

The Book of Revelation: Introduction

by Jim Seghers

Authorship

It has been traditionally believed that the author of the Book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse, was St. John the Apostle, the author of the Gospel and Epistles that bears his name. This understanding is supported by the near unanimous agreement of the Church Fathers. However, what we learn from the text itself is that the author is a man named John (Rev 1:1).

Arguing against John the evangelist's authorship is the fact that the Greek used in the Book of Revelation is strikingly different from the Greek John used in the fourth gospel. This argument is countered by those scholars who believe that the Book of Revelation was originally written in Hebrew of which our Greek text is a literal translation. The Greek text does bear the stamp of Hebrew thought and composition. In addition there are many expressions and ideas found in the Book of Revelation which only find a parallel in John's gospel.

Many modern scholars have the tendency to focus almost exclusively on the literary aspects of the sacred books along with a predisposition to reject the testimony of the Church Fathers. Therefore, many hold that another John, John the Elder or John the Presbyter [Papias refers to a John the Presbyter who lived in Ephesus], is the author of the Apocalypse. One scholar, J. Massyngberde Ford, provides the unique suggestion that John the Baptist is the author of the Book of Revelation (*Revelation: The Anchor Bible*, pp. 28-37).

Until there is persuasive evidence to the contrary, it is safe to conclude that St. John the evangelist wrote the Book of Revelation.

Dating

The date that one subscribes to the writing of the Book of Revelation is critical to its interpretation. The present fad among the majority of modern biblical scholars is to assign a late date c. 96 A.D. to the composition of the Apocalypse. This conclusion rests primarily on arguments external to the text itself, chief among which is the alleged statement by St. Irenaeus [Book 5 of his *Against Heresies*, 5: 30: 3] that the book was composed "towards the end of Domitian's reign."

There are three major problems with St. Irenaeus' statement. First, the Greek he employed is obscure and lends itself to a variant translation, namely, that the **author** of the Book of Revelation lived until the end of Domitian's reign rather than the book was composed near the end of Domitian's reign. Secondly, almost all scholars agree that the Book of Revelation was written during a time of persecution. Yet, there is no historical evidence that Christians were persecuted under Domitian who died in 96 A.D. However, there was a terrible persecution under Nero who was emperor from 54 to 68 A.D. Finally, a late composition conflicts with the clear sense of the text which informs the reader that these events will occur "soon" (Rev 1:1, 3, 19; 22:6, 7, 12, 20).

The Presbyterian scholar, Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., presents overwhelmingly persuasive arguments that the Book of Revelation was written before 70 A.D. in the popularized version of his doctoral dissertation entitled: *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*. Many of Gentry's arguments based on the text itself will be highlighted in the commentary which follows. Gentry's careful investigation corroborates the pioneering work of John A. T. Robinson in his monograph: *Redating the New Testament*. A growing number of scholars are now arguing for a pre 70 A.D. authorship, which is the position supported in this commentary.

Schools of Interpretation

Many commentators state that the Book of Revelation is the most difficult book of the bible to interpret, yet in spite of this difficulty it is the subject of many published commentaries and scholarly articles. One reason for this interest is undoubtedly the fact that the figurative language of the book readily lends itself to escapades of fertile imagination. Interpretations generally fall into one of the following four schools.

Preterist —The word “preterist” comes from the Latin word *praeteritus* [from the verb *praeterire* - to go by, pass]. It means “past.” Those who hold to the preterist point of view believe that the Book of Revelation was written to encourage Christians in the first century during a period of virulent persecution. Therefore, the events portrayed in this book were fulfilled in the past. Among those scholars who hold to a preterist or past interpretation there are two camps. Some believe that the book deals with the downfall of the Roman Empire. Others believe the book addresses the issues leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D.

Historicist —This interpretation views the Book of Revelation as providing the Christian with a panoramic view of all subsequent Church history up until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. From this perspective the book is not concerned with past events of the first century. These scholars attempt to show that periods described in the book tie in with specific epochs of Church history.

Futurist —The futurist believe that the Book of Revelation is not concerned with any past events. Rather, it is a description of those tumultuous events immediately preceding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the end of the world. This is the most popular interpretation in the United States today, especially among many evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants and popular tele-evangelists. Many Catholics hold the same view. The enormously popular, best-selling book, *The Great Late Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey is reflective of this point of view.

Without taking a poll, I would bet that most of you share at least some aspect of the futurist perspective, namely, that the Book of Revelation is about the end of the world. There are sub-groups within the futurist family, all of whom have staunch proponents. Examples of these sub-groups are: millennialists, premillennialist, postmillennialist, and amillennialist.

Idealist —The idealist interpretation focuses on the timeless truths that pertain to the ongoing spiritual struggle that the Church faces in every age, and which each individual Christian

experiences in his or her own life. Therefore, history is ignored as the interpretation highlights the principles that come into play within the struggle between earth and heaven, and the world, the flesh and the devil against the Church and God's angels. The key issues, then, revolve around the moral struggle between good and evil, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The Fathers of the Church frequently gave the Book of Revelation an idealist interpretation.

Conclusion

It is the position in this commentary that the text itself as well as external evidence overwhelmingly supports a preterist interpretation. Specifically, the Book of Revelation was written to comfort first century Christians who were undergoing a deadly persecution from pharisaical Judaism. This does not mean that there is nothing of value to be learned from the other interpretative schools.

From the historicist we can learn how the events leading up to 70 A.D. finds parallels in Church history and in our own experiences. From the futurist we can see in the events described in the Book of Revelation a kind of foreshadowing of what will occur when Jesus comes again. Finally, from the idealist we can gain valuable spiritual insights. Few people today, for example, are without trials and hardships. In the Book of Revelation Christ reveals himself as the Lord of history and the King of kings over all the earth. Therefore, no matter how much we suffer and irregardless of how bad things get - apostasies, temptations, betrayals, and persecutions - Jesus Christ is already enthroned and he reigns. We will triumph with him.

Thus, the Book of Revelation will prove as vital and relevant today as it did when it was first read. It teaches that Jesus Christ is victorious over His enemies. In that process He has removed the old order and replaced it with his New Covenant, the Church.

Characteristics

Liturgical

Worship imagery abounds in the book. It is the most liturgical of all the New Testament books. Massey Shepherd points out that the architecture of the book corresponds to the early Church's worship which had a predominant Paschal emphasis (Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse*, Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960).

Scholars have also noted the remarkable parallels between the Apocalypse and Ezekiel. This step-by-step pegging of the Book of Revelation with similar passages in Ezekiel is designed for lectionary use in a liturgical service. "In other words, the Book of Revelation was intended from the beginning as a series of readings in worship throughout the Church Year, to be read in tandem with the prophecy of Ezekiel (as well as other Old Testament readings)" (Chilton, p. 22).

Revelation and Ezekiel Parallels

1. The Throne-vision (Rev 4/Ez 1)
2. The Book (Rev 5/Ez 2-3)
3. The Four Plagues (Rev 6:1-8/Ez 5)
4. The Slain under the Altar (Rev 6:9-11/Ez 6)
5. The Wrath of God (Rev 6:12-17/Ez 7)
6. The Seal on the Saint's Foreheads (Rev 7/Ez 9)
7. The Coals from the Altar (Rev 8/Ez 10)
8. No More Delay (Rev 10:1-7/Ez 12)
9. The Eating of the Book (Rev 10:8-11/Ez 2)
10. The Measuring of the Temple (Rev 11:1-2/Ez 40-43)
11. Jerusalem and Sodom (Rev 11:8/Ez 16)
12. The Cup of Wrath (Rev 14/Ez 23)
13. The Vine of the Land (Rev 14:18-20/Ez 15)
14. The Great Harlot (Rev 17-18/Ez 16, 23)
15. The Lament over the City (Rev 18/Ez 27)
16. The Scavengers' Feast (Rev 19/Ez 39)
17. The First Resurrection (Rev 20:4-6/Ez 37)
18. The Battle with Gog and Magog (Rev 20:7-9/Ez 38-39)
19. The New Jerusalem (Rev 21/Ez 40-48)
20. The River of Life (Rev 22/Ez 47)

Covenant

"The Bible is a book (The Book) about the Covenant. ... [it] is God's written revelation of Himself, the story of His coming to us in the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ; and it is the story of the Church's relationship to Him through the Covenant He has established with her" (David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, p. 10).

The idea of the Covenant as a predominant theme which runs through and unifies the entire Bible is so critical to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation that one is adrift without this anchoring motif. Thus, for example, in interpreting a passage like Revelation 9:16: *"The number of the troops of cavalry was twice ten thousand times ten thousand,"* biblical interpretation becomes the imaginative plaything of the interpreter. Thus Hal Lindsey in our day gives it the meaning of an impending invasion of 200 million Red Chinese soldiers with their allies, whereas J. L. Martin, who wrote in the 19th century, saw it as a prophesy of the modern cavalry fighting (Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance*, pp. 11-13). It's fun to be imaginative!

The Covenant is the oath by which God weds Himself to His people. This unique family bond carries with it mutual obligations and promises. It is not surprising that the biblical notion of the Covenant finds a reflection in the structure of ancient Near Eastern peace treaties between kings and their vassals. After all, culture developed from the descendants of Noah and his family with whom God renewed the Covenant he made with Adam. These ancient treaties were always formulated in a five part structure:

1. **Preamble** - Identified the lordship of the King and stressing his greatness and his nearness;
2. **Historical Prologue** - Provided a review of the King's relationship with the vassal, emphasizing the blessings bestowed;
3. **Ethical Stipulations** - These enumerated the vassal's obligations;
4. **Sanctions** - The blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience were listed;
5. **Succession Arrangements** - This dealt with the continuity of the covenant relationship in future generations.

This identical five-part covenantal structure is seen, for example, in the Book of Deuteronomy, one of the oldest books of the Bible.

Deuteronomy

1. Preamble (1:1-5)
2. Historical Prologue (1:6-4:49)
3. Ethical Stipulations (5:1-26:19)
4. Sanctions (27:1-30:20)
5. Succession Arrangements (31:1-34:12)

This covenant framework for the Book of Revelation is also clearly seen in the following outline.

Revelation

1. Preamble: Vision of the Son of Man (1)
2. Historical Prologue: The Seven Letters (2-3)
3. Ethical Stipulations: The Seven Seals (4-7)
4. Sanctions: The Seven Trumpets (8-14)
5. Succession Arrangements: The Seven Chalices (15-22)

While treaty documents provide a legal framework for understanding the Covenant and its relationship to the Book of Revelation, they do not tell the whole story. The biblical idea of Covenant is family, specifically God wedding Himself to his people through the unique arrangement of the Covenant. Thus it is to be expected that marital imagery will permeate the entire Apocalypse. This marital setting can be seen in the following outline.

Revelation

1. The Bridegroom (1-11)
2. The Bride (12-22)

These two ideas of the Covenant oath with binding consequences and as a marriage give insight into the prophetic role.

Prophesy

The Book of Revelation is a prophetic book. The difficulty with that statement is that the popular idea of prophets as forecasters of the future distorts the biblical understanding of the prophetic role. Prophets are God's spokesman. As such they are called to be conduits of truth. Specifically, the prophetic mission was to teach God's people to understand and to be faithful to their obligations in the Covenant stipulations. When the people violated the Covenant's stipulations the prophets confronted them with the impending consequences of their adulterous behavior (See: Jer 18: 7-10). Sin from the biblical perspective of the Covenant is always an act of spiritual adultery.

When the prophets confronted God's people regarding their infidelity to the Covenant their message was delivered in the same format of the Covenant itself. An example of this is seen in the Book of Hosea.

Hosea

1. Preamble (1)
2. Historical Prologue (2-3)
3. Ethical Stipulations (4-7)
4. Sanctions (8-9)
5. Succession Arrangements (10-14)

In these situations of Covenant infidelity, the prophet becomes God's spokesman assuming the role like that of a prosecuting attorney bringing charges in a Covenant Lawsuit. In the Apocalypse God is announcing through John, his prophet, that he is executing judgment on Old Testament Israel for its violation of the Covenant's stipulations.

The prophetic nature of the Book of Revelation is also seen in its close relationship with Ezekiel to which there are 130 separate references. Ezekiel laments over Tyre whereas the Apocalypse transfers that irrevocable note of doom to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Apocalyptic?

Between the years 200 B.C. and 100 A.D. there existed a genre of Jewish writing that modern scholars refer to as "apocalyptic." Since the Book of Revelation is often called the Apocalypse, the question arises whether this book is of the same genre? David Chilton gives a definitive answer to that question. "There is no basis for this opinion whatsoever, and it is unfortunate that the word *apocalyptic* is used at all to describe this literature" (Chilton, p. 25). It rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the meaning of the Book of Revelation.

He and others have pointed out that there are vast difference between the Book of Revelation and so called apocalyptic literature. These writings are replete with symbols that are unintelligible and unexplained. Moreover, these works abound in pessimism. They portray a bleak view of history that depicts the world so controlled by evil that one can only long for the

end. Thus all is hopeless. There is no use attempting to resolve life's problems, and, as a result of this pessimism, they rarely concern themselves with ethics.

The Apostle's approach is entirely different in the Book of Revelation. John's symbols seem obscure and confusing to us only because they are firmly rooted in the Old Testament in which we haven't taken the time to become well grounded. One scholar, for example, states that there are 348 clear Old Testament references in the Book of Revelation (Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Covenant., 1957, p. 101). In addition, the Apocalypse is optimistic amid great trials because Christ has triumphed and we will reign with him. Lastly, it is a prophesy (Rev 1:3; 10:11; 22:7, 10, 18-19). Like all biblical prophesies it is vitally concerned with mankind's ethical conduct.

December 29, 1995