

## Part 1

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# INTRODUCTION: HOW TO STUDY THE REVELATION

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### SUMMARY

The book of Revelation has strong, reassuring visions for the church in crisis. Although it has been much misunderstood and distorted, it plays an important role in the Bible. The book is apocalyptic, a unique category of religious literature that requires particular understanding. It is also unique within the category and among the biblical books, for its author and addressees are explicitly named. It abounds in Old Testament references, and these must be carefully considered. Some ways of approaching the book deal with the text more seriously than others. The book is timely in ways that differ from some popular interpretations.

### BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

Revelation 1-22

### WORD LIST

apocalyptic  
preterit  
seer  
symbol

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If you have not read "Before We Begin," on pages vii and viii, do so now before you go on to the following text.

### **Visions for the Church in Crisis**

The church has seldom had times when there was no crisis. The gospel began in crisis, and the Acts and Epistles recount how the church developed in the crises of its first years. The Savior's vision and then that of early disciples brought strength, vigor, and hope through those years.

Finally, the first-century church was confronted by the tremendous secular power of the Roman Empire. In this crisis a gifted, courageous disciple recorded visions that sustained his Christian contemporaries and have brought saving assurance to the Christian church ever since that time.

In these visions succeeding generations have seen their own crises reflected and have been able to look beyond to God's promise of a new creation. Here are vivid symbols and images of spiritual truth that are more telling than mere words. Here are heaven's strength and promise of reward for those who are caught in the grim bonds and suffering of earth's existence. Here the victory of Jesus Christ is seen in sure conquest over all the forces of evil that any age can muster. Faithful endurance is crowned by certain hope.

### **The Almost Lost Book**

This book of Revelation, the last book in the Christian Bible, has been lost for much of the church. This has happened in several ways and for several reasons. Many people take a quick look at the book and, without seeking reliable help or considering what they may be losing, simply abandon the effort to understand. If they only realized that the book *is* difficult and, perhaps more than any other biblical writing, requires some guidance for responsible interpretation, they could find the spiritual and practical wealth that is in the Revelation.

Other people abandon the book because they perceive it as the particular preserve of religious extremists who profess to find all sorts of strange interpretations and applications in the text. Some shy away from such extreme ideas without any attempt to seek a more sober approach. Some are at first fascinated with extreme interpretations and then realize what insuperable problems are raised by following such ways.

For whatever reason, the book is a serious challenge for those who want to understand the Bible, but surely it does not deserve to be put aside without making an attempt at careful, intelligent study. This Kerygma resource is intended to help persons who are willing to come to the text with an open mind and a determination to find out what the Bible is saying. Every effort is made to apply the best resources of biblical study to the task.

If the way is rough, we may note that the Revelation has posed problems for the church since very early times. In the fourth century, when there was as yet no unanimous decision as to which books belonged in the New Testament, Eusebius of Caesarea, the "father of church history," listed three categories of books: (1) those that were confessed genuine by the whole church; (2) those that were in dispute; and (3) those that were rejected as not genuine. Curiously, the Revelation fell in either the first or the third category; it was *in* or *out*. It became popular during the Middle Ages, and its vivid imagery was often portrayed in art and drama. Some early leaders of the Reformation did not like the Revelation. In Martin Luther's list of New Testament books (1522), he placed it in a special category after the books he thought acceptable for use in the church. In the first printed English New Testament (1526), the translator William Tyndale followed Luther. This is the only New Testament book upon which John Calvin did not write a commentary.

So if we find the book difficult, so have many others before us. That is not adequate reason, however, to abandon the Revelation; for the church *did* accept the book as a part of its canon (that is, it was placed among those books that were held to be uniquely the written Word of God and so comprised the new Christian Scriptures). This study assumes (1) that in accepting the book the church rightly perceived God's will, (2) that the book can be understood, (3) that it has a particular, relevant message for its readers today, and (4) that we have nothing to fear from studying it with every reasonable resource available. We may find that its place at the end of the Bible is quite fitting and that its meaning applies today as perhaps never before in history. We should be open for learning and surprise.

### **An Apocalypse**

The Revelation belongs to a kind of literature called "apocalyptic." Sometimes the book is called "The Apocalypse." This latter designation comes from a Greek

word *apokalypsis*. The Latin equivalent is *revelatio*, from which, of course, the usual English name of the book is derived. Apocalyptic literature is meant to *reveal* things that may not otherwise be known. History is surveyed from beginning to end in order to uncover its meaning. Secrets and mysteries of all creation are unveiled: the heavenly bodies and their relation to human affairs, the heavenly realms beyond the sky, and the underworld—how things came to be, elaborating upon the stories at the beginning of Genesis. The hidden meanings of life are probed, especially the existence and power of evil in face of the sovereignty of God. Human destiny, the end of this life, and existence beyond death are all involved.

Apocalyptic literature was popular in Judaism from about 200 BCE<sup>1</sup> to about 100 CE. There are apocalyptic-like sections in several of the prophetic books (for example, Ezekiel 38-48 and Zechariah 12-14); and true apocalyptic is found in Daniel 7-12.<sup>2</sup> These passages have strongly influenced the book of Revelation. Other apocalyptic books were current but were not accepted into the canon of Hebrew Scripture.

The prophet-seers sometimes saw the future in schemes that included their past and contemporary history. They projected outlines of this history into the future and portrayed times yet to come as including events and nations already a part of history. Since they were dealing with the future, which one cannot really *see* now, they often employed elaborate visions. These visions were portrayed as puzzling to the seer, so sometimes there is introduced an angelic interpreter, whose dialogues help the seer—and us—to understand the symbolism that is always part of the visions. Sometimes the seer goes on journeys to the farthest parts of the earth and even into heaven. Sometimes oracles are received, words directly from God, comparable to messages given to the biblical prophets.

Because the message was intended for people under stress and often in danger from enemies, these writers commonly used coded language, which only

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<sup>1</sup> Many writers on biblical subjects now use "Before the Common Era" rather than "Before Christ" and "The Common Era" rather than "A(nno) D(omini)." We shall use BCE and CE; you can treat them as "Before the Christian Era" and "The Christian Era" if you prefer.

<sup>2</sup> This Daniel passage is dated by scholars at 165 BCE. The reasons for this dating are precise but beyond our scope here.

the intended readers could interpret properly. The resolution of their troubles is assured, for God will intervene to assure final victory of believers. The scope of apocalyptic expectation, therefore, is universal, even cosmic: all the inhabitants of earth and heaven are involved. The present is full of evil and suffering, and this will get worse before God brings it to an end. God's people, however, are encouraged to remain faithful, for victory is near.

Most of this, as we have noted, is put in symbolic language. Since God has already determined the outcome of history, its course and approaching end are frequently outlined in numerical patterns. History may be divided into periods; in the Revelation, this is in sequences of sevens. Details of the symbolism are elaborate. Most of it may be traced to the Old Testament, but in apocalyptic writing it is much more thoroughgoing and systematic. Thus nearly every number, color, and animal has a symbolic value and therefore is not intended to be taken literally. This alerts us that we must look for the symbolic meaning of other pieces of the pictures.

In the Revelation we find prolific use of Old Testament references. We regularly look to the Old Testament as a starting point for our interpretation. The Revelation differs somewhat from other New Testament books in the way it uses these references. While there are literally hundreds of allusions and words and phrases from the Old Testament, there are few extended quotations; so the usage is not easy to trace. Fortunately, reference Bibles usually are very helpful in locating these sources.<sup>3</sup>

Apocalypses are usually attributed to some venerable person of the past. Thus one of the best known apocalypses outside the Old Testament canon is the Book of Enoch.<sup>4</sup> No one should be fooled into thinking that Methuselah's father wrote this book (see Genesis 5:18-24). An exaggerated modern comparison would be a book discussing the causes of World War II but attributed to George Washington. The book of Daniel is generally dated around 165 BCE, but in chapters 1-3 the man Daniel is associated with Nebuchadnezzar, who lived in the 6th

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<sup>3</sup> Sometimes these Old Testament references will be in notes at the bottom of the page. Sometimes they are keyed by numbers or letters. Some Bibles have references in columns alongside the text. There may also be a cumulative list of references at the back of the book. A little practice will help you make these references most useful.

<sup>4</sup> This and a number of other such books are referred to as "pseudepigrapha," that is, works written under a pseudonym. Another well-known pseudepigraph is the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Many of these books date from the period noted above, 200 BCE-100 CE.

century BCE. Again the Revelation is unusual, for its author professes to be "John," a contemporary of the addressees (1:1,4,9).

Parts 2 and 3 deal with John and the churches he addresses. It is important to remember that we cannot understand his book all at once. Details become clearer the further we study. It is unwise to fix too much attention on any one detail as we proceed. Finally, details are interpreted in the light of the whole.

### **Some Literary Considerations**

Our Fourth Gospel is traditionally called *The Gospel of John*, and three epistles in the New Testament are attributed to a "John" though none of them includes his name.<sup>5</sup> Biblical scholars do not agree as to the precise relationship among these books. Since the third century it has been recognized that the Greek that the authors used makes it evident that the same author did not write the Gospel and the Apocalypse. Beyond that, however, it is hard to make a judgment. Certain similarities among the five books suggest to some scholars that there may have been a tradition, perhaps a "school," that dated from John the apostle and that honored his name in its writings. It is also quite possible that there was more than one Christian writer named John. Beyond that it is difficult to venture.

The addressees of the Revelation are explicitly named: they are seven congregations in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey). We learn much more about them in Parts 2 and 3. The author is evidently well acquainted with each of them. John assumes that they will understand his symbolic language. He also must know that they are conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures and that he can allude to those Scriptures freely in developing his message.<sup>6</sup>

The Old Testament references are of several kinds. Sometimes it is merely a word that is to be understood in connection with its Hebrew background. These are often words that recall an Old Testament event or circumstance. There are phrases that are clear allusions to Jewish antecedents. Occasionally references are paraphrased or inserted in whole or in part into a new statement. John does not limit himself to the original intention of his older sources. Occasionally there are

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<sup>5</sup> The Second and Third Epistles are from one designated *The Elder* .

<sup>6</sup> An approximate count of references listed in an appendix of the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* totals over 600 references to Old Testament books in the Revelation!

Old Testament quotations that are readily identifiable; an easy example is 4:8 where Isaiah 6:2,3 is used.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes a patchwork is produced from several sources. In any case, one must consider these references carefully in the task of interpreting the text of Revelation.

### **Ways of Approaching Interpretation**

Apocalyptic literature has been approached in a number of ways. Because of the particular characteristics mentioned above, these ways differ significantly and yield widely differing interpretations. As you read each of the following approaches, try to anticipate the problems posed by each and the results each will yield in understanding the text.

First, there is the **preterit** approach. Preterit refers to past time.<sup>8</sup> This method tries to understand the text in terms of its original setting in history. In the case of the Revelation this means that the time, place, and circumstances of writing are to be determined as accurately as possible and the book read in the light of the bearing these have on the text. The primary focus of the book is the message the seer John was directing to his Christian contemporaries with reference to their life setting.

Second is the **continuing historical** view. This approach believes that the book predicts events throughout the course of history leading to the end or consummation of history (that is, to the so-called "end of the world"). Not all interpreters find the same details prophesied, but usually they span the history of the church from the time of the apostles to the present. This view regularly reaches the conclusion that the process is almost at an end.

Third, there is the **futurist** view. Here all is directed to the end-time. John's visions and prophecies concern the final days of the church and of the world and are specifically for the support of Christians in that period. Most of the details in the book are interpreted as relating to people and events contemporary with the interpreter. Unless one believes that the last days are upon us, of course, this interpretation robs the Revelation of most of its relevance.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah seems to be a favorite book of the seer. He refers to it over 100 times, more than to any other book. (Psalms, Ezekiel, and Daniel are the next runners-up.)

<sup>8</sup> Edward P. Blair in *The Illustrated Bible Handbook* (Abingdon Press, 1987) refers to this as "the contemporary-historical view" (page 362).

Fourth is a **spiritual** interpretation.<sup>9</sup> In this approach the historical reference of the book is quite secondary. Timeless truth is sought. This method is likely to become quite far-fetched since it allows considerable room for subjective views. On the other hand, it can yield constructive guidelines for Christian life and thought.

Finally, one may take an **inclusive** approach and draw some guidance from several of these methods. Surely one should begin with the assumption that John takes seriously the needs of the churches that he is addressing. Since he is at pains to show that he knows each church and its problems well,<sup>10</sup> it follows that when he addresses those problems, he is serious. It would be shortsighted, however, to confine the significance of the prophecy to that one time in the life of the church. If the church at another period finds that its problems are like those of the first-century congregations, then the words of the book should also apply to the later time. And certainly some of the truth has timeless, spiritual meaning.

We shall follow the **inclusive** approach. Clearly this requires diligent study, for we need to try first of all to understand John's message in its first-century setting. Because the church has used the book through the centuries, we do not ignore the historical approach, but precisely because of these views, we have no use for the futurist approach. Much of the application of the meaning to our day comes out in the "Reflection" section and in group discussion.

### **A Book for These Times**

Before going further, take time to read rapidly through the entire book of Revelation. If possible do it at one sitting. Do not stop to muse over the meaning of obscure parts.

You undoubtedly have mixed impressions. Parts of the book may seem utterly fantastic, even bizarre. The addressees are evidently in dire straits, facing both earthly and demonic enemies. There are natural disasters and man-made cataclysms of horrendous proportions. World history comes to a crashing end, and God eliminates all the enemies of the "saints." The universe is finally

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<sup>9</sup> *The Illustrated Bible Handbook* : "mythic-symbolic."

<sup>10</sup> This will be taken up in Part 3.



renewed. Throughout, there are scenes in heaven where God and *the Lamb* are being magnificently praised. From beginning to end an invitation is open—sometimes expressed, sometimes implied—for John's hearers to come to the ultimate safety of the company of God's people.

The Revelation, then, is addressed to people who are facing a world situation that appears to be "terminal." Obviously, the expected end did not come upon the original readers and hearers of the prophecy, nor has it arrived in any succeeding age, even though there have been many times when persons were convinced it was at hand. The divine reassurance that is an essential element of the book, however, sustained John's churches and has been a comfort and hope in every age of the church.

In the last half of the twentieth century a new fear has gripped many thoughtful people in the world. Heretofore, the "end of the world" has been thought of—if at all—as an eventuality that rests in the hands of the Creator of the world. Now it seems clear that we have the power to bring about that end. The horror of such a chance makes this truly an apocalyptic age. However one understands and interprets this grim possibility, it is a time of fearsome dread for many people. Only a person naively indifferent can live today without considering seriously what grounds for hope there may be.

In the face of this situation the Revelation, the Apocalypse of John, affirms the ultimate sovereignty of God Almighty. As we are faced with the possibility that the world may come crashing in upon us, we read the reassurance of the final victory of Jesus Christ. This book, then, may be for us the most timely part of Holy Scripture after the gospel message itself.

## **FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION**

### **Memory Bank**

Study the outline of the Revelation and of this course (pages iii f.). Particularly note the titles of each Part and how they summarize the movement through the book.

## **Research**

1. Use several English Bible versions as you study. The Kerygma Program particularly recommends the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New English Bible (NEB), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), and Today's English Version, the Good News Bible (GNB). Look in these to marshal potential aids for your further study. In the Roman Catholic church the New American Bible (NAB) is regularly in use and is a very good version.
2. Try to recall interpretations you have heard that deal with all or parts of the Revelation. Which of the five ways of approaching interpretation did these represent?
3. In your rapid reading of Revelation, which verses struck you as familiar? From what circumstances do you remember them?

## **Reflection**

1. To what extent has the Revelation been a "lost book" for you? Why?
2. What aspects of the ways of approaching interpretation suggested here seem to you to be applicable to the study of one of the Gospels? How? Why?
3. John professes that most of the Revelation came to him as visions from the Lord. What special problems does this pose for interpretation?
4. From your rapid reading of the book, what key values do you see in it?