were at least two people with the same name (John), and later tradition confused them. A second century Christian writer – Papias of Hierapolis – affirms that there were indeed two persons by the name of John in the early Church: one the apostle, and another an elder at Ephesus who received the visions on Patmos. It is clear, from the enormous difference in their use of the Greek language, that the John of Revelation did not write the Gospel of John.” Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*
- Whether you decide that the author of John and Rev are the same or not, **we must not allow hypothetical scenarios crafted to lift up a shaky tradition any influence over our reading of this book, since these scenarios have no justification within the text itself.**
- It was not until Athanasius’ canon in the 4th century that both Eastern and Western Christians accepted Rev as biblical, although Syrian and Syriac speaking Churches have a history of rejecting the canonicity of Rev.
- In the Reformation, Martin Luther contended that Revelation was apocryphal (not the Bible), Ulrich Zwingli famously disagreed with Luther, and Rev was the only book of the Bible that John Calvin never wrote a commentary about.
- Questions about the place of Rev in the canon are due to two factors: 1. Uncertainty about the author 2. And far more importantly, because the actual content of Rev offers a clear and decisive challenge to all Kings and Empires.

Historical Setting: Probably written between 92 and 96 AD near the end of the Emperor Domitian’s reign. This dating is reached through consideration of the absence of certain Church structures in the letter, but mainly by its use of symbols: post Temple destruction, Domitian called himself “Lord and God,” and his reign felt like the return of Nero to many Christians. There are also references to events, such as the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius (see 8:8-9), that supports this dating.

Homework: Read Revelation 1-3 before next Sunday’s class.