

Preface to the second edition

Revelation Unwrapped started life as a series of Bible studies when I was chaplain to the University of East London in the early 1990s. There can be few better ways to sharpen your own understanding of a text than to have to teach it to four separate groups of inquisitive minds every week! Those original notes, however, became the work you are now holding. Since then I have taught the book of Revelation at innumerable conferences and churches, and to my great relief there is nothing that I would change substantially in what I first wrote. I have come across some useful works which have sharpened my understanding but nothing which has made me wish I could recall the book or rewrite it in any substantial way.

Credit for this, however, lies not with myself but rather with the firm foundation laid by those authors who first helped me 'unwrap Revelation'. Principal among these is still Michael Wilcock, whose commentary *I Saw Heaven Opened* is now available in the 'Bible Speaks Today' series published by IVP. I must confess to not keeping up with new publishing on Revelation, being convinced that the best 'tool' for getting to grips with the text is the rest of Scripture, and in particular the Old Testament. In addition to Wilcock, however, I would commend the following works:

The Revelation of St John the Divine G B Caird (London: A & C Black, 1966)

Revelation J M Court (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994)

The Gospel in Revelation G Goldsworthy (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994)

More than Conquerors W Hendriksen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990)

The Book of Revelation P E Hughes (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990)

The Millennium and the Book of Revelation R J McKelvey (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1999)

Revelation L Morris (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1987)

Apart from this preface, two other changes of content have been made to the present work. A very stimulating article by Meredith Kline has prompted me to add a section on Armageddon to Appendix A. I have also reworked the section there on the Millennium. Besides that, however, what was taught in 1992 is pretty much what you have here.

■ THE END IS NIGH

One thing I can, of course, say with confidence is that, whatever view you take of it, the end of the world is nearer than it was when this book first appeared! Of more seriousness to Christians is that the Western world is clearly about to become a substantially less friendly place than it was ten years ago. Europe is returning to something of the unity it had before the Reformation, which is not necessarily bad in itself, but it is clear that national governments will themselves be under the control of European legislators and that such legislation is based on an ambiguous attitude towards religious freedom. Thus Section 1 of Article 9 in the European Convention on Human Rights declares that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”. But then Article 2 immediately qualifies this considerably: “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.” The word ‘only’ here is, of course, superfluous! The reality is that religious freedom in Europe will be subject to the future prescriptions of European law, whatever they might be, and to European legislators, whoever they are.

We have thus come a long way, in this country at least, from the commitment made fifty years ago by Queen Elizabeth II at her coronation to maintain ‘the laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel, maintain the Protestant Religion established by law and maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline and government thereof, as by law established in England.’ Some may feel this is a good thing. What is undeniable is that we are entering a very different world from that of the twentieth century.

Indeed, there is reason to believe we are approaching one of

those recurrent periods in history described in Revelation 13, where a person's ability to engage in the normal commerce of society is determined by their willingness to forsake Christian values for those of a world dominated by the enemies of the gospel. Already there is anecdotal evidence of Christians in the medical profession facing difficulty over their attitudes to abortion. A more serious battle for the churches is likely to come over legislation on sexual orientation and employment. The need for Western Christians to hear the message of Revelation is thus perhaps more acute than it has been for centuries.

■ INTERPRETATION

Yet the book of Revelation does not offer a blueprint for the future. That, at least, is the interpretation you will find here. Instead, it offers a perspective on the present — a perspective that has been equally relevant to every Christian since the book was first written. The opening words of the book promise blessing to the reader who acts on what it says, “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein” (1:3). Unfortunately, many Christians miss out on the blessing because they are too nervous to read the book!

Yet that blessing was promised to John's first audience, not to some future generation living in a putative ‘Tribulation’ immediately before Christ's return. It therefore follows that they must have understood the book when they heard it, perhaps around the turn of the first century AD. Sometimes it is suggested that this is because they had some sort of ‘key’ to unlock the book's ‘code’. And certainly the ‘apocalyptic’ style was more familiar to them than to us. But my own conviction is that Revelation was understood by them simply because it reworks gospel theology and biblical themes, albeit it in an unfamiliar way.

I have taken to comparing the book of Revelation to an overture to a musical. Those familiar with the musical as a whole will recognize individual tunes within the overture. They will know where they come from and how they are developed in their later context. They will perhaps even be able to sing all the words, even though what they hear is only a snippet. Yet the overture also works as a musical piece in itself, even for the first-time hearer. Indeed, it will even change aspects of the individual pieces

in the musical to *segué* from one part to the next. And in doing so it creates new emphases and highlights particular aspects of the whole.

In a similar way, Revelation uses existing biblical material to create its own message. And yet it does so biblically, under the controlling influence of the gospel, so as to give us not a new message, hidden within a ‘cryptic’ work, but a new emphasis on the old message, constantly appropriate to Christians living under pressure from the world, the flesh and the devil.

This interpretation is, I know, one with which not everyone will be comfortable. It is certainly not universal in the more popular commentaries. But it is one which I believe people will find commends itself as they read through Revelation itself. Our motto at all times should be the advice Paul gave to Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything.” (2 Tim 2:7). As the great Evangelical teacher Dick Lucas is fond of pointing out, it is the combination of *our* thinking and the *Lord’s* helping which will lead us into God’s truth.

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The background to the Book

■ DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

Following early tradition, commentators have tended to date the writing of Revelation around 90AD. However, there are reasons (also compatible with tradition) for believing it could have been written earlier than 70AD. J A T Robinson, in particular, argues for this view in *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976). The writer names himself as “John” (1:9) and tradition also identifies him with the Apostle and the writer of the Gospel and Epistles bearing his name. D Guthrie’s *New Testament Introduction* (London: IVP, 1970) gives a thorough review of the arguments about authorship and dating. Guthrie comments that though the arguments in favour of John’s authorship are inconclusive, “At least, if this is the true solution it at once explains the rise of the tradition, which none of the others satisfactorily does” (p 949). As this conclusion is congruous with the content of Revelation, we will be assuming throughout that it was set down by the Apostle John and that it was, as he says, initially revealed to him by Jesus. The exact nature of his *experience* must necessarily remain a mystery. However, our ignorance at this point need not prevent us understanding the message of the book.

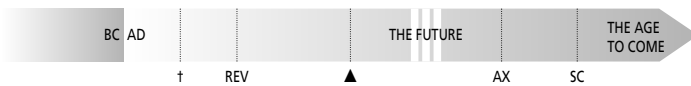
■ REVELATION AND HISTORY

One of the main problems with studying Revelation is its relationship with history. Throughout this book we will use a ‘time-line’ to indicate how each section we are studying is being related to human history, even though we will not always tie this to particular events. The key points on this time-line are:

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|----|---|---|
| BC | = | Before Christ |
| AD | = | Anno Domini, the time after Christ’s birth. |

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|-----------------|---|---|
| THE FUTURE | = | The period (of unknown length) from now to the second coming. |
| THE AGE TO COME | = | The period subsequent to Christ's Second Coming. |
| † | = | The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. |
| REV | = | The time at which John received Revelation (between 70 and 90AD). |
| ▲ | = | The present. |
| AX | = | The time of the Antichrist |
| SC | = | The second coming of Jesus. |

Our basic 'time line' looks like this (the relative periods are not to scale):



Over it, we will fit the various parts of the book as we proceed. Thus, chapters 2 and 3 fit as follows:



If we cannot be sure where a particular passage 'fits', this is indicated with a question mark, e.g.: 9:1-21?

Our overall understanding of the relationship of Revelation with history directly affects its interpretation. Is it a book which had a message once, or perhaps a book which will have a message to a generation of Christians in the future? Or has it a message for every Christian in every age? In this respect, there are four 'schools of interpretation' which can be summarized as follows:

Preterist – Revelation describes PAST events written as if it were 'prophesy'. This is the view of many liberal scholars. It

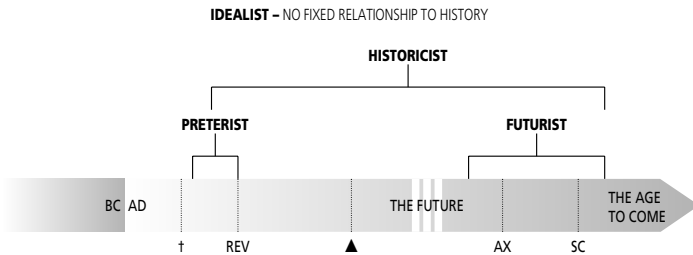
allows the book to have a message for us today – but not a predictive message for the future.

Historicist – Revelation describes the WHOLE OF HISTORY, particularly from 70AD to the return of Christ. This was the view of many Reformation scholars. It allows the book to have both a message for today and an element of prediction.

Futurist – Revelation deals principally with events of the FUTURE ‘END TIMES’. This is the view of many modern popular writers, especially in America. This means whilst the book is interesting to read now, it will only be practically relevant at some time in the future.

Idealist – Revelation is entirely symbolic and DOES NOT REFER TO ANY SPECIFIC EVENTS at all. Again, it allows the book to be relevant today, though the meaning may not be immediately obvious.

We can relate each of these views to our ‘time line’ as follows:



There are problems with all these views. However, the position we will be taking is basically a mixture of ‘Historicist’ and ‘Idealist’.

■ REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE

Most of the imagery in Revelation is drawn from other books in the Bible. It is therefore important in reading Revelation to realize that it is not usually adding new information so much as summarizing old. Many of these allusions to other parts of Scripture will be noted as we

go along. Frequently they are single verses, but these should not be seen as isolated ‘proof texts’ so much as *examples* of the background material to a particular passage or concept. Obviously it has been impossible to note all of these allusions, or even always to be aware of them! At some stage you should get hold of a Bible with footnoted references and see the wealth of material John draws on.

You will get the most benefit out of this book if you actually read the cross-references given in the text. The following conventions have been used for those Bible references:

- Chapters and verses are indicated by “Shortened-book-name N:n”. Thus “Gen 3:15” means “the book of Genesis, chapter 3, verse 15”. (There is a list of abbreviations in Appendix B.)
- Gen 3:15a means the first part of Gen 3:15, 3:15b means the part after 15a, and so on.
- All verse numbers are *inclusive*.
- cf means “compare with” (i.e. look these verses up!).
- All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added for the purposes of this book.

■ THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

It is clear to any reader that Revelation has a definite structure, but precise analyses of this vary. Most commentators divide the book into seven main sections – with or without a Prologue or Epilogue. The following structure is used in this book:

Introduction

Prologue (1:1-20)

The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

Main Section

The Seven Seals (4:1-8:1)

The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:18)

The Holy War (11:19-15:4)

The Seven Plagues (15:5-16:21)

The Fall of Babylon (17:1-19:10)

The Conquering King (19:11-21)

The Reigning Saints (20:1-21:8)

The Final Act

The New Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)

Final Instructions and Exhortations (22:6-21)

Exercises (Throughout this book you will find exercises and questions as you go along. You don't have to tackle these, but obviously they are designed to help your understanding. You may find the questions useful for group discussion.)

- Read through Revelation in one sitting and note in your Bible the sections given above.
 - See whether you would like to make additional or different sub-divisions.
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