

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

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Apocalyptic Literature

The NT book of Revelation rightly belongs to a class of literature called apocalyptic. The term is taken from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, found in Revelation 1:1, which literally means "an uncovering or unveiling" (some Bibles actually use the title "The Apocalypse").

Writings of this type first appeared after the period of OT prophecy. The Jews were experiencing difficult times and were without any inspired words of comfort and encouragement. Thus emerged the non-canonical apocalypses such as the Book of Enoch, the Assumption of Moses, the Apocalypse of Baruch, etc.

This type of literature generally had the following characteristics:

- They contained visions which pointed to a glorious day of victory over the enemy.
- They used great symbolism to convey the message; the readers did not spend endless hours speculating on the meaning of each symbol, for they served only to convey the message with greater drama.
- Symbolism also helped to mask the message in case their enemies might discover it; the personal safety of both the writer and the readers might be compromised were the true message to be known. The intended readers, however, because of their familiarity with the style and circumstances of the writing, would have no difficulty understanding the meaning.
- Numbers were also symbolic: 10 (and multiples thereof like 1000) referred to completeness; 3 conveyed divinity; 4 referred to the world (4 winds, 4 corners, etc.); 7 referred to divine completeness; 12 was symbolic of organized religion; 3 1/2 was intended to convey something indefinite or incomplete; 6 referred to that which is evil. None were taken literally to refer to exact measurements in time, etc.

It appears that the non-canonical apocalypses were imitations of the genuine, inspired OT book of Daniel (the book of Ezekiel also appears to have similarities to the later apocalyptic writings). There are distinct differences, however, between inspired writings such as Daniel and Revelation and the uninspired apocalyptic writings. The book of Daniel and the book of Revelation record genuine visions seen by the writers, divine visions given to convey a true message from God. The uninspired writings, however, were simply literary works of fiction, designed to give hope, but not truly from God.

1st Century Interpretation

The book of Revelation has been interpreted in numerous different ways. Some have applied its symbols to computer chips and 20th and 21st century world politics. Others have applied it to the ever-changing Roman Catholic Church, while they, on the other hand, have applied it to the Reformation. However, any interpretation of the book should take into account what it meant to the first readers (this is called Biblical exegesis and is necessary for a proper interpretation of every book of the Bible).

There were two dramatic events of the latter half of the 1st century (the time of the writing of Revelation). First, the world of that time and place would be drastically affected by the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Second, Christians of that time would find themselves subject to suffering severe persecution at the hands of the Roman emperor.

Domitian, in particular, demanded to be worshipped as a god; those who refused to do so were severely persecuted, even to the point of death. Christians in this situation thus needed a message of hope and encouragement. In Revelation 1:9, John said he was a "fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance." This was a difficult time for Christians; thus John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write to them. Is it reasonable to conclude that the message he gave them was all about things that would happen at least 2000 years later (as many today speculate)? What benefit would such a message be to them in their time?

Therefore, the book of Revelation and its message must be first and primarily for 1st century Christians, not 21st century Christians. Yes, we can still learn from it and make applications to our situations today (we still endure suffering today and need to be encouraged to stay faithful to God), but if a particular interpretation can't be applied to the first readers, then it surely can't be the right interpretation. Keep in mind that the very first verse of the book says the book is about "things which must shortly come to pass."

Some people say, "Oh, but a day is as 1000 years and a 1000 years is as a day to God." Yes, but not to real Christians enduring real persecution. They were told the book was about things which would happen soon. 2000 years may be soon to God, but not to people who are suffering and praying for relief and justice.

One other point needs to be made concerning the interpretation of this great book. It has already been established that a basic characteristic of apocalyptic literature is the extensive use of symbolism. Therefore it is not very scholastically responsible to subjectively pick and choose certain parts of the book and deem them as literal.

A symbolic message about the difficulties of that time, the enemies of God's people and their ultimate demise, and the promise of eternal reward for those who would remain faithful seems much more vital and relevant.