

REVELATION: (Intro)

GETTING STARTED:

The way Christians view the Book of Revelation is a study in contrast. Some avoid this book altogether thinking the images are too hard to understand and/or too scary to contemplate. And some are obsessed with Revelation. To these it's a prophetic road map and timetable to predict when God will bring the world to an end.

Admittedly while Revelation's images can be unsettling and hard to understand, it offers the thoughtful reader some good insight into history's progression and how God will ultimately deal with the world. We're not meant to be afraid of it nor obsessed by it. As we will discover, Revelation is a pastoral letter meant to be read during worship by average Christians. It reveals Jesus and is meant to encourage, direct, correct, and give insight to believers as they follow and obey him in incredibly difficult life circumstances.

THE CORE:

A major error we make in studying the Book of Revelation is diving right into it without understanding two essential pieces of information:

1. Genre – kind of writing 2. Context – historical background

GENRE: kind of writing

The Bible employs at least 8 genres in communicating God's truth, Poetry/Wisdom/Narrative/Parable/Prophecy/Apocalyptic/Epistle (letter)/Law

God communicated truth through John to the churches employing a very special blend of genres – Epistle/Apocalyptic/Prophecy

Epistle: Letter format

Apocalyptic:

This writing style (genre) is present in the Bible during the time of Isaiah (740 – 680 BC), especially Ch. 24-27, and in the second half of Daniel (600 – 500 BC). It was most popular in the intertestamental period (400 BC – AD 1) when the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books were written. What's most interesting is that John chose this writing style in AD 95 to communicate God's truth to God's people.

Features of apocalyptic:

1. **Visions** of cataclysmic end-time events
2. Hidden truths revealed through **symbolic** language and imagery
3. **Dualism** between good and evil
4. Themes of **eschatology** (end-times) and ultimate salvation or restoration
5. Communication through **angels** and heavenly beings

While this genre may be new and puzzling to us, Bruce Metzger suggests why it is such a powerful and suitable way to tell Revelation's story,

“The book of Revelation is unique in appealing primarily to our imagination – not, however, a freewheeling imagination, but a disciplined imagination. The book contains a series of word pictures, as though a number of slides were being shown upon a great screen. As we watch we allow ourselves to be carried along by impressions created by these pictures. Many of the details of the pictures are intended to contribute to the total impression, and are not to be isolated and interpreted with wooden literalism.”

I like what someone has said about the prophetic/apocalyptic style of writing,

“The symbols of Revelation are meant to reshape our imagination so we think differently about the world.”

Revelation perfectly illustrates the phrase, “a picture being worth a 1000 words.” And two essential senses dominate the book, sight and sound. At least 41X the reader is asked to see or hear something, or both.

Revelation uses its rich symbolism strategically to make its point. It paints unforgettable vivid word pictures that pierce the reader's heart, staying in their mind, and impacting how they live. Let's be clear, the writers of scripture are free to use whatever literary forms they choose to make their point. This calls for careful reading on our part.

While some argue that interpreting Revelation symbolically is too subjective, symbolism must be properly considered because it's a legitimate communication form in the Bible. Conservative Christianity has taught us that Revelation must be interpreted literally as this is the only correct way to understand it. But a “literal” interpretation of the bible must include the idea that we interpret each book according to the literary form presented. This means that images, numbers, and other features in Revelation can be understood symbolically and still be completely truthful. Genre doesn't lessen the value of the truths being taught.

Value of apocalyptic genre:

1. Reveals divine secrets or the true nature of the world from a heavenly perspective.
2. Studies the end times involving universal judgement and the ultimate fate of humanity.
3. Offers a sense of hope, promising divine justice, redemption, or a renewed world.
4. Explores civilization's collapse, mass unrest, and the struggle for survival in ruined world.
5. A cautionary tale examining human nature and resilience under extreme pressure.

Prophecy:

The word “prophecy” immediately evokes the idea of predicting the future. But prophecy is much more than predicting the future. When we think about prophets, people like Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah, etc., come to mind. Yet Deuteronomy calls Moses the greatest prophet in Israel (Deut. 34:9-12). How could this be so?

“We must remember that prophecy has a much wider context than predicting the future. The primary purpose of prophecy is to call people to faithful living, providing divine instruction, offering warning and encouragement, and clarifying God’s will and purposes. While foretelling future events can be a component, it’s often a consequence of this broader goal, serving to influence present actions and decisions by revealing the potential consequences of faithfulness or unfaithfulness.”

Moses was certainly a true prophet of God. We must keep in mind that Revelation’s purpose is about far more than predicting the future. John wrote to seven churches about their spiritual maturity and walk with Jesus in the then present of AD 95. With our expanded understanding of apocalyptic prophecy, you can see how this genre certainly fits Revelation’s true future and present purpose.

Authorship:

The author of Revelation is John. Although his exact identity is debated, most often he is thought of as an apostle, the one who wrote the Gospel of John. Both internal and external evidence concerning Revelation suggests that an exact identity is not entirely possible. Nonetheless, we can rest assured that whoever John was, he loved the Lord and served God’s people faithfully. His concern for God’s people is both genuine and passionate.

Pastoral purpose:

Eugene Peterson points out that John is a pastor writing a pastoral letter to seven congregations. He cares about them and their ability to be the church in difficult times. John’s preaching to his congregations using unforgettable word pictures to cement truth. Even more, the Revelation is about Jesus, not simply the vivid images it presents. The subject and focus of the book is Jesus Christ (1:1). The book reveals him and is from him. Jesus is the central message of the book. John is anchoring his readers in Jesus as they live out their faith under Roman rule.

Understanding the approach to Revelation:

Many conservative Christians have been steeped in a dispensational understanding of Revelation. Among the unique teachings of dispensationalism is idea that the church and Israel are two distinct and separate entities and remain so throughout Scripture. As this applies to Revelation, dispensationalism teaches that the book is to be divided into two parts. Some chapters apply to the church and some apply to Israel. For example, Ch.1-3 and 20-22 apply to the church, while Ch. 4-19 focus entirely on Israel. We however will view Revelation as a singular document written to the seven churches. Dividing Revelation into two parts is completely unnecessary.

These churches are comprised of Jews and Gentiles who’ve received Jesus. Does this mean the church replaces Israel? NO! The church never replaces Israel. The church is an assembly of all of God’s people as he intended from his promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 onward.

Eph. 2 is a beautiful picture of how God sees this assembly. Paul says it's "one new man" as Jew and Gentile alike experience salvation through faith alone in Jesus. But Paul never erases the uniqueness of Israel, nor the fact that Gentiles are grafted in (Rom.11). God brings both Jew and Gentile together in Christ to form a new entity built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets; God's household, built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22). Revelation addresses this household expressed as 7 churches.

Outline:

Revelation is divided into 22 chapters. We will use the attached book chart as a guide to help us understand the direction of Revelation's writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

The Revelation was probably written in or around AD 95, approx. 62 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Pastor John is in exile on the Isle of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor because of his ministry. He writes to a group of 7 churches under Roman authority in the Province of Asia Minor. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed 25 years earlier (AD 70), and the center of Christianity has now shifted from Jerusalem to Rome. Additionally, the Christian church now stands separate from its Jewish roots and beginnings. Until AD 70 Christianity was understood as a sect of the Jewish faith. The two are now distinct.

Roman authority meant many things to the Christian community. Key among them was the matter of faith. William Barclay notes (Vol. 1, p.15-18)

"By the time of the *Revelation* Caesar worship was the one religion which covered the whole Roman Empire; and it was because of their refusal to conform to its demands that Christians were persecuted and killed. Its essence was that the reigning Roman Emperor, as embodying the spirit of Rome, was divine. Once a year everyone in the Empire had to appear before the magistrates to burn a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar and to say: 'Caesar is Lord.' After he had done that, a man might go away and worship any god or goddess he liked, so long as that worship did not infringe decency and good order; but he must go through this ceremony in which he acknowledged the Emperor's divinity.

The reason was very simple. Rome had a vast heterogeneous empire, stretching from one end of the known world to another. It had in it many tongues, races and traditions. The problem was how to weld this varied mass into a self-conscious unity. There is no unifying force like that of a common religion but none of the national religions could conceivably have become universal. Caesar worship could. It was the one common act and belief which turned the Empire into a unity. To refuse to burn the pinch of incense and to say: 'Caesar is Lord,' was not an act of irreligion; it was an act of political disloyalty. That's why the Romans dealt with the utmost severity with the man who would not say: 'Caesar is Lord.' And no Christian could give the title Lord to any other than Jesus Christ. This was the centre of his creed.

We must see how this Caesar worship developed and how it was at its peak when the *Revelation* was written. One basic fact must be noted. Caesar worship was not imposed on the people from above. It arose from the people; it might even be said that it arose in spite of efforts by the early emperors to stop it, or at least to curb it. And it is to be noted that of all the people in the Empire only the Jews were exempt from it.

Caesar worship began as a spontaneous outburst of gratitude to Rome. The people of the provinces well knew what they owed to Rome. Impartial Roman justice had taken the place of capricious and tyrannical oppression. Security had taken the place of insecurity. The great Roman roads spanned the world; and the roads were safe from brigands and the seas were clear of pirates. The *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, was the greatest thing which ever happened to the ancient world. As Virgil had it, Rome felt her destiny to be 'to spare the fallen and to cast down the proud.' Life had a new order about it. E. J. Goodspeed writes: 'This was the *Pax Romana*. The provincial under Roman sway found himself in a position to conduct his business, provide for his family, send his letters, and make his journeys in security, thanks to the strong hand of Rome.'

Caesar worship did not begin with the deification of the Emperor. It began with the deification of Rome. The spirit of the Empire was deified under the name of the goddess Roma. Roma stood for all the strong and benevolent power of the Empire. The first temple to Roma was erected in Smyrna as far back as 195 B.C. It was no great step to think of the spirit of Rome being incarnated in one man, the Emperor.

The worship of the Emperor began with the worship of Julius Caesar after his death. In 29 B.C. the Emperor Augustus granted to the provinces of Asia and Bithynia permission to erect temples in Ephesus and Nicaea for the joint worship of the goddess Roma and the deified Julius Caesar. At these shrines Roman citizens were encouraged and even exhorted to worship. Then another step was taken. To provincials who were *not* Roman Citizens, Augustus gave permission to erect temples in Pergamum in Asia and in Nicomedia in Bithynia, for the worship of Roma and *himself*. At first the worship of the reigning Emperor was considered to be something permissible for provincial non-citizens, but not for those who had the dignity of the citizenship.

There was an inevitable development. It is human to worship a god who can be seen rather than a spirit. Gradually men began more and more to worship the Emperor himself instead of the goddess Roma. It still required special permission from the senate to erect a temple to the living Emperor, but by the middle of the first century that permission was more and more freely given. Caesar worship was becoming the universal religion of the Roman Empire. A priesthood developed and the worship was organized into presbyteries, whose officials were held in the highest honour.

This worship was never intended to wipe out other religions. Rome was essentially tolerant. A man might worship Caesar *and* his own god. But more and more Caesar

worship became a test of political loyalty; it became, as has been said, the recognition of the dominion of Caesar over a man's life and soul."

The problem, as Metzger points out, is that at some point, as Emperor Worship grew, so did the ego of the Emperor. It was the Emperor Domitian who, near the end of his reign, "became so over-weeningly proud and arrogant that he demanded people address him as 'our god and lord' (dominus et datus noster in Latin)".

Ironically, since Christianity now stood on its own apart from the Jewish religion it no longer enjoyed the exemptions that Jews had regarding the worship of the Emperor. Christians who refused to participate in emperor worship exposed themselves to the charge of not only being unpatriotic, but also of being subversive and enemies of the state. Consequently, at various times and places they suffered persecution because of their faith".

Making it Real:

We need this perspective to create context. Most often people delving into Revelation do not take time to understand how or to who the book was written, nor its historical context. Clearly, Revelation tells us these were troubled times for the church. The question is how will the churches respond to the times in which they live given their allegiance to God through Jesus Christ? More importantly how will we respond to the God who called us to faith, and how will we respond to Jesus who is our living Savior?

Question: How does this context affect your view of Revelation? Let's talk about the impact that this setting may have had on the Christians. How may all this have affected their families (immediate and extended), their jobs, their freedoms, etc?