

The Seven Churches of Revelation

(1) The Purpose of the Book of the Revelation or the Apocalypse

General Introduction to the Book of the Revelation

The title commonly given to this Book is Revelation but it is also known as the Apocalypse taken from the Greek word *Apokalupsis*, meaning a revelation, or discovery of what was concealed or hidden. It has been said that this revelation, or discovery of hidden things, was given by God to Jesus Christ; that Christ gave it to his angel; that this angel showed it to John; and that John sent it to the Churches. It is properly, therefore, the Revelation of God, sent by these various agents to his servants at large; and this is the proper title of the book.

The word *Revelation* is shown in several texts of the New Testament. 1 Peter 1:7 for instance mentions the *revelation* of Jesus Christ, while 2 Thess 1:7 states that The Lord Jesus is *revealed* from heaven, Paul in Rom 2:5 announces the *revelation* of the righteous judgement of God in the day of wrath. Although the title may describe the revelation as of the revelation of St. John the first verse indicates more correctly that it is the revelation of Jesus Christ to John.

This book takes the reader into territory they have never been before. For mature readers of the Bible they are reminded of the prophecies of Daniel. However, the description of what the Apostle John saw takes the imagination into a different and higher dimension of vision.

In the formation of the canon of Scripture the Western Church accepted Revelation early on in the debate but the Greek Church continued to mistrust it for some time as did the Syriac and Armenian churches. By the fourth century it was firmly established in the canon of scripture by all sections of the Christian Church.

It is by far the most difficult of all Books of the New Testament to understand. Some divines of earlier generations rejected it as a Book worthy for inclusion in the New Testament including such influential people as Luther while Zwingli the Swiss theologian was also hostile to it.

Revelation is an open book in which God reveals His plans and purposes to His Church unlike the other prophetic Book of the end times, Daniel when finishing writing his prophecy, was instructed to "shut up the words, and seal the book" (Dan 12:4); whereas in Revelation we read that John was required, and I quote, "Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (Rev 22:10). Why? Since Calvary, the Resurrection, the Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God has ushered in the "last days" (Heb 1:1-2) and is fulfilling His hidden purposes in this world. "The time is at hand" (Rev 1:3; 22:10). It is the time of revelation.

John's prophecy is primarily the revelation of Jesus Christ, not the revelation necessarily of future events. We must not divorce the Person from the prophecy, for without the Person there could be no fulfilment of the prophecy. "He is not incidental to its action," wrote Dr. Merrill Tenney. "He is its chief Subject." In Rev 1-3, Christ is seen as the exalted Priest King ministering to the churches. In Rev 4-5, He is seen in heaven as the glorified Lamb of God, reigning on the throne. In Rev 6-18, Christ is the Judge of all the earth; and in Rev 19, He returns to earth as the conquering King of kings. The book closes with the heavenly Bridegroom ushering His bride, the church, into the glorious heavenly city.

There are several known different interpretations to this complex Book. It has been argued that the early Christians of the seven Churches understood the key to the symbolism and mysterious illusions contained in the Book otherwise they would have discarded it as unintelligible. Somewhere in the ages that were to come the important key was lost and as a consequence we are left rather bereft of complete understanding.

The various approaches have been defined as:

The Preterist View

This view considers it to be a description of past events many relating to the Roman Empire of the 1st century AD. The writer being horrified by the evil contained in the Empire used the imagery to protest against it. When the oppression of the Roman Empire against the Jewish cult of Christians is fully understood then there is strong arguments for such claims. Nero placed the blame for the setting fire to Rome upon the Christians and many died horrific deaths at their hands. Chapters 21 and 22 are however, acknowledged future events.

The Historicist View

This approach sees the wide span of history from the 1st century right through to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. Many of the Reformers took this view and identified the Roman Catholic Church with the Beast. In later years all sorts of people have replaced the Pope as the most evil one and several different countries have been recognised as the forces of evil. Even those that hold this view cannot agree among themselves what are the main historic signposts having confined themselves to the history of Western Europe and completely ignored the rest of the world.

The Futurist View

With this interpretation the Book from chapter four deals with end time events. What is to happen at the Second Coming of Christ onwards. It removes much of the historical content. What 1st century believers would have thought of this view cannot be imagined.

The Idealist or the Poetic View

The assertion of this view is that the Book is concerned with inspiring persecuted Christians to enable them to endure to the end so that they may be saved. An independent reader however, may conclude that along the way the prophet is proclaiming the end times.

Eclecticism

Another view is expressed by G. K. Beale who finds all the above approaches wanting in some respects but finds some truth in all. For him there are no specific prophesied historical events are discerned in the Book, except for the final coming of Christ to deliver, judge and to establish the final form of the kingdom in a consummated new creation, though there are exceptions to this rule.

Three aims of the Book

The first verse gives a clue to the three part approach that perhaps many would consider appropriate. "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John."

The Book is to be

- Apocalyptic
- Prophecy
- Epistle

Apocalyptic-

Meaning End times including catastrophe

Prophecy

In terms of what will happen in the immediate and in the longer future

Epistle

Care for the Christians in the seven Churches

Influential Texts in Revelation

Before we consider the seven Churches of Revelation individually there are some influential texts through the Book that should be noted. These include:

- 1.:5 Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead... ruler of the kings of the earth.
- 1:6. He loves us, and released us from our sins by his blood...made us to be a kingdom, priests to his God and Father.
- 1:8 I am Alpha and Omega... who is, who was and who is to come the Almighty.
- 1,7 I am the first and the last.
- 1:18 I am alive forevermore...I have the keys of death and of Hades.
- Chapter 4. Scene in heaven. Worship of Christ as the Lord and our God (4:11)
- Chapter 5. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has prevailed.
- Chapter 7. The sealing of the 144,000 "...behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes,...saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (v9)
- Chapter 19. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb. King of kings and Lord of lords.
- Chapter 20. Satan bound for 1000 years. Reigning with Christ for 1000 years. The Judgement Seat of Christ.
- Chapter 21. A new heaven and a new earth. "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any mourning , or crying, or pain .behold I make all things new.
Description of the new Jerusalem. No temple present. "The Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its temple (23). "Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" are able to enter (27)

Chapter 22. The tree of life. Christ promises to come back , “I am coming quickly (7 & 20).

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