

## What About The Book of Revelation

One of the most persistent of questions to me over the years has been about the strange, terrifying, wonderful and confounding book of Revelation.

It was the last book chosen by the church to be in The New Testament because it could be interpreted in such wild and highly divergent ways. For many people it is the last book of the Bible they'd choose to read.

It has spawned such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* novels and has been used to calendarize the precise end of the world. It is used to create the false scenario of the Rapture and what is called "Pre-Millennial Dispensationalism". All the above are in my mind a grave mis-reading of the book.

Well, what is it about, and how best do we read it?

### I

First, it is in the Bible to show us how God's story ends.

It is important to know how God's story begins: with a Creator God who scooped us out of the clay, breathed into us God's own breath and called us good. It is important to know the crux of the story, as God becomes a man named Jesus

who lived God's love and who died on a Roman cross to show us a love so high and deep and broad that not even his death could stop God from loving us.

But it is also important to know how God's story ends, with a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell with us and wipe away all tears, for sin and death have passed away and all things are become new.

Have you ever watched a basketball game you have pre-recorded when you know your team has won? You cheer even more wholeheartedly, and mistakes by the players or officials seem not so terrible. The Book of Revelation shows us the end of the story so we may live our stories more truly and faithfully today. "For", as David Buttrick says, "if God's story will end in a world reconciled, with New Humanity...with The City and The Lamb and wiped away tears, then all our stories must be revised."

## II

The book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse of John, was written near the end of the first century. The empire wide persecution of Christians has begun. John is a prophet who has been banished and imprisoned on the isle of Patmos because he has refused to bow down and call Caesar Domitian Lord. His brothers and sisters in Ephesus are in similar danger.

Isolated in exile, John is consumed with terrifying questions: Why is Caesar so powerful? Why does God allow the forces of evil to be so strong? What will happen to the churches?

Then God gave John a story. It came from visions brought by an angel. It is a wild fantastic story filled with terrifying animals and mysterious persons, glimpses of heaven and hell, the darkest of darkness and eternity's own light.

The story operates on two levels, the historical and the symbolic. On the first level it is a survival document for a persecuted church. It is God's message for the downtrodden and oppressed. It is a secret document written in code: an animal code, a color code and a number code. It is an underground document written to reveal the meaning of history to the persecuted people of faith and to conceal it from the persecutors.

At this level it has been an important word of God to the downtrodden throughout history. The persecuted church during the Third Reich used it to persevere. It belongs to a genre of literature called "apocalyptic." Apocalypse means an *unveiling* of the meaning of history in dark and terrible times and of God's final victory. As the hymn goes: "Though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

One must first deal with the historical level. It keeps interpretation from going off the rails.

On a second level, the symbolic level, it is a book that reaches deeper than the conscious mind, a level of archetypes and symbols where God still walks with us in the cool of the day. The message is that the forces of evil will be defeated, that God will win the final victory and there will be a final healing of all things. Some try to literalize the symbolic, which is like, says N.T. Wright, saying Global Warming caused the end of the Cold War.

It resembles in some ways those stories called fairy tales, or fantasy stories like *Lord of The Rings* where we experience what J.R.R. Tolkien called a *eucatastrophe*, a good catastrophe, where we meet a sudden miraculous grace and we are given a “glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world.”

### III

In my first church I decided to teach through the Book of Revelation on Sunday nights, January through May. We went painstakingly through the book. On the last Sunday night I had prepared the conclusion. What I had not prepared was that the children’s choir had planned their end of the year program that night, 30 minutes worth, and all I was supposed to do was give a brief meditation.

What to do? The children's choir had gone down to sit in the front rows. I put down my manuscript walked in front of the children and told them the story of Revelation as a child's story, all in about ten minutes. I don't know what the children got out of it, but more than one adult came to me and said "You've been teaching us this book for 4 months and I think I understood it for the first time tonight."

It went something like this:

In the Book of Revelation God unveils to us the meaning of history, past, present and future.

It begins in the throne room of God, which is where everything begins. All around the throne figures are singing praises to God.

Then there appears a Lamb. He has suffered a mortal wound but is alive. His secret name is Jesus who lived, died, was raised. Crowds sing to him "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

The Lamb goes to the throne and takes a scroll on which is written all history. As he unrolls the scroll, we see history unveiled.

First we see the white horse of conquering and a parade of conquerors through history.

Then we see the red horse of war, and we see all the wars of the world.

Then comes the black horse of famine and we see a long line of parched lips and empty stomachs.

Finally the fourth horse comes, and its color is pale green. It is the horse of death and here come plagues and diseases, ancient and modern, malaria, small pox, AIDS.

We know this to be the way of human history and then see it beset with ever more calamity: persecution of Christians, earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes. And we are almost afraid to look and wonder why history is like this.

The story tells us. It is not God's plan or will. There has been a revolt in heaven. War in heaven by a creature called the Dragon. Unable to defeat God there he flees to earth to carry on his war with God's people. The secret name for the Dragon is Satan, and he is the reason for this chaos and calamity throughout history.

History is a fight to the finish between the forces of good, led by the Holy Trinity, God, Christ and Spirit, and the Unholy Trinity, the Dragon, the Beast and the False Prophet.

We've met the Dragon. Here is the Beast, as described in Revelation 13. It comes from the sea. It has ten horns and seven heads and on the heads are written blasphemous names. The Dragon has given to the Beast its power, throne and authority, and the Beast has accepted it. And all the world bows down and worships the Beast saying "Who is like the Beast and who can fight against it?" In the Old Testament that is what the Psalmist says about God: "Who is like God? Who can compare with God?" you see, the Best has become like god and his number is 666. Paul Tillich once defined the demonic as anything finite that presumes to be infinite. So here the State becomes demonic.

Revelation 13 and 17 contain a number of allusions to Rome and Caesar. Domitian as the Beast. Throughout history people have indentified others who oppress and presume to take God's place. Christian in German during the Third Reich identified Hitler as the Beast.

Who is the Beast? Anything or anyone that accepts power and authority offered by the Devil. Remember, Jesus was offered it in the wilderness but said no. There are plenty who say yes.

The third member of the Unholy Trinity is the False Prophet. He is the chief propagandist of the unholy forces. He goes around persuading people to fall down and worship the Beast, and gives the mark of the Beast to all who do.

There it is: history as a battle between the forces of good led by the Holy Trinity and the forces of evil led by the Unholy Trinity.

What will happen? John's story is true of the past and present. It also unveils the future.

At a time in the future Christ will return, not as we first saw him, the Lamb who was slain, but as glorious figure on a white horse. He will lead a final climactic battle against the forces of evil (Revelation 18). He throws the Beast and the False Prophet into the lake of fire that burns forever.

But there's one left, the Dragon, and God takes care of the Dragon personally and throws the Dragon into the lake of fire.

Then comes the final judgment where we will be given a smooth white stone. And on that stone which you hold in your hand will be a name, perhaps your own secret name, perhaps the name of Christ. And with this stone we are welcomed into the kingdom prepared for us since the foundation of the world.



Then will come a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and old, earth. The New Jerusalem will come down from heaven, adorned as a bride for her husband, a city too wonderful to describe in human words. God will dwell with us and we with God, and God will wipe away all the tears and death shall be no more. Behold, says God, I am making all things new.

A river of life will flow through the center of the city. Trees will line both sides of the river and their leaves will be for “the healing of the nations.”

The vision is meant to inspire us to live this way now, citizens of the coming city of God, And to hope in the time of Final Blessing where

All shall be will

And all shall be well

And all manner of things shall be well

Near the beginning of Revelation we hear the words: “Blessed are those who keep what is written here in.” And near the end we hear the words again: “Blessed, happy, is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

To “keep what is written” in Revelation is not to make sense of all the symbols and allusions in the story. It is not to answer questions like, Who is 666?

When is the Rapture? What is the thousand year reign? When is Christ coming back?

It is to trust the arch of the story: Evil is terrible and real, but despite appearances to the contrary God will conquer evil and the darkness will be overcome by the light.

“To keep what is written” means to live by the faithfulness and goodness of God, regardless of the times, and to lean forward to the final healing of all existence.

Revelation is the story of God’s love which in history sometimes becomes a suffering love and how that love will become a triumphant love. Christ’s love made eloquent in suffering shall prevail at last and bring to completion the redemption of the world.

Imagine, a wounded Lamb defeating a dragon!

A friend of mine going through a rough season sent to me a saying he is living by these days:

Everything will be alright in the end, and if it’s not alright, it’s not the end.

John couldn’t have said it better.