
Krapf Commentary Series

Reading the Revelation

“It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out” (Proverbs 25:2)

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Four Views of Revelation

- **The preterist** believes that the events recorded in Revelation have already happened, during the time of John, the author. The term preterism comes from the Latin *praeteritum*, the Latin word for 'the past.'
- **The historicist** believes that the events recorded in Revelation are happening now; they are a symbolic overview of the whole history of the Church, from the time of Christ's first coming to his second coming and even after that. The historicist identifies the events and people mentioned in the Revelation with the event and people throughout history.
- **The futurist** believes that the events recorded in Revelation will for the most part happen in the future. The futurist is looking for political and social events, and for people who will correspond with what he sees in the Revelation.
- **The idealist** (or spiritual view) approach accepts aspects of all the previously

mentioned views. For the idealist, however, the importance of the book of the Revelation is not in specific events or people, but principles that apply to the Church in every age. The idealist views Revelation as a commentary on the ongoing struggle between the dragon and the Lamb, between good and evil.

Suggestion: Take time to think through these four main views on Revelation. I would suggest that you get a notepad and write them out in your own words, along with the upcoming studies. Identify those areas of Revelation that are key or disputed and read through them with each view in mind. This will help you process each view. Remember, each of these positions is held by faithful evangelical Christians around the world, but whatever view you are convinced by, make sure to hold it loosely and graciously-don't be afraid to change your view as you work through the differences, and always be willing to see the other person's viewpoint. Most of all, seek to find Christ in the book who is the blessing promised in 1:3.

The type of literature in Revelation (Genre)

To understand the Revelation, it is important to recognise the types of literature we are dealing with. Think of someone trying to read a history

book as if it was poetry; it would not make sense. So it is with Revelation, we must know the type of literature we are dealing with to understand it.

Revelation contains three different types (or genres) of literature; letter, prophecy and apocalypse.

- **Revelation is a letter**

The book of the Revelation is a letter to the Church. This letter, along with a "cover letter" specific to individual churches, was originally sent to seven churches in Asia Minor (Ch's. 2,3). Verse 4 begins the letter as 1st century letters normally began, with a greeting and the book ends with a final greeting as letters normally ended (22:21).

But the prologue of this letter differs, indicating from the beginning, that this is like no other letter. Other letters, like Paul's for example, discuss, explain and apply what God had already revealed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. This letter pulls back the veil and reveals the secrets of the decrees of God concerning Jesus Christ and his great victory over the evil one (Revelation 11:15).

The point is that this letter deals with issues that the contemporary audience was dealing with. Those who first read this letter understood it in their

context, like all the other letters in the New Testament.

- **Revelation is prophecy.**

The book is called “the book of this prophecy...” (1:3; 22:7,10,18.19). But we need to understand that the nature of prophecy is only about predicting the future. The Old Testament prophets had a twofold mission. First, they were *forth-tellers*, preachers to their own people, speaking into the context of their own times. Second, the prophets were *foretellers*, they had a message for the future. There is no doubt John is foretelling the future in this letter, but as a letter this book was written for the immediate encouragement of the original reader.

- **Revelation is Apocalyptic.**

Apocalyptic literature is a subcategory of prophecy which was commonly used in the times when Jesus lived. Apocalyptic literature depicts the struggle between good and evil using graphic and dramatic symbolic images like dragons and beasts, as well as symbolic numbers and names. Recognising this symbolic language is important and distinguishing it from the person or event that it is referring to is also important.

For example, the dragon in chapter 12 is clearly identified as the devil, and the symbol of the pregnant woman is clearly the people of God. There is not a literal dragon nor a literal pregnant woman, but symbols pointing to something in reality. If we don't recognise the symbolic language for what it is, then we will look for a fulfilment in a form that was never intended.

Old Testament apocalyptic literature can be found in Isaiah 24; Daniel, Ezekiel, Zachariah, and also in the New Testament in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21).

Suggestion: Read Revelation and try to recognise these types of literature. Look at other biblical passages with apocalyptic literature and see the similarities, and how you would understand them. Think of how the first readers of this book would have received this letter from John and would have been encouraged and blessed by it in the first century Church, struggling against persecution.

How should we read Revelation

- **Remember the name of the book.** The Greek word "apocalypse" means to "unveil" or "uncover." Revelation is

intended not to obscure the truth or make it difficult but to reveal truth—it is a “revelation.” While there are difficult aspects in the details, the theme and main truth of this book can, and should be understood by most Christians and they can be blessed by it (1:3). Think about this in light of the confusion that so often surrounds this book. Our response to Revelation should be primarily one of worship and hopeful anticipation. We should not come to Revelation with not spreadsheets and charts but with a heart of wonder and worship.

- **Remember the time of writing**
Revelation. The Revelation was written during a time of religious persecution. John was exiled on an island, and he was writing to the persecuted Church. From beginning to end Revelation encourages us to endure through persecution.
- **Remember the Old Testament**
Background. Although the Old Testament is rarely quoted in Revelation, there are several important Old Testament references in the symbolic literature. Seeing the Old Testament

references will help us understand the meaning of much of the symbolic language and the meaning of the book to the original readers. Think, for example, of the imagery relating to the exodus and wilderness wandering—the darkness, plagues, etc., and escape by the blood (1:5) into the wilderness (Ch. 12. Egypt is called a dragon in Ezekiel 29:3; Psalm 74:13). The siege of the city and the Babylonian Captivity (14:8; 20:9; ch. 18).

- **Remember the end of the Story.** The entire book looks towards the victorious end, and from the beginning we are encouraged to endure until that victory comes, looking to Jesus who has already won the victory (see 22:6-20).

The Message of Revelation

Chapters four and five of Revelation set the scene for the rest of the book. In these two chapters we read of when John was brought up to heaven and saw the throne of God, a scroll in God's hand and the Lamb. The scroll had seven seals and was written within and on the back (5:1). What did John

expect to see in these scrolls, and why did he weep?

If we understand this scroll in the right hand of God in light of the vision of Ezekiel (2:1-3:3), then John knew that the scroll spoke of the purpose of God in the struggle between good and evil-between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. John's concern here is how this battle of the ages will play out; "the things that must take place after this" (4:1). John wept, not out of a simple curiosity, but for the same reason Christians weep today, because of godly desire, expectation and anticipation for the victory of the gospel, the glory of God and by extension, the will of God for their lives. What is the kingdom of God going to do in the face of such opposition?

In light of this, we are faced with three major responses as we read the Revelation; we are called to worship God (19:10; 22:11), to follow the Lamb (14:4) and to overcome the dragon (12:11). This is the overwhelming message of the book from beginning to end.

You may never come to a conclusion on the end times, understand the meaning of the 1000 years or agree on the "mark on the forehead." But if you worship God, follow the Lamb and overcome the

dragon, you have fulfilled the requirements of Revelation, and you will receive the blessing promised to those who “read ... and keep what is written” (1:3).

Emotionally we are drawn to John weeping at the sight of the sealed scroll. But just as it is in our own lives, we need to keep our attention on the central image of the throne of God and the conquering Lamb. The focus of this first vision is not about how John feels (his weeping), nor about what the purpose of God in his circumstances as an exile on Patmos, or in our circumstances (the scroll). The focus is on the throne of God and the Lamb.

- **Worship God.**

The first and the primary impression from this scene is the throne of God. John did not at first see the Lamb, although he will later recognise the throne as “the throne of God and of the Lamb” (22:1,3), but he saw the throne and to the One on the throne, the “Lord God almighty” (vs. 8).

Our attention is drawn first to God himself, sitting on the throne. All that John sees is in the right hand of God. We are in his hand, and every detail of our lives is written and is in his right hand.

We live in a world of smoke and mirrors, of mirage and illusions and pretentious power. Much of our anxiety is based on what appears to be, and not what real is –it is what we *think* others think or what we *think* they are saying. But John’s attention is directed away from all of this to the monarch of the universe, to a reality that is more real than the “reality” we see around us.

Nothing that happens in this world, no matter how disturbing it is, should smother the realization of the sovereign Monarch of the universe, whether in our personal circumstances, as John exiled on Patmos, or in the political world or social order.

Seven times in Revelation, the Lord God the “Almighty” appears (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22). **He is** the “Alpha and Omega,” the beginning and the end.” Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, but the Greek words that explain these could be understood as the “source” and “destination” of all things. He is the timeless, or eternal God, who is and who was and who is to come (1:4, 8; 4:8, see also 11:17; 16:5). The dragon (Satan) had seven diadems (12:3) and the sea beast had ten diadems (13:1), which speak of complete authority within their realm. But the Lord has “*many diadems*”

(19:12) pointing to his infinite sovereignty over all things.

So, what should our response be to this? Like most of us who read and study Revelation, John was overwhelmed and at times confused by what he saw and heard. Twice, he fell down and worshiped the angel, God's messenger, and was told to "worship God," (19:10; 22:11). This is the message of Revelation, and this should be our first response to the book. Further to this, we should desire to "look into" the contents of the book of God's purposes, as John did and as Ezekiel did (5:3-4, Ezekiel 2:1-3:3. See also Psalm 25:14). We should want to know God, his ways, and his will for us.

- **Follow the Lamb**

The seven seals on the scroll calls attention to the Lamb. That question that John struggles with and that causes him to weep, is this; to whom will God entrust the purposes on earth and who will he employ to open the book and announce its contents? No man on earth was worthy, nor was any of the angels worthy to open the book. One emerges from the shadows, who is both "worthy" and "able" to open the book.

Only through this One (the Lamb) can we understand and make sense of the events on earth, the mystery of the provinces of God. He is announced to John as the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (vs. 5), but John looks up and sees a slain Lamb (vs. 6). There is no contradiction here. He is both Lion and Lamb; not a lion sometimes and a lamb at other times, but both a lion and a lamb at the same time. He became the Lion by being the Lamb—by his sacrifice on the cross, he destroyed Satan, crushed death and overcame the grave. Towards the enemy he is a fierce and conquering lion, but towards his people he is the slain Lamb.

He is worthy to take the book not because he is the Son of God, but because of what he accomplished as the Son of man. For this One, who is worthy and able, a song of praise echoed out from the throne in three waves of praise; first among the closest to the throne (vs. 8), then those angels standing around (vss. 11-12), and then "every creature in heaven and on earth ..." (vs. 13).

This is the Lamb, the Son of God who is revealed in the Revelation. This book of revelation is his public and visual declaration to us, the New Testament Church of his victory. This is the One that we "follow wherever he goes" (14:4). Our loyalty and obedience must be only to him because only

through his accomplishments can we overcome; we conquer because he has conquered for us (12:11).

- **Overcome the Dragon**

One of the most prominent themes in the Revelation is the persecution of the Church. The Church is called to suffer (2 Timothy 3:12) but victory is certain over the relentless onslaught of Satanic opposition. As a letter, this book was given to a Church under attack. The purpose of the book, therefore, must be, "not to satisfy the idle eschatological curiosity ... but to fortify Jesus' followers in steadfast hope and holy living" in the midst of persecution (Dennis E. Johnson, 16).

In the midst of the pain and uncertainty that characterises our present condition, Revelation takes us backstage and lets us see the ultimate enemy in this cosmic battle. It is the "great dragon," the "ancient serpent," the "devil and Satan (12:9). But backstage we also see that the Dragon is unsuccessful—he has already been defeated by the Lion, of the tribe of Judah (5:5)

The church is called in the context of suffering, to "Keep what is written"—an admonition that brackets the book of Revelation (1:3; 22:7). For those who keep Christ's word, who keep themselves pure

from the seducing allurements of this world (7:14; 14:4; 16:5) and who endure even to the pain of death (14:13) the Revelation holds out a sevenfold (complete/absolute) blessing (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14).

Throughout the book John reminds us of the need to “overcome” (12:11; 15:2; 21:7) because Jesus has already “overcome” as our Redeemer (5:5; 17:14). To each of the seven Churches then, Jesus gives a promise for those who overcome (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21).

Application: read through Revelation prayerfully and see how these three exhortations—worship God, follow the Lamb and overcome the dragon—are outlined. Meditate on each and pray to God that you will be one who has kept yourself pure and has overcome to finish the race, through Jesus (2 Timothy 4:7)

The Sevenfold Blessing of Revelation

The blessing promised in reading and understanding this book relates directly to Jesus (vs. 3). If God has promised a blessing to those who read and understand, then we need to find a way to read it that is a spiritual blessing. Scholars and Bible teachers tend to make it complicated and rob

it of the simplicity that is in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

There are seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). These can be divided into two categories. There is in the first category those blessings that are general to all believers, the blessings of being in Christ.

These include.

- First, the blessing of a Christian death, for those who "die in the Lord" (14:13).
- Second, the blessing of feasting with Jesus at the marriage supper (19:9).
- Third, the blessing of the resurrection of the saints (20:6). In 20:6 the reference to the resurrection is a little bit more complicated, as it is in the chapter that deals with the millennium.

Premillennialists believe that this resurrection is that of those saints who reign on earth during the millennium. The general resurrection for the wicked and the great white throne judgement will be 1000 years later.

Others, such as the North African Church father, Augustine, understood this resurrection to mean the resurrection of the soul from spiritual death.

Others believe this to mean the "translation of the soul from this earth to heaven," which will be followed at the Lord's return by the second resurrection. Those who argue for this view of "spiritual resurrection" show from Scripture that there is only one resurrection, not two (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:14-15). Spiritual resurrection of the soul in Christ is spoken of throughout the New Testament (see Mark 12:24ff; John 5:28ff; Philippians 3:11; Hebrews 9:27ff; 1 Peter 1:3-5).

Regardless of these differing views, the Bible teaches, and evangelicals believe in both the resurrection of the soul from spiritual death, the resurrection of the body from physical death, what Paul called "the redemption of the body" (Romans 8. see also 1 Corinthians 15). Resurrection then of soul and body is fundamentally part of the Christian message and the promised blessing of

the believer, and in this we rejoice together.

We have considered three of the seven blessings in Revelation; a Christian death (14:13), feasting with Jesus at the marriage supper (19:9), and the resurrection of the saints (20:6). These three blessings will be enjoyed by all believers. But there are four other blessings mentioned in the book, for those who keep the words of the prophecy (1:3, 22:7), who watch (16:15) and who have washed their robes (22:14 see the reading of 7:14). The emphasis of these blessings is on the fulfilment of our responsibility, what we must do, if we confess the name of Jesus.

White robes are a gift from God, as we have already learned earlier in the book (3:5; 6:11). But here is an equally important aspect of our salvation, for God does not force salvation on any of us against our will or without our consent. By his grace, he makes us willing (Psalm 110:3), and by the grace that he has provided he demands a correct response from us and a vigilance. So, along with the promise of blessings, the Lord also gives warnings against moving away from the faith or being seduced by the world and of relying on cheap grace. So, we must identify with the victory of Jesus' bloody sacrifice and the purity that Jesus'

sacrifice offers (7:14, 22:14). But we must also read, obey and be doers of the Word (1:3; 22:7; see also James 1:22), and we must watch and be ready (16:15).

Overview of Revelation

Between the prologue (1:1-8) and the epilogue (22:20-21), it is helpful to see the book of Revelation divided into eight scenes. You may come to differ with this view, but it is good to take hold of a view and face the challenges as you try to develop that view through the book.

The Revelation covers the period of time from John to the end of time. It covers that period only once but in three sections. Each section contains a set of seven—the seals, the trumpets and the bowls—and each section goes into greater detail than the previous.

First, the opening of the seven seals reveal the suffering Church on earth (4:1-8:1), then the trumpets, warning of judgement against all who oppose the church (8:2-11:18), then the seven bowls of the wrath of God poured out on those who have served the dragon (15:5-16:21).

Commentators use different images, like peeling back the layers of an onion, or a telescope extending out in three stages, to show that the message is one message and, in each vision, we are getting to see a small part of the bigger picture.

Scene 1: (1:9-3:22) cover letters to the churches. Jesus writes to the churches. He is among them, he knows the character of each church, and he speaks to it directly.

Scene 2: (4:1-8:1) the seven seals reveal the suffering of the Church. The Lord sits enthroned, victorious and guiding his Church into conquest. Jesus protects his Church, his covenant people and will answer their prayers for relief and will destroy the evil powers that afflict the Church.

Scene 3: (8:2-11:18) the seven trumpets warn of the coming judgement. Judgement on the powers of evil is spelled out in this scene, and in the end the Church will rise victorious, vindicated as those to belong to the Lord and to his Christ, to reign for ever and ever (11:15ff).

Scene 4: (11:19-15:4) Christ, the centre of human history. This section gives us a panorama of the conflict of the Lamb and the dragon

throughout human history and encourages us not to fall to the deception of the beast or the seduction of the harlot. The Lamb and his followers will enjoy victory, and their enemies will suffer judgement (14:6-20).

Scene 5: (15:5-16:21) the seven bowls pour out the wrath of God on those who serve the

Dragon. The judgement previously predicted will come to pass in its completion. The wrath of the dragon against the Church, will not be able to stand against the wrath of God.

Scene 6: (17:1-19:10) the harlot Babylon. This section really deals with the seduction of the world symbolised by the harlot. The Lamb's Bride will come forth as pure and enjoy the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:6-10).

Scene 7: (19:11-21:8) the final conflict. While the Church has suffered, Jesus will have the final victory, and his enemies will be cast into the Lake of Fire (19:11ff).

Scene 8: (21:9-19) the Bride and the New Jerusalem. This is the glorious scene of final victory and vindication, a new heaven and a new earth with the saints gathered in eternal praise of the Lamb.

Suggestion: read through each section with the heading of the section in mind. The section headings and the overview will give you an anchor point and some context. It might also be helpful to memorise an overview of the content of these sections. Write a brief overview in your own words and commit it to memory, to the degree that you can explain it without notes. This will give you a broad understanding and foundation to work from and memorized for a quick mental reference.