

Introduction

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this *is* the whole *duty* of man. Ecclesiastes 12:13 KJV

As I write these words, I teach a class of beginning Christians. Our subject is the book of Revelation. Why, you may ask, am I teaching *that* book to beginners? After all, theologians of all persuasions for many centuries have said it was the most difficult book in the Bible. Some have even said that they wished it wasn't in the Bible. John Calvin even refused to write a commentary on it.

When we look at proposed interpretations, the picture gets worse. Every possible flight of fancy has been published as the "last word." Some see literal monsters and unspeakable horrors. Others see figurative descriptions of past and future history. Most apply the visions to their own time, and think that John was seeing the evils that had reached a peak at that moment. Some even take the book as a nearly day-by-day description of events of the near future. With all this confusion and controversy, why would I subject beginners to such a book? Shouldn't I reserve it for an advanced seminary class?

The answer is found in the opening words of the book.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated *it* by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Revelation 1:1-2 NAS

The book reveals Jesus! It will expose the things about him that hadn't been understood. The central issues of the gospel will be presented for us to understand. They are given to bless all who claim to serve God (verse 3).

Revelation *does* require a bit of work, since it is expressed in symbolic language. But God made sure that the original readers saw that by saying that it was "symbolized" to John.¹ This tells the reader that he should look for the biblical source of the unusual things he sees in the book.

John's original audience had a firm foundation in Jewish traditions. Jews had spread through the Roman Empire, and had established synagogues in many major cities. The book of Acts tells us of frequent visits by the apostles to these synagogues, and Jewish converts were prominent members of the early churches. This means that many of the images John recorded would have been obvious to them. After all, John was a *Jewish* fisherman, converted by the Savior, who was a *Jewish* theologian.

These images are *not* so obvious to us. We *aren't* Jewish. We didn't go to Hebrew school, read *Torah*, and celebrate the *Bar Mitzvah* when we reached twelve years old.² And none of us are likely to read or speak biblical Hebrew. At this point, the obvious question is, "Why are you talking about Hebrew when John wrote in Greek?"

Scholars examining Revelation have noted two key features of the book. First, John used the Hebrew scriptures (cf. 2 Tim 3:15, the Old Testament) a lot. John learned his theology from Jesus,

¹ The word translated "communicated" is *semaino*, and suggests communication by way of symbols.

² To any Messianic Jews reading this, please accept my apologies. Most of the readers of this book will not be Jewish.

and he taught from the Old Testament.³ John's thought patterns come from this foundation, which he uses over 800 times. Sometimes he uses exact phrasing or technical wording. Other times he uses ideas that are clearly recognizable from the Old Testament. This sort of thing is found all through the book. This means that Revelation has to be understood within John's Hebrew thought pattern.

Second, John's Greek grammar is often bad. Bishops of the early church commented on this in their writings.⁴ But they didn't understand why John wrote that way, since they weren't as well founded in Old Testament Hebrew as John was. We know now that John wasn't using bad grammar at all! Instead, he was quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, which he translated word-for-word into Greek.⁵ Because of differences between the two languages, the good grammar of Hebrew sometimes became bad grammar in Greek. John did this to point us back to his starting place to point out the impact of the source on his meaning.

This shows that we need to learn about the Old Testament. In particular, we'll need to learn about the sanctuary, since it was the center of Hebrew identity. Its architecture and services are present in almost every part of Revelation. If we understand the sanctuary, we will have the basis to understand most of the book. Some parts come from other places, but even those gain meaning from the sanctuary.

We need to know about the sanctuary for another reason. It teaches us about Jesus. The lamb killed as a sin offering was an acted-out prophecy of Jesus' death on the cross. The incense burned on the golden altar was an acted-out prophecy of the prayers of the saints rising before God.⁶ The mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant was God's throne on earth (Lev 16:2), and pointed to his throne in heaven (Psa 11:4).

Each of these acted-out prophecies is called a "type" by theologians. Each type points forward from its small reality to a much larger truth called the "antitype." When John the Baptist said "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), he was identifying Jesus as the (large) antitype of the (small) sacrificial lamb type in the temple.

My class of beginners has had no trouble understanding typology. After all, the types in the temple point forward to Jesus. And Jesus is the heart of the gospel. In other words, typology is another way of explaining the gospel, and the gospel is what brought them to Christ. It also brings us full circle.

Almost every week in my class I have occasion to ask this key question, "What is the first rule of biblical interpretation?" And the answer is, "The Bible interprets itself." Each time a question about the meaning of a symbol or action is raised, we find the answer by searching through the Bible.⁷ Our first step is to see how John used the term other places in Revelation. Often that's enough to solve the riddle.⁸ If that's not enough, then we start looking at other passages to see what it means. Usually the symbol has been used several places, and that makes us confident that we have found the proper meaning.

³ It would have been extraordinarily difficult for Jesus to teach from the New Testament, since its first book wasn't written until decades after he died.

⁴ Dionysius of Alexandria (died 264-265AD) said that John's "use of the Greek language is not accurate, but he employs barbarous idioms, in some places committing downright solecisms." (from Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.26-27)

⁵ Sometimes the quotes are from the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek done about 200 BC. Other times it appears that John directly translated the Hebrew into Greek himself.

⁶ This symbolic use of incense is explicit in Revelation 5:8, 8:3, and 8:4.

⁷ The infrequent exception to this rule comes from the occasional mention of a common item from John's day, such as the white stone in Revelation 2:17.

⁸ A good example of this is the term "the great city" used in Revelation 11:8. It is a bit unclear here, but in the seven other places John uses it, it always means Babylon. That means that it means Babylon in 11:8 as well.

This process is exactly what the Bible says to do.

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Peter says that, instead of man interpreting prophecy by himself, God reveals the proper interpretation. Through the Holy Spirit he told the prophets the message to write. God also told his servants the things to write that would explain the prophecies. If we want to understand the prophets, we need to listen to them.

The book of Revelation is about the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's not about strange beasts or plagues. Those bits of the story are there to help us understand the way the gospel will play out in history. They are drawn from things John learned in Hebrew school. If we learn about those things, we'll understand it, too. Since Hebrew faith was built around the sanctuary, that's where our study will center.

This book is written for the everyday Christian who is willing to open his Bible. Because John's literary source is the Old Testament, we'll frequently visit the Old Testament. The class has found this to be enjoyable, since it helps them see the gospel in every part of the Bible.

Sometimes the process of discovery will require extensive digging. This can make the discussion seem stiff. I'll try to avoid that like the plague, but must ask for your forgiveness if on occasion I get a touch academic. As you may have noticed, there will be footnotes. Most of the time, a note will explain a point that would be distracting if it was in the main text. You have already seen a few of these. I'll put those extra bits into footnotes. Other times the note will be a reference citation. Citations will be necessary, since this book must respect standards of good scholarship, even if it's written in a relaxed style.

I won't use the more formal endnotes that some books have at the end of the chapter or the end of the book. I think putting them at the end is rude because it makes you search for information that should be right under your thumb (literally) at the bottom of the page.

There will be times when a picture can explain something better than words. That picture will be on the page. And sometimes there will be particularly important ideas that deserve additional emphasis. Those thoughts will appear in highlight boxes.

Unfortunately, it's impossible to properly study the Bible without occasionally looking at the original languages. Most modern translations are pretty good, but there are some places where translations miss the flavor of the original Hebrew or Greek. Occasionally, there are even places where the translations get it wrong. When those problems affect our understanding, we'll have to deal with the original Greek and Hebrew.

There are also times when the original Greek or Hebrew adds to our understanding. In Revelation, there are two kinds of crowns: the laurel wreath of victory (*stephanos* in Greek) and the king's crown (*diadema* in Greek). Both get translated "crown" in English. But the distinction is important, and I'll pointed it out. I will try to keep those discussions as non-technical as possible.

Lots of places you'll find a text listed in parentheses. After a quotation, that's just the place the quote came from. But when a citation is in the in the middle of the discussion, it's telling you the place you can find a related Bible text. The text may be exactly on point or only similar. If you are willing to look up the text(s), you will see why I am saying what I say. And you will understand the Bible better.

If you bear with me, I think you will find that the book of Revelation was given by God for an encouragement to us. It sheds light on the war between Christ and Satan, illuminating the

schemes of the Devil and the great victory of our Savior. Let's walk together through the book that reveals more of Christ than any other single book in the Bible.

Never take my comments as the last word. God's word is the only perfect reference. Satisfy yourself that what I have said makes sense by comparing it to the Bible. And remember that, no matter how much I say on any subject, there is always more. In some ways Revelation is such an intricate book that there will always be another detail to discover.

There are literally hundreds of commentaries on Revelation. Each of them has something to offer. As the teacher says, "But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body" (Eccl 12:12). To include every good point would make this book incredible wearying. To paraphrase John 21:25, "The world could not contain the book." I can't do that to you. You want to strengthen your mind, not your muscles.

I will try to include enough of those details to cover the subject. But I will try to avoid being so detailed that I bore you. There are enough sermons that will put you to sleep. Revelation should be interesting. Maybe I can help you to be as excited about the book as I am.