

The Book of Revelation

Week #1 - Overview

I. INTRODUCTION

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me” [Rev 3:20]

“After this I looked, and lo, in heaven, an open door . . .” [Rev 4:1]

Most people should begin their Scripture studies with one of the Gospels [Matthew, Mark, Luke or John] or with the Book of Genesis.

The ancient title of Revelation is *Apokalypsis* [Apocalypse] from the Greek which literally means to “pull back the veil” or the covers. It is bridal language. The book of Revelation ushers the reader into the sacred bridal chamber of the Lord and his Bride, the Church.

Most of us are fascinated with the Book of Revelation because we believe that it predicts the end of the world and the major events which will occur before the end.

And we all want to know what is going to happen, no matter how frightening! Dragons, beasts, the four horsemen, a killer lamb - it's almost too scary - yet it is many people's favourite book.

The book is full of images, numbers, colours, and creatures unfamiliar to a reader of the twenty-first century. Though the images in this book may seem like fantasy, once the rich symbolism is understood, you will find it very relevant to your daily life.

Unfortunately, the Apocalypse, considered by some to be the most beautiful book in the New Testament, is at the same time the most complex. No book has given rise to so many **conflicting** interpretations.

- Is it a coded message for our times?

- Is the Beast a prophecy about Russia, or Hitler or Stalin, or Saddam Hussein, or Barack Obama?
- Does the book describe a countdown for the destruction of the world and the Second Coming of Christ,
- And, if so, what are the signs of the End?
- Will these events take place in our generation?

A. Background Information

Fascinating questions! And we want the answers NOW!

Unfortunately, before we can run, we have to learn to walk. The same applies to our study of Scripture. Before we can attempt to answer these questions we need some background information on the book, such as:

- Who wrote it;
- when was it written – ***this is crucial for it's interpretation;***
- the meaning of the images and symbols in the book;
- the history of the times in which it was written;
- How do we interpret Revelation? Is it prophecy or history, myth or legend?
- Do we take the book literally or not?

B. Points to Remember

As we begin our journey in search of some answers we have to keep in mind the following:

- Certainty is hard to come by – mysteries abound, especially in the Book of Revelation, and Biblical scholars disagree about the interpretation and meaning.
- There are many layers of meaning in the Scriptures – see handout on the four senses of Scripture.
- There are different ways to interpret the book – some of which are valid; some not.

Let's see if we can begin to answer some of these questions.

C. Apocalyptic Literature

When we select a book from the library it is helpful to know at the beginning whether it claims to be a biography, a novel, a play, a historical study, philosophy, or poetry.

In the Bible, which is itself a library, how do we classify the Book of Revelation?

The very first word of the book is *Apokalypsis* [Revelation]! From this title some scholars have assumed that the book belongs to a type of Jewish literature popular around the time of Christ called *apocalyptic literature*.

Some features of apocalyptic literature are:

- A fascination with symbols, with symbolic colours and numbers;
- Themes of heavenly battle and cosmic catastrophe;
- The description of present political powers in terms of past ones [Rome as Babylon, the people of God as Jerusalem];
- The life and death struggle of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world.

D. Prophetic

But while the book has some traits of apocalyptic literature, we are better off to accept its own repeated claim to be **prophecy** [Rev 1:3 22:7, 10, 18-19].

*Blessed is the one who **reads aloud** and blessed are those who listen to this **prophetic** message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near [Rev1:3].*

E. Liturgical

Revelation is the most liturgical of all the New Testament books – **it describes an elaborate heavenly liturgy, on which the Mass is patterned!**

John's words were read out to the Christians gathered together for the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy, and served as the Liturgy of the Word, in preparation for the Liturgy of the Eucharist
[Archbishop Collins]

*"Blessed is the one who **reads aloud** and blessed are those **who listen** . . ."*
[Rev1:3].

Pope John Paul II has called the Mass "*heaven on earth,*" explaining that "*the liturgy we celebrate on earth is a mysterious participation in the heavenly liturgy.*"

F. Authour

Scholars disagree about the authour book of Revelation, but an impressive number of Church fathers in the first few centuries [St. Justin, St. Irenaeus, St. Hippolytus, St. Jerome, Tertullian, and Origen] argued that the *Fourth Gospel* and *Revelation* had the same authour: the Apostle John, brother of James and son of Zebedee.

Most scholars today do not agree with that, although they believe that John may have been the "authority" behind the tradition.

There are good arguments on both sides. We will follow the tradition of the Church that the authour is the Apostle John, also called the Beloved Disciple.

Revelation identifies the authour as a prophet, but does not call him an apostle. However he has authority over seven churches, and presents himself as someone with special authority from the Lord. It is hard to believe that someone with this kind of authority is not as apostle.

G. Dating: Time Frame

Determining the date when the book was written is of critical importance for its interpretation. Scholars disagree on when Revelation was written. Estimates vary from the late 60s to the mid 90s AD.

Today, most scholars hold that the book was written in the mid 90's during the reign of the Emperor Domitian who reigned from AD 81-96.

But a growing number of scholars believe the book was written much earlier, sometime before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.

There are good reasons to believe that Revelation was written before AD 70, since it does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. For the Jews the destruction of the Temple was literally the End of the World. It is hard to imagine that John would not have mentioned this earth-shaking fact in the book, if it was written after AD 70.

The book was probably written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero, who reigned from AD 54-68. Nero began the first and probably worst persecution against the Church after the burning of Rome in AD 64. It is believed that Nero himself ordered the city to be burned and used this as an excuse to persecute the Christians.

Revelation was written on the island of Patmos, which is just off the coast of Turkey, where John had been imprisoned by the Emperor for preaching about Christ.

I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus [Rev 1:9]

While imprisoned on Patmos, John had a vision of God's glory on a Sunday. Inspired by God to reflect on this vision and how it applied to the Christian communities back on the mainland, he wrote the Book of Revelation.

H. Interpretation of Revelation

Since Revelation is concerned with the future more than any other New Testament book, and because of the great amount of symbolism it contains, it is understandable that theories abounded as to what events have fulfilled or will fulfill the prophecies contained in the book.

It has been interpreted in many different ways over the centuries. The four main interpretations are as follows:

- 1.** Revelation is talking solely about the political and cultural period in which it was written, i.e., **in John's time**, and

describes the Church's struggle against the mighty Roman Empire [*Critical view*];

2. Revelation is talking exclusively about the events pertaining to the **End of the World** [*Futurist view*];
3. Revelation describes the situation of the Church in John's time **and** a gives preview of the end of history – the return of Christ and the last Judgment [*Preterist view*].
4. Revelation is a history of the Church, proclaiming the main events and epochs of the Church, past and future. Seven periods are identified, the last being the reign of a thousand years which Christ and His followers will establish before the end of the world, if Revelation 20: 1-7 is taken literally.

The *preterist* position comes closest to the tradition of the Church Fathers although the Church has never defined which approach to take.

*In the final analysis, all these perspectives have something to offer and draw attention to important aspects of Revelation. What is needed is an **integrative** view that recognizes the presence of multiple themes and perspectives that complement one another, and add richness and depth to the book [ICSB pg 35].*

I. Message of Revelation

God inspired John to write the book of Revelation to provide guidance and encouragement, not only to the Christian community under his care, but to all Christians of his time and down through the ages, in response to two great threats; **persecution and seduction.**

J. Persecution

Persecution was coming from both Jews and pagans [Romans]. Pagan persecution had begun with the first great persecution instigated by Nero and would continue until the fourth century when Constantine put an end to it.

“Christians needed to be strengthened and given hope so that if they were called before the Roman officials and told to worship

the Emperor they would remain faithful to the Lamb of God [Jesus] even if ferociously attacked by the Beast [the Roman Empire headed by Nero Caesar]. All around them they saw the power of Rome; John sought to make visible to them the power of Christ” [Archbishop Thomas Collins].

K. Seduction

“[Seduction] was an even greater threat. Many Christians were being seduced by the pagan values of the Empire, so John seeks to convince the wavering Christians to remain faithful to their principles as members of the Church, the Bride of Christ. He reminds us that although they live in a materialistic society which is like pagan Babylon of OT times, they are really citizens of the New Jerusalem, the holy city of God [Archbishop Thomas Collins].

L. Symbols and Imagery

[See handout by Archbishop Collins].

COLOURS:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| 1. White | = | victory, joy; |
| 2. Black | = | Death, disaster, distress |
| 3. Red | = | blood, martyrdom; |
| 4. Sickly Green | = | sickness, plague |

OBJECTS:

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 5. Horns | = | power; |
| 6. Eyes | = | knowledge; |
| 7. Crowns | = | royalty |
| 8. Key of David | = | Power to open or shut God’s Kingdom |

ANIMALS:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------|
| 1. Lamb | = | Jesus; |
| 2. Dragon/Serpent | = | Satan; |

3. Beast [#1] = Roman Empire / Emperor
[Nero Caesar]. The number of the beast is 666!

NUMBERS:

1. Three (3) = divinity;
2. Seven (7) = perfection;
3. Six (6) = imperfection [sin];
4. 666 = maximum imperfection or greatest evil;
5. 1000 = A long period of time (10x10x10);
6. 144,000 = All of God's people in union with Him.
Product of 12x12x1000

M. Main Characters in Revelation

The way we identify the characters of Revelation will depend on our scheme of interpretation. In other words, is John describing the events of his time, our time, or the End Times, or all three? I believe that it is all three. There is no reason that they all can't be true simultaneously.

The Lamb

This is Revelation's favoured title and image for Jesus Christ. Yes, He is also Ruler, High Priest, the Holy One, the Lord of Lords, and King of Kings, Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, but most of all in the book of Revelation Jesus is the Lamb of God!

A Woman Clothed with the Sun

Who is the Woman of Revelation described in chapter 12?

“ . . . A Woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.”

There are several levels of meaning!

- She is Mary [the Ark of the New Covenant; she is the one who gives birth to the male child Who will rule the nations]. The child is Jesus.

- She is also ancient Israel often called “daughter Zion” who brings forth Israel’s Messiah;
- She is also the Church [the New Israel], besieged by Satan, yet preserved in safety, and brings forth spiritual offspring.

The Beasts

The beasts are symbols but they are not *just* symbols. They are real spiritual beings, demonic persons who have corrupted the political destiny of nations! There are two beasts – one comes out of the sea and the other from the land.

The beasts want to subvert God’s plan by corrupting both the **State** [political institutions] and the **Church** [religious institutions].

And they are active in every age, including our own.

The First Beast [Rev 13:1-3]

- The first beast comes out of the sea and is a hideous seven-headed, ten-horned monster; a terrifying combination of leopard, lion, and bear. Each horn has a crown. The horns symbolize power; the crowns, kingship. It is very similar to the “dragon” of Revelation 12!
- It comes out of the sea and receives its power and kingship from the dragon [Satan].
- This beast represents all corrupted political authority, and the corrupting demonic power behind it. In John’s time, it represented Nero and the Roman Empire. At the End of Time it will represent the Antichrist!

- In our time . . .?
-

The Second Beast

- The second beast comes from the earth/land and has horns like a lamb, but speaks like a dragon.
- It makes the world worship the first beast.
- It looks like a lamb [Jesus] but is really another agent of Satan.
- It represents corrupt religious authority. In John's time, it represented the corrupt religious leaders of Jerusalem who choose Caesar over Jesus. In response to Pilate's question, "***Shall I crucify your king?***" the chief priests said, "***We have no king but Caesar.***"
- In the End Times it will represent a corrupt religious leader, a false prophet, who will work with the Antichrist!
- In our time . . .?

Angels

- St. Michael the Archangel
- The four "living creatures"
- The four horsemen

The Scroll with the Seven Seals

The scroll that the Lamb unseals is a will or testament, that is, a covenant document. The opening of the scroll is the reading of the document.

A testament in antiquity was sealed by six witnesses and the testator [the one who dies or makes the will].

Those who have been unfaithful to the New Covenant will inherit the curses, while the faithful will find their inheritance and blessing in the Kingdom of God.

The Four Horsemen [Angels]

The horsemen bring about God's covenant judgment on Jerusalem, which occurred in the destruction of the Temple.

- **First Seal: First Horseman - The White Horse** [Rev 6:1-2]. **Conquest, Invasion.** Disputed interpretation.
- **Second Seal: Second Horseman - The Red Horse** [Rev.6:3-4] – **War, persecution, civil unrest, international strife.**
- **Third Seal: Third Horseman: The Black Horse** [Rev 6:5-8] - **Famine**
- **Fourth Seal: Fourth Horseman - The [Sickly] Green Horse** [Rev 6:7-8] – The worst of the four. Rider's name is "Death and Hades." A combination of all the others – death and disease.
- **Fifth Seal: Souls of the Martyrs** [Rev 6:9-11]
- **Sixth Seal: The Great Earthquake** [Rev 6:12-17].

Pause: Victorious Martyrs Rev 7:1-17]

- **Seventh Seal: Silence** – Prayers of the Saints [Rev 8:1-5].

Follow-up reading and preparation for Revelation, Week 2:

- 1.** *The Apocalypse* – notes by Archbishop Collins (handout)
- 2.** The Four Senses of Scripture (handout)
- 3.** *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible – Introduction and Chapter 1
- 4.** Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation – Introduction and Chapters 1-3