

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

The Revelation of John is often enough the book in the New Testament that people wish to know about and the last one they actually need to know about. For too many, interpreting the Revelation has become the Christian way of legitimizing unbridled speculation—of indulging a captivating obsession for the cryptic that leads non-Christians toward such things as astrology and the occult. Because the Revelation is filled with esoteric language and symbolism, it has become a happy hunting ground for self-proclaimed authorities to put forth their dogmatic opinions. This state of affairs is unfortunate, because in the effort to avoid such undisciplined excesses, the Revelation has sometimes been shunned by those with a healthier respect for its apocalyptic genre. Many people need to hear clearly that God stands in judgment over a power-hungry world, and the Revelation asserts this truth in graphic terms. Others need to be assured of God's ability to preserve them in the darkest hour of helplessness before a threatening world system. All of us need to be reminded that God is in control of history and shall conclude it according to his own sovereign will.

Before exploring the book, some introduction is in order, especially since the very first word in the Greek text of the book identifies it as an "apocalypse," a very special genre of literature. The general character of apocalyptic literature was well established long before the writing of Revelation, since it thrived in Judaism during the intertestamental period and on into the early Christian era. To study the Revelation without some knowledge of the apocalyptic genre is like trying to read *Animal Farm* without any knowledge of allegory.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE AND THE BIBLE

The roots of apocalyptic literature lie in the Old Testament prophets, where portions of Isaiah, Zechariah, and Daniel exhibit the literary characteristics of this genre. In the intertestamental period, quite a number of works were written by the Jews in this style, and within the New Testament, one also finds the genre in Jesus' discourse on the fall of the temple, and of course, the famous Apocalypse of John (the Book of Revelation).

PRIMARY CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

The basic character of apocalyptic literature involves several primary features, all of which are to be found in the Book of Revelation.

Special Disclosures

The writers of apocalyptic provide answers to the secrets of the hidden world by dreams, visions, and/or heavenly journeys with angelic guides. While the texts may cover a variety of subject matter, they often describe the end of time and how the age will close. The descriptions are esoteric, which is to say, they are cryptic and intended to be understood by insiders, those who understand the symbolism involved.

A Dualism of Powers and the Triumph of God

Apocalyptic is usually a form of theodicy and depicts the universe as locked in combat between two personified forces of good and evil, God and Satan. In Jewish apocalyptic, Satan is clearly inferior to God and is destined for defeat. He is the arch opponent of God and the persecutor of God's people.

However, God has set limits to his powers, and although the conflict presently rages, it will soon end. God will intervene powerfully to establish his perfect kingdom on the earth.

A Dualism of Ages

THE BIBLE AND TIME

*Two important Greek words are used in the New Testament to describe time, **kairos** and **aion**. The first describes a point in time. The second describes a duration of time, and often enough, a series of ages. To express unending ages of time, the Greek NT uses the expression “the ages of the ages,” which is captured in the Book of Common Prayer as “world without end.”*

Apocalyptic features a marked concept of two ages, a **present age** dominated by evil and a **future age** of perfection. In general, apocalyptic literature arises during times of extreme duress as a sort of “tract for bad times.” The righteous people of God face oppression, persecution, and martyrdom. The present age seems hopelessly given over to the powers of evil. However, God’s people are not to abandon hope, because God will intervene to close the present age, to put down evil once and for all, and to inaugurate a new age of blessedness.

Symbolism

In keeping with the esoteric nature of apocalyptic, the literature is replete with symbolic language, a language that is sometimes unintelligible to modern readers and hence has made the Revelation the object of unusual speculations. Animal and number symbolism are especially prominent. Sometimes the numbers are specifically named, and at other times they are implicit in the scheme of the writing.

Cosmic Disturbances

Apocalyptic often describes the end of the world in cataclysmic terms, including the disintegration of society and even the universe. The earth’s foundations will be shaken, the doors of the underworld will be opened, the oceans will roar, and there will be natural disasters upon the earth. The heavenly bodies will be disturbed, and there will be universal calamity and woe.

Angelology and Demonology

Jewish apocalyptic is frequently marked by the activity of angels and demons, angels on God’s side and the demons opposing them. The concept of seven archangels, for instance, comes from 1 Enoch 20:1-8. Sometimes angels are depicted as guardians of nations. Demons are traced to fallen angels.

A Messiah Figure and a Messianic Age

In some apocalypses, there is a messiah-type hero who stands in opposition to an anti-messiah figure, each on the side of God and Satan respectively. An important title in this respect is “Son of Man,” a heavenly figure who has been hidden by God since the creation in order to be revealed at the end to judge the world, put down evil, and save the righteous. Though the relationship between the titles messiah and Son of Man is not always clear, the messiah figure stands in an opposed balance with the anti-messiah figure. The anti-messiah figure, found under a variety of names, sometimes is depicted as a human being and at other times as a mythological monster or the incarnation of a demon. When the anti-messiah and the powers of evil are destroyed at the close of the present age, some apocalypses envision an interim golden era prior to the new age.

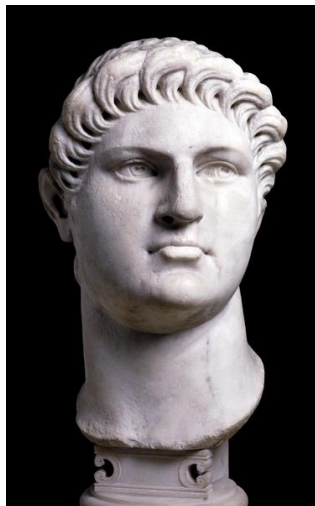
DISCUSSION POINTS

- *To what sort of things should a modern reader be sensitive when reading an apocalyptic work like Revelation—things that wouldn't be so prominent in other types of writing?*

BACKGROUND ISSUES

Authorship

The Revelation was written by John, a Christian seer who tells us nothing about himself other than his name (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). The fact that he gives his name (a rather common name in the 1st century) with no further identifying marks suggests that he may have been well-known within the early Christian community. From the mid-2nd century on, he was believed to have been the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, but there is no way to verify this tradition with certainty, and the jury is still out. We do know of another important “John” from the writings of Papias (early 2nd century), a man who was a disciple of Jesus but also a priest, and we know of an “Elder John,” mentioned by the 4th century historian Eusebius. Both are additional candidates as author. However, the name “John” (*Ioannes*) is exclusively Jewish, and the grammar in the book suggests that he was a Hebrew or Aramaic speaker for whom Greek was his second language.



Nero (ruled AD 54-68)



Domitian (ruled AD 81-96)

Date

Two dates have suggested themselves, both related to periods of the persecution of Christians. The early option is that it was written at the end of Nero's reign (ca. AD 68), and the latter at the end of Domitian's reign (ca. AD 95). A critical factor concerns the internal references to the temple and the holy city (11:1-2). If taken historically, then the implication is that both the temple and Jerusalem were still standing, which puts the book prior to AD 70. If taken symbolically, then the AD 95 date is open. Also, in a sequence of kings, John specifically indicates that the 6th ruler “is,” which is to say, was

currently in power when the book was composed (17:9b-10). Depending upon how one interprets these kings, the king who “is” could be either Nero or Domitian. The tradition of the post-apostolic church favors the later date. Scholars in the 19th century favored the earlier date. Contemporary scholars now favor the later date.

Sources

In addition to his knowledge of the gospel of Christ, John drew heavily on the Old Testament as well as on the imagery of the apocalyptic literature that preceded him. The allusions to the Old Testament are almost too many to count. One scholar, H. Swete, calculated that of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 contain Old Testament references. Sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish between a quotation and an allusion, since quotations by New Testament writers were often

somewhat free. Another source, perhaps not so well recognized, is the hymnody of the early church. The “hymnbook” of the early Christians was the Old Testament Psalter, and John makes use of the Psalter in constructing hymns found in the Revelation. It is quite possible that the hymns of Revelation, which are introduced by phrases such as “singing” and “they never ceased to sing,” reflect the hymnody used in the worship services of early Christian congregations.



According to early Christian tradition, John received his visions in a shallow cave halfway up the path from the present harbor town of Skala to the mountain village.

Form

John employs three different terms for his composition, one being apocalyptic, which we have already examined. In addition, however, the work is in some sense also a prophecy and an epistle (1:1, 3, 4). The book takes its unique character from the combination of all three of these forms.

New Testament letters were intended to be read during worship services (cf. Col. 4:16), and the Revelation was written for the same purpose. The Greek verb *anaginosko* (= to read) in 1:3 means to read aloud in public, as is evident in the phrase “blessed is the one who reads ...and blessed are those who hear it” (cf. 22:18). The book was addressed to seven local congregations in Asia Minor (1:11). If the book was addressed specifically to these seven, we should expect the contents to have a special relevance for them.

John’s adoption of apocalyptic style doesn’t hinder him from thinking as a prophet. He claims that his message is “the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 19:10; 22:16) and that “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10b). Prophecy includes both what God purposes to do and also what he wills humans to do. As such, the Revelation contains both prediction and ethical admonition, and repeating words like “soon” and “near,” which frame the book, seem to refer to the future (1:1, 3; 3:11; 22:6-7, 10, 12, 20). It remains for the modern interpreter to decide whether these words should be taken to mean “near future” or “impending future.”

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *While much of the New Testament was written by apostles, some parts were not. Why, then, do we say that the whole NT is apostolic, and is this important?*
- *If you had lived in the 1st century and heard this book read, what might be your reaction?*