

September 3rd:

Introduction

In spite of all its weirdness, Revelation has one core theme that is woven throughout its narrative: Jesus wins in the end! No matter how crazy or evil or bizarre the world may seem right now, take courage, for **Jesus will win in the end**. Revelation in Greek is “Apocalypse”, which simply means “something that’s being revealed”. There are not multiple revelations, but only 1 Revelation: Jesus! In spite of what the world may seem like right now, Jesus is returning and will be “revealed” to the whole world in the fullness of time. Revelation was speaking to the Christian church in a particular time and place, and while its core message still speaks to us today, we must understand the world in which it was written and its intended audience to faithfully interpret this most mysterious piece of scripture.

Important Numbers in Revelation

3: The spiritual order

4: The created order

7: (3+4) perfection or completeness.

10: Totality

12: (3x4) Israel, God’s holy people

3 ½: The number of evil (half of perfection)

Multiples and repetitions: Intensification/emphasis (ie, 12, 144, 12,000, and 144,000 all symbolize God’s people with varying degrees of emphasis).

Numerology (transposing letters into a numerical system) was a common method of speaking in code in the ancient world. Therefore, when John writes in 13: 17-18 “calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. It’s number is 666.” The number of the Greek Kaiser Neron transposed into Hebrew was 666 for Emperor Nero.

Who wrote it?

While historical tradition has named John of Zebedee as both the beloved disciple and the author of Revelation, we know through his use of Greek (very different writing styles and Greek vocabulary chosen) and the late dating that it’s extremely unlikely that John Zebedee authored Revelation. More than likely it’s written by an unknown John (named by scholars as John of Patmos) who would have been well versed in Hebrew scripture. Revelation employs more imagery and allusions to Hebrew scripture than anywhere else in the New Testament. While he never quotes word for word, some passages of Revelation are very similar to what’s written in the prophets. These passages taken from Hebrew scripture would have been highly confusing to the Romans, but would have made perfect sense to a Jewish Christian audience. John uses these images and phrases as a kind of code. Insiders will understand the hidden message, but to outsiders the words will seem nonsensical. Christian tradition says that John was exiled to Patmos (off the western coast of Turkey) from 18 months to 15 years, and after Domitian’s death was allowed to return to Ephesus.

When?

Revelation was written between 81-96CE, during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian. This was a relatively stable, prosperous time for Rome.

During the 60’s Emperor Nero threw the empire into chaos as he set fire to Rome (to enlarge his palace) and then blamed it on the Christians, which led to the martyrdom of many Christians in the

city (Peter and Paul among them) in the year 64. In 68, Nero committed suicide, throwing the empire into further chaos by sparking a civil war to determine the next emperor. During this civil war, there was a revolt in Galilee and Judea. Vespasian was the general who crushed the Jewish revolt, and was subsequently made emperor. Nero bankrupted the Roman empire, so Vespasian had to bring up taxes (taxed toilets and sewage). Vespasian's favorite son, Titus, took over after Vespasian's death but only ruled 3 years before he suddenly died.

Domitian was not really liked and had a massive inferiority complex. Domitian presented himself as a divine figure in the here and now. At Domitian's death, the golden era of Rome began! There was not YET an empire wide targeting of Christians. Persecution was usually contained in communities and showed up as social ostracism. Christians were treated as social deviants, so they went in the closet to avoid being targeted. In 110AD Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia and had an exchange with Trajan on what to do with Christians. "If someone is denounced as being a Christian, give them a chance to repent by offering a sacrifice to the gods, don't go searching for them." By the end of the first century Christians are distinguished from Jews. Christians are considered "atheists" because they don't believe in the gods of the people and say that the established religion does not exist. Christians are public nuisances.

Where?

Revelation was addressed to churches in the Roman province of Asia, current western Turkey, one of the most prosperous provinces of all the empire. This region was full of natural resources and agricultural wonders. After Nile delta, Turkey was the next largest exporter of food to the entire Roman empire.

Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis were all significant trade cities, Ephesus and Smyrna were major port cities.

To be Anti-Roman in Asia at that time was like being Anti-American living in Texas. Being anti-Roman made you a target and business competitors would denounce you to the magistrates. The question that Christians all over Asia wrestled with was: How do we live loyal to Jesus Christ in an area that is permeated with imperial ethos.

What is Revelation?

John Collins: *"Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal in so far as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world"*

The Apocalypse genre was popular from 170bc-200ce during a time when wisdom theology appeared to fail. This is a time when God's people are being persecuted, when wisdom theology ("you get what you deserve") has failed, apocalyptic theology begins.

A narrative framework tells a story, it introduces us to characters who are both human and nonhuman (angels, demons, beasts –both symbolic and mythological). The plot of an apocalypse ultimately boils down to GOOD vs EVIL. The stakes are of ultimate importance: control of heaven and Earth. This is not a linear story, the beginning of the story doesn't come til ch 12! In the end of the story God wins it all, good conquers evil once and for all time. A lot of time is spent describing the penultimate events of the story, because penultimate time is the time in which we're living right now, and have been since Revelation was written. The time between when Christ rose from the dead and when Christ comes again in glory to pummel Satan and all the forces of evil, that's penultimate time (the 2nd to last thing).

The intent of Revelation is not to predict the future but to reveal cosmic discrepancy. In apocalypse you have outward reality versus REAL reality.

Outward reality: Way the world seems to work, things are what they seem to be. Dominant culture is right because it's been divinely established. Assimilate to way things are. Minorities who refuse to assimilate (like Christians) are either ignorant or insane.

Real reality: Things are not what they seem to be. Knowledge comes through special channels. Something else is going on that needs to be revealed. Deviant knowledge of the minority (the gospel) offers HOPE, which is subversive. The goal of hope is to upend outward reality, this is a threat to those who benefit from keeping the status quo as it is. Our hope comes in the form of Transcendent reality where the old, evil age is temporary. God's reign, (where there is divine vindication, vindication of the faithful, and evil obliterated,) is eternal.

Why was Revelation written?

Revelation was written to address the discrepancy between outward reality and real reality, and to offer hope to those persecuted by outward reality. **The apocalypse is a radical call of resistant HOPE**, not predicting the future. When we understand the eternal future, we know how to live today. Eschatology is in service of ethics. John is reminding the people that we are aliens in an alien culture, to live loyally to God is a dangerous business, but we are called to faithful worship. In the end, God will destroy the imperial dominant culture. Central focus of Revelation is the present, the now. Revelation is concerned with life in the here and now. By presenting the future, we're given ethical guideposts of how to operate here and now amidst dominant culture.

How should Revelation be studied?

With full use of imagination and senses! Revelation employs imagery for all the senses as it tells this story of apocalyptic hope. Close your eyes as the scripture is read and picture the events in your mind. See the gleaming sea of glass, smell the sulfur and brimstone, hear the angelic chorus. The literary form of Revelation does not follow from A-B-C-D, but rather tells the story in concentric circles of perspective. From beginning to end, John tells of the same events from a macro to a micro view (like zooming way in on a map). There is much repetition in this story, as it tells the same story of events with a closer and closer perspective on the action, this would have helped the original audience (who would have been hearing, rather than reading Revelation) to remember what was written, not just with their intellect, but with full use of their bodies. Revelation is meant not just to convey information, but most importantly to convey emotion –what will it look like and feel like when Christ comes again?