

Revelation: Crisis or Catharsis, justice or retribution? A snappy introduction to a florid and complicated book.

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Introduction

Like the scroll which the Lamb takes from the one enthroned on high, the book of *Revelation* seems sealed with seven unbreakable seals, for many in the church today¹. It is a book which is unlike the others of the New Testament; seemingly it bellows for vengeance, rather than calling for a love of ones enemies², or even as the First Testament³ teaches, to turn the other cheek..

Revelation is a book which brings a passionate commitment from traditional evangelicals and fundamental Christians to a particular way of reading and interpretation. They may disagree about the details, but they share a basic approach to its interpretation. On the other hand, the Greek orthodox thought so little of the book that they omitted the book from their canon. Anglicans, Lutherans and Catholics barely give the book a nod in their lections.

Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament canon, though there are short apocalyptic passages in various places in the Gospels and the Epistles.

Revelation is said to be a part of the genre of literature, entitled Jewish apocalyptic literature which is both included in, and outside, the Christian canon, (e.g. *Daniel*, the *Apocalypse of Ezra* [4 Ezra = 2 Esdras 3–14] and the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* [2 Baruch] and stretches from the book of *Daniel* to the 13th century CE).

The title *Revelation* came into usage from the first word of the book in Koine Greek: ἀποκαλυψις, meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘revelation’ (the author himself did not provide a title). It is also known as the *Book of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine* or the *Apocalypse of John*, (both in reference to its author) or the *Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (in reference to its opening line) or simply *Revelation*, (often dubbed *Revelations* in contrast to the singular in the original Koine) or the *Apocalypse*.

The word ‘apocalypse’ is also used for other works of a similar nature in the literary genre of apocalyptic literature. Such literature is ‘marked by distinctive literary features, particularly prediction of future events and accounts of visionary experiences or journeys to heaven, often involving vivid symbolism⁴’.

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Who wrote *Revelation*?

The author of *Revelation* identifies himself several times as 'John' and states that he was on Patmos, a Greek island when he received his first vision. A traditional view holds that John the Apostle, considered to have written the Gospel and the epistles of John, was exiled on Patmos in the Aegean archipelago, during the reign of Domitian, and there wrote *Revelation*.

Arguments in favour of apostolic authorship point to the testimony of the early church fathers and similarities between the *Gospel of John* and *Revelation*. For example, both works are soteriological and possess a high Christology, stressing Jesus' divine side as opposed to the human side which is stressed by the Synoptic Gospels. In the *Gospel of John* and in *Revelation*, Jesus is referred to as 'the Word of God' (Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ), although the context in *Revelation* is very different from the *Gospel of John*. Ὁ λόγος (The Word) in Rev 19:13 is involved in judgement, but in John 1:1, the image is used to speak of a role in creation and redemption.

More recent methods of scholarship, such as textual criticism, have been influential in suggesting that John the Apostle, John the Evangelist and John of Patmos were three separate individuals. Differences in style, theological content, and familiarity with Greek between the *Gospel of John*, the epistles of John, and *Revelation* are seen by some scholars as indicating three separate authors.⁵

When was *Revelation* written?

According to early tradition, *Revelation* was written near the end of Domitian's reign, around the year 95 CE. Some suggest an earlier date, 68 or 69 CE, in the reign of Nero or shortly afterward. The majority of modern scholars accept one of these two dates, with most accepting the Domitianic (later) date.⁶

What was the *Sitz im Leben* of *Revelation*?

In the Gospels and the epistles, it's easy to talk about the community the Gospel was written for, or in the case of the Epistles, the community to whom the letter is addressed. For example Matthew's Parable of the tenant (Matthew 21:33–46) addresses a matter raised in Matthew's mixed Jewish Gentile community about who might be part of God's kingdom. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians addresses the theological problem of Christians dying.

A number of elements in *Revelation* point to it being a response to a crisis or a crisis with several facets. Initially we might look to a political crisis, which looks promising given the widespread Roman occupation of the time. The first tension

to consider is what may have been happening in Domitian's reign which might impact a new community of Christians.

Emperor worship, at the heart of many of Jesus actions⁷ was as prevalent in Domitian's reign as it had been in previous Roman emperor's reign. Neither Jews nor Christians joined in emperor worship, a continuing cause of irritation for the Roman emperors. This caused both low key harassment, and at times straight out persecution for both Christians and Jews. But there is no record of Domitian responding in any particular way in this matter. Further Domitian did not persecute Christians as Christians per se. We can then discount persecution by the emperor Domitian as a particular crisis that John might address⁸.

A second crisis may well have been a dispute between Jewish Christians and Jews. At first Jewish followers of Jesus were considered by Gentiles to be part of the rich diversity of ancient Judaism. Later, toward the end of the first century and certainly at the time *Revelation* was written, differences between Jews who followed Jesus and Jews who did not, became more public. This made the situation of Christians precarious, particularly if they were barred from the synagogue. They had no ancient traditions, homeland or religious centre to appeal to, and were socially, politically and economically insecure.

An example of John's attitude to Jews is expressed for example in the letter to Smyrna (2:9-10) and is at the very least, ambiguous. Although the hostility and tension is high, the break seems recent and not altogether irreparable⁹.

Rejection by Jews made Christians particularly vulnerable because they had little identity apart from Judaism. Their Gentile neighbours were not sympathetic because of Christian exclusivity, Christians refusal to worship any God but their own and their avoidance of Gentile social and political life¹⁰.

As well as political in its widest sense, and religious differences, Yabro Collins (1984) writes that the perceived persecution by the writer of *Revelation* seems multi-layered and is therefore difficult to unravel. She also identifies economic difficulties, a conflict over wealth, both attitudes to wealth and the tensions between the rich and poor in Asia Minor at the time.

In chapter 18 of *Revelation* Rome is attacked on the basis of perceived wealth. This perception of wealth is not only a reflection of both cultural and ethnic tensions but also propaganda in the area (p 89).

There was a diversity in relations between Jews, Jewish Christians and Rome. At times relations were poor, at others, ambiguous, and at other times very good, however a great deal of opposition to Rome came from Palestine. The resentment of Roman colonisation is very apparent in a saying attributed to Gamaliel who lived at the time: 'The empire gnaws at our substance through four things it's tolls, it's bath buildings, its theatres and its taxes in kind'¹¹.

It is possible that the crises that eventuated in the writing of *Revelation* was one or

other of the above, or a combination, or a perception of a crisis by the author or a combination of a personal and socio/politico/economic crisis. It is also possible that the crises which eventuated in *Revelation* were a crisis only in the perception of the author, and the crisis was not felt by others around the author.

What we can be sure of is that there were numbers of tensions in the lives of the Palestinians at the time of Domitian and the creation of *Revelation*. These pressures and conflicts may well be the cause of the apocalyptic book, *Revelation*.

A literature of prophesy

An introduction to *Revelation* would not be complete without some reference to the relationship between *Revelation*, prophecies of the apocalypse and Christian Zionism.

These ideas stem from the mid nineteenth century. Puritans brought from England and Scotland to America, an eccentric change of thought about the nature of biblical apocalyptic literature. This resulted in the widely held belief that *Revelation*¹² is a prophetic book.

The dispensationalist views of the puritans who interpreted the Bible literally led to the cult of apocalyptic prediction which in itself led to the beliefs of Christian Zionism.

Although Christian Zionism, at first glance, seems to consist of Christians supporting the Jewish right to a homeland, a closer inspection reveals that Christians Zionists support Israel as a means to their own redemption at the (coming) Apocalypse. According to journalist Grace Halsell

They have one goal: to facilitate God's hand to waft them up to heaven free from all trouble, from where they will watch Armageddon and the destruction of Planet Earth¹³.

Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* a well known work of 'biblical prophesy' identifies the 'restoration of Jews' to be God's faithfulness to the covenant God made with Abraham. However, Lindsay says, many Jews will die in Armageddon and the church will replace God's chosen people as Israel, on earth.

Lindsey goes further than that. In discussing the symbolism of Revelation Lindsey 'is sure that the author was trying to describe modern weapons'. He says that the locusts may well be 'a description for some kind of advanced helicopter'¹⁴.

In Tim LaHaye's prophecies, played out in the *Left Behind* series of popular apocalyptic novels, those left behind after the rapture will live in what might be described as a 'one world socialist gulag'.

Amongst other Christian Zionist beliefs there is an understanding that scripture should be interpreted literally and apocalyptic texts, *Revelation* and *Daniel*, and

chapters from *Zechariah*, *Ezekiel*, and *1 Thessalonians* which Christian Zionists believe refer to actual and future events.

Christian Zionism is found within most protestant, charismatic, fundamentalist and pentecostal churches. Some support is found in the evangelical wings of the mainline churches; premillennialist dispensationalist themes cross denominational boundaries because of their prevalence in Christian radio and television broadcasting.

Summary

The New Testament apocalyptic book *Revelation* is quite different from other New Testament writings because it seems to call for revenge or vengeance rather than the more accepted Christian belief of loving one's enemy. Although *Revelation* is quite reliably dated as being written at the end of the first century CE, and was written on the island of Patmos, none of the tensions or crises of the time can be identified as having been solely responsible for the imagery and narrative of the book. Neither can *Revelation* be understood as a reaction to singular socio/political/economic events.

However, literal understandings of *Revelation* have led to end time beliefs which have the by product of pragmatic support for the nation of Israel.

Although *Revelation* is not a unique piece of literature, being part of the genre of Jewish apocalyptic literature it holds a unique place in the New Testament canon. The images, symbols, and themes are a treasury which the church has mined throughout the ages to the betterment of Christian worship.

¹ See Yabro Collins 1988 p. ix

² Matthew 5:44

³ Lamentations 3:30

⁴ Elwell 1996 p. 28.

⁵ It has also suggested that core verses of the book, in general chapters 4 through 22, are surviving records of the prophecies of John the Baptist. In this view, the Lamb of God references and other hallmarks of Revelation are linked to what is known of John the Baptist, though it must be confessed that little information about this is known.

⁶ Those who favour the later date appeal to the earliest external testimony, that of the Christian father Irenaeus (c. 150-202), who wrote that he received his information from people who knew John personally. Domitian, according to Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263-339), started the persecution referred to in the book. While some recent scholars have questioned the existence of a large-scale Domitian persecution, others believe that Domitian's insistence on being treated as a god may have been a source of friction between the Church and Rome.

The earlier date, first proposed in modern times by John Robinson in a closely argued chapter of "Redating the New Testament" (1976), relies on the book's internal evidence, given that no external testimony exists earlier than that of Irenaeus, noted above, and the earliest extant manuscript evidence of Revelation (P98) is likewise dated no earlier than the late 2nd century. This early dating is centered on the preterist interpretation of chapter 17, where the seven heads of the "beast" are regarded as the succession of Roman emperors up to the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

⁷ For example the Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem mocks the entry of the emperor god into Jerusalem.

⁸ While Domitian did not persecute Christians for being Christian, it is said that he was ruthless but efficient autocrat, whose cultural, economic and political program provided the foundation of the peaceful 2nd century.

⁹ See Yarbrow Collins 1984 p85

¹⁰ See Acts 19 for a good example of this. The silversmiths fear for their livelihood, and arouse a mob against the Christians because of the snub the Christians give to Artemis, the goddess of the Ephesians.

¹¹ Yarbrow Collins 1984 p90

¹² In the United States, where Christian Zionist beliefs are most prolific, a 1984 Yankelovich poll found that 39% of Americans believed that when the *Bible* says the earth would be destroyed by fire, this meant that we would destroy the earth in a nuclear Armageddon.

¹³ Halsell ed 2003 p5

¹⁴ cited in Sizer 2004 p124