

Introduction to Revelation

- I. The title:
 - A. The title is derived from the first three words of the Greek text: “Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).
 - B. The noun “revelation” denotes an action of uncovering, disclosing, and revealing (here it is used of a particular form of disclosure, as in a vision).
 - C. It is wrong to refer to this book as “the Book of Revelations” since its purpose is to reveal the role and significance of its central character: Jesus Christ.
 - D. The various visions within the book make up one revelation.
 - E. And that revelation concerns itself with the Person and Work of Christ related to the establishment of the divine order on earth.

- II. Canonicity
 - A. In the era immediately following the apostolic era (e.g., patristic), the church did not universally accept this book as canonical.
 - B. Justin Martyr (c. 135 AD) did however say that it was written by the apostle John.
 - C. Melito of Sardis (160-190 AD) did compose a commentary on this book.
 - D. Clement of Alexandria, who died around 250 AD, was familiar with the book and regarded it as worthy of a place in the canon of scripture.
 - E. Dionysius of Alexandria, who followed Clement, rejected the book as not having been composed by John, but he was aware that the church had received it as such.
 - F. The Muratorian Fragment (c. 170 AD), which contains the earliest known record of the canon, included it.
 - G. The church of Carthage accepted it and Tertullian (190-220 AD) quoted from eighteen of its twenty-two chapters.
 - H. The Western Church of the 2nd century was almost unanimous in accepting the book (a dissenting voice was Marcion).
 - I. By the 3rd century its place in the canon was fully recognized.
 - J. The Eastern churches almost unanimously rejected its canonicity.
 - K. Eusebius (315-386), the father of church history, forbade the reading of the book in the churches and discouraged believers from the private reading of it.
 - L. It was not until around the 5th century that the Eastern churches finally came to accept it as scripture.

- III. Authorship
 - A. The internal evidence clearly designates the author as “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8).
 - B. Some have suggested that the author was not the apostle John, but some other John, based primarily upon a stylistic argument.
 - C. The difference in linguistic style between his other generally accepted writings (his gospel, and his three epistles) can be explained by the fact that much of what he wrote in this book was dictated to him by an angel, and this would account for the differences in the vocabulary and structure of the Greek of this book.

- D. As noted above the patristic writers, including Justin Martyr (140) attributed the authorship to the apostle John (Martyr: “a certain man, whose name was John, one of the apostle of Christ...”).
- E. John the apostle did not find it necessary to more specifically identify himself as his widespread fame within the Christian community was such that all he had to do was refer to himself by the simple appellation: “John.”
- F. In the Gospel that bears his name as well as his three epistles he does not even publish his personal name.
- G. A lesser individual would have certainly had to provide more detailed information to the Christian community if he was going to convince anybody of the validity of his work.

IV. Place and Date

- A. John tells us that he was on the island of Patmos (just off the coast of Asia Minor west and south of the Ephesus) at the time of his visions, he indicates that he was told to “Write!” what he saw and heard (at 1:19; 14:13; 19:9; cp. 10:4).
- B. John was told to “Write in a book what you see and send *it* to the seven churches of Asia” (1:19).
- C. And finally, in chapter 22 verse 6 John is told that what he had seen and heard was “faithful and true” in verse 19 of the same chapter there is a reference to “the words of the book of this prophecy...which are written in this book” indicating that it was composed during John’s imprisonment on Patmos.
- D. Patmos is a small rocky island off the coast of Asia Minor (mod. Turkey) where John had been exiled during the persecution of Caesar Domitian.
- E. Tradition says that John was arrested in a cycle of persecution around 96 AD and exiled to Patmos where there was a penal colony laboring in the quarries.
- F. By this time the apostle John would have been well into his eighties.
- G. He was later released from Patmos and he finished up his Phase 2 at Ephesus according to the early church tradition.
- H. So the contents of this book was revealed and written down around the mid-nineties AD.

V. Historical Setting

- A. The early Church enjoyed the status of *religio licita* (legal religion) as the Roman authorities tended to view it as simply a sub-sect of Judaism.
- B. But with Nero (54-68) things went for bad to worse for the Christian communities within the Empire as Nero and the subsequent Flavian emperors (Vespasian 69-79; Titus 79-81 and Domitian 81-96) took a more aggressive stance against all who refused to worship the emperor.
- C. By the reign of Domitian and even more so of his successor Trajan the Christian faith was declared *religio illicita*.
- D. Christians who refused to abandon their faith were subject to all manner of state sponsored oppression.
- E. It was against this background that God revealed his prophetic plan for the consummation for his people through His apostle.

- VI. Recipients
 - A. The immediate recipients were seven local churches residing in Asia Minor who lived under the shadow of imperial persecution (Rev 1:11).
 - B. The seven cities/towns in which these seven congregations existed lay on a circular road that linked them and they could have been visited in the very same order they are mentioned in 1:11 (and chapters two and three).
 - C. Based on the opening verse we are safe to assume that this message is ultimately meant for all believers living at any time as are the New Testament letters which were written to specific churches.

- VII. The Preterist school of interpretation regards the book as descriptive of the conditions of the Asian churches toward the end of the 1st century AD.
 - A. This approach sees the book of Revelation as using veiled language to encourage believers during a period of heavy persecution.
 - B. It has the obvious disadvantage of limiting the content to the history of the 2nd half of the first century AD, and having nothing to say about the last days associated with the coming of Christ.
 - C. Under this view Babylon and the beasts refer to Rome while the woman in chapter 12 refers to the Church.
 - D. The various judgments are simply viewed as natural calamities that occurred within the lifetime of John.
 - E. This approach to the book completely undermines the historical-grammatical approach to the interpretation of Scripture.
 - F. The Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Christ (among others) subscribe to this view.

- VIII. The Historicist Interpretation limits the scope of the book to the entire course of Christian history from the time of John to the end of the Church age with no recognition of the coming tribulation.
 - A. For these proponents the seals, trumpets and bowls are to be regarded as successive stages in the development of the Church.
 - B. This view gained stature during the Reformation as it identified the Pope as the beast and the false prophet as the Catholic Church.
 - C. This view engenders all sorts of identifications based on whatever is “current.”
 - D. This view mismanages the details applying it all to the history of the Church which is clearly absent from the events of chapters 6 through 19.
 - E. This view held sway during the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

- IX. The Idealists approach assumes that the visions are not literal and nothing more than an attempt to represent the on-going conflict between good and evil.
 - A. The proponents of this view deny the literal return of Christ to the earth.
 - B. This view is essentially allegorical following the school of Alexandria of which Origen is associated.

- X. The Futurists school sees the book as prophetic.

- A. It recognizes that chapter one is introductory.
- B. But after that, everything that follows deals with the future history of mankind including the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.
- C. It even sees chapters two and three as being prophetically symbolic of seven eras within the current church age.
- D. This position sees everything from chapter five forward as coming after the removal of the Church from the historical scene.
- E. This view recognizes the existence of seven local churches, but it also sees the reason these seven churches were chosen is because they typify seven eras within the current dispensation.
- F. This school sees the symbolism of chapter four verse 1 as representing the Rapture of the Church.
- G. In chapters four and five the scene shifts to heaven where the Church is.
- H. In chapters 6 through 19 the 70th Week of Daniel chapter nine runs its course (the term "church" is used nineteen times in the first three chapters but is not mentioned again until we come to 19:7-9 where the church is mentioned under the figure of a "bride").
- I. This view allows for the application and interpretation of symbols.
- J. The major weakness of this view is that its supporters hold to a false immanency failing to identify the rapture generation based on the doctrine of the fig tree.

END: Introduction

Jack M. Ballinger

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