

Introduction To Revelation

The book of Revelation is probably one of the most mysterious and confusing books in the entire Bible. It stands alone in the New Testament. Generally, it has been neglected, misunderstood and grossly perverted. Yet, of all the books in the Bible, it is one of the most beautiful in thought, challenging in nature, comprehensive in scope, prophetic in purpose, comforting, reassuring and rewarding. But Revelation has always been what you could call a "turn back" book. Many Christians have made their way through the New Testament, only to turn back to Matthew when they reach the book of Revelation.

There have been so many conflicting opinions about the meaning of the book that many have felt that a good interpretation will never be found. It has been used extensively by individuals and groups who have found that they could prove almost anything by the manipulation of the symbols contained in the book. For this reason, false teachers' attention has been centered upon Revelation as the basis of rather strange systems of interpretation.

Believe it or not, there is a way to understand Revelation. There are many places in the book that I do not have an answer for, but the main objective of the book can be understood. Revelation brings together Old Testament prophecies, both of victory and desolation, and shows their impending fulfillment as things shortly to come to pass.

The Style Of Revelation

A casual reading of the book of Revelation will reveal something startling. The book does not mimic the style of the gospels or the epistles which make up the majority of the New Testament. Revelation is unique in the New Testament. Its style is called apocalyptic. Notice the following points about the book of Revelation and apocalyptic literature:

- I. The book of Revelation is written in apocalyptic language. The title of the book in Greek is *apokaluptis* (meaning disclosure or uncovering), from which we derive our English word "apocalypse." This classifies the book as a recognized type (or genre) of literature. This literary form is not as well-known to us as the epistle, novel, poetry or historical narrative. Examples of this literature in the Old Testament are Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. In the New Testament, Revelation and the sections about the destruction of Jerusalem are apocalyptic (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21).

- II. This is the most common literature in the period between the testaments. Non-canonical literature like the book of Enoch, Assumption of Moses, Baruch, Fourth Ezra, etc., is commonly referred to as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.
- III. We must not think of Revelation as one of these books, but neither should we overlook the fact that it does partake of these general characteristics.
- IV. "Apocalyptic literature was occasioned by certain discernible conditions; it was 'created in an hour of desperate need' (Rowley). Most of it was written between the years 200 B.C. and A.D. 100 when the Jewish nation was struggling for its very life. The great spiritual crisis which befell the Jews at this time was brought on from without. Antiochus Epiphanes offered the pious Jew the alternative of death or assimilation with the pagan world around him; the Jew chose to die. Russell points out that apocalyptic literature illustrates the adage that 'man's extremity is God's opportunity'" (Jenkins). Apocalyptic literature looked beyond the present time to a dramatic intervention by God.
- V. The book of Revelation is different from apocalyptic literature in two respects:
 - 1. It is in the true line of prophetic books (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19).
 - 2. It is pseudonymous (uses a false name), uses a different method of treating forecasts of the future and contains ethical exhortations.
- VI. Apocalyptic literature was always relevant to the historical situation of the day. This is very important. Daniel and Ezekiel were written during the Babylonian exile to comfort the chosen people in their faithfulness and to prepare them for trials, even down to the times of Antiochus Epiphanes and to the Roman Empire.
- VII. Apocalyptic literature made great use of symbols and visions. These symbols would have been clearly understood by the first readers.
- VIII. Apocalyptic literature was basically a reinterpretation of prophecy. This means that the book of Revelation draws heavily upon the Old Testament (especially Exodus, the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah). The book is completely saturated with Jewish thought, expression and symbology.

The Authorship Of Revelation

The majority of evidence indicates that John the apostle wrote the book. However, it is impossible to present irrefutable evidence that the apostle John did indeed write the book. Evidence from within Revelation would indicate that it was written by the same author as that of the gospel and epistles which bear John's name. Words and phrases appear in all of these which seem to be characteristic of just one man whose name is John. The ap-

proach of the author of Revelation seems to be the same as that used by the author of both the gospel and the epistles of John. In all of these books, there is a conflict between the church of Jesus and Satan.

The Date Of Revelation

Among Christians, the main debate over the book of Revelation is the date. This is a viable debate because establishing the date of the New Testament books contributes to our overall understanding of the message. The book of Revelation is unique in that the date of its composition affects the interpretation placed upon its message.

For those who see the fulfillment of the "things which must shortly come to pass" in the desolation of Israel and the destruction of the Jewish city, Jerusalem, a date preceding A.D. 70, during the reign of Nero, is absolutely essential. A later date is desired for those who feel that the date must correspond to the time when the Roman Empire exercised absolute authority and power over its citizens, demanding them to worship the empire and its emperors under the threat of the death penalty. This would be a date close to A.D. 95-96, during the reign of Domitian.

In the search for the proper date, one must consider both the internal and external evidence. The internal evidence is contained within the book itself. External evidence is found outside the book and contributes to the understanding of the matter and cannot contradict apparent facts of scripture.

I am of the opinion that the book of Revelation was written during the later date of 95-96 A.D. There are a number of reasons for this belief:

- I. Revelation clearly indicates that the Christians were being persecuted because they refused to worship the emperor. There was no such formal persecution during the time of Nero (A.D. 64-68). He persecuted Christians to divert from himself to others the blame for burning the city of Rome. Furthermore, Nero's persecution of Christians never reached other parts of the empire.
- II. The internal condition of the churches also argues against an early date. Some of these churches had been meeting only a few years when the Neronian persecution came. It is highly unlikely that such rapid growth and development had taken place. Deterioration had set in at Ephesus, and at Sardis and Laodicea faith is dying or dead. The Nicolaitan party, of which there is no certain trace in Paul's epistles, is now widely distributed and firmly rooted.

- III. The persecution of the Christians reflected in the book fits the period of Domitian alone. His persecution was for the purpose of enforcing emperor worship. Clement of Rome, a contemporary of Domitian, spoke of "sudden and repeated calamities and adversities" which had befallen Christians. The forms of punishment were many. Some were put to death, some were exiled, some were tortured into a confession of the divinity of the emperor, some had their property confiscated, and some received combinations of these measures. Although the evidence for widespread persecution under Domitian is not especially strong, there is no other period in the first century in which it would be more likely.
- IV. Many early writers held to the view that Revelation was written near the end of the first century. Irenaeus, Origen, Victorinus, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Hegesippus, and Jerome all held the belief that Revelation was written during the persecution of Domitian.

Theories Of Interpretation

Through the years, there have been many approaches to the book of Revelation by students attempting to understand its message. Nearly everyone has a new twist. This is because everyone studies the book from the standpoint of their own knowledge and understanding of the Bible. If our understanding of the Bible is flawed, then we will have an erroneous concept of the book of Revelation. It is essential that we know and understand the purpose of God, the fall of man, the scheme of redemption, God's dealings with the nations and prophetic promises that were to be fulfilled, before we can correctly diagnose the message of the book. There are five basic approaches to the interpretation of the book:

- I. **The Futurist View** -- This method of interpretation pictures the book as yet unfulfilled. The millennialist and dispensationalist groups hold to this view. This would have had absolutely no meaning to the people of John's day. In reality, it is a contradiction to the stated purpose of the book which was to reveal "things which must shortly come to pass" (1:1). Chapter 12, obviously historical, is a death blow to this system. But, this is the most popular view of the book today.
- II. **The Continuous Historical View** -- This approach presents the book as a forecast of the history of the church with the rise of the papacy, Mohammedanism, the reformation, etc. Modern world leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin have been imagined as foreseen by John in the Apocalypse. Needless to say, this would have been meaningless to the people addressed.
- III. **The Philosophy of History View** -- This view is also called the Idealist or Spiritual View. This position says that the things revealed were not

actual events, but were symbolic of spiritual and temporal forces at work in the world which, ultimately, the spiritual are victorious. With this view, meanings and applications of the book are always elusive and amount to nothing. This view of the book opens the door to every interpretation imaginable.

- IV. **The Preterist View** -- This view recognizes that the book is now history. It was written to the saints of John's day and was fulfilled in their immediate future. According to the preterist, the book has little, if any, meaning to the Christian today.
- V. **The Historical Background View** -- This view combines the features of the conservative preterist method and the philosophy of history approach. I accept this as the best method of interpretation. Ferrell Jenkins suggests the following principles to guide someone in this method:
 - A. A study is made of the historical setting of the book. Moral, religious, social and political conditions of the time when it was written are also considered.
 - B. Realize the book was written in highly figurative language.
 - C. Keep in mind that the book used Old Testament terminology with New Testament meaning.
 - D. Seek to grasp visions or series of visions as a whole without pressing the details of the symbolism.
 - E. Remember that Revelation is addressed chiefly to the imagination.

Numerology In Revelation

We today have difficulty in understanding the book of Revelation because we are unfamiliar with the symbolic use of numbers. Read articles on this subject in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. A brief summary of the symbolism of numbers in the book of Revelation is presented below:

- I. **One** -- A symbol of unity; there is one God, one Lord Jesus Christ, etc.
- II. **Two** -- A symbol of strength; two witnesses are stronger than one.
- III. **Three** -- "A complete and ordered whole" (ISBE). Three persons in the Godhead. Christ was raised on the third day. A sacred number.
- IV. **3 1/2** -- Half of seven, represents trials and hardships. Also, in contrast with the perfect seven, it represents broken, incomplete period of time. Other expressions of this symbol are "42 months," "1260 days," and "a time, times and half a time."
- V. **Four** -- A symbol for comprehensive extent or completeness. The "four winds" blow from the "four corners of the earth." There are "four living creatures" around the throne.

- VI. **Six** -- The number of man (13:18), who was created on the sixth day. Man always falls short of perfection. The number became a bad omen.
- VII. **Seven** -- A sacred number, "associated with completion, fulfillment and perfection" (NBD). There were seven churches, seven golden candlesticks, seven stars, seven angels, seven lamps of fire, seven spirits of God, seven seals, seven horns and seven eyes on the Lamb, seven angels with seven trumpets, seven heads on the dragon and the beast and seven last plagues poured out from seven golden bowls.
- VIII. **Ten** -- Human completeness. The basis of the decimal system, probably based on man's having ten fingers and ten toes. Revelation has ten days of tribulation, ten horns, ten royal diadems and ten kings.
- IX. **Twelve** -- The "religious number." There were twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of Christ. It is a multiple of three times four. Plato called it "a perfect number" (ISBE).
- X. **666** -- A string of sixes, but never attaining the perfect represented by seven. A symbolic term of the "mark of the beast."
- XI. **1,000** -- The result of ten times ten, it represents ultimate perfection. A "thousand years" appears in chapter 20.
- XII. **144,000** -- A perfect number. The result of 12 times 12 times 1,000.

The Old Testament In The Book Of Revelation

As we look into Revelation, it becomes apparent that the Old Testament plays a heavy role in the book. A big part of understanding the book is understanding the Old Testament. Revelation is the most thoroughly Jewish in its language and imagery of any New Testament book. This book does not speak the language of John, Paul or Luke, but of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Merrill Tenney had this to say about the Old Testament in Revelation:

It is filled with references to events and characters of the Old Testament, and a great deal of its phraseology is taken directly from the Old Testament books. Oddly enough, there is not one direct citation in Revelation from the Old Testament with a statement that it is quoted from a given passage; but a count of the significant allusions which are traceable both by verbal resemblance and by contextual connection to the Hebrew canon number *three hundred and forty-eight*. Of these approximately ninety-five are repeated, so that the actual number of different Old Testament passages that are mentioned are *nearly two hundred and fifty*, or an average of more than *ten for each chapter* in Revelation (emphasis mine, KAC).

The words "quotation" and "allusion" need to be defined. A quotation is "a general reproduction of the original text, sufficiently close to give the meaning of its thought and to establish unquestionably the passage from which it is taken." Quotations, as defined here, are rare in the book. Probably the closest one that approaches a direct quotation is in 2:26-27, taken from Psalm 2:8-9. An allusion "consists of one or more words which by their peculiar character and content are traceable to a known body of text, but which do not constitute a complete reproduction of any part of it." There are many allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation. The *probable* source or sources of a particular allusion can often be identified.

The question comes to mind: Why did John use so much imagery from the Old Testament? There are two probable explanations. First, and probably of lesser importance, is that John used the Old Testament scriptures as a source for literary ornamentation just like a modern preacher would use phraseology from the King James Version in his preaching because of its familiarity to the minds of his audience. Second, apocalyptic literature demands certain figures to express its meaning. This is probably the closer of the two reasons. In other words, to get across the meaning symbolically, symbols whose meaning was already understood were used. They may be given new meaning and application, but any person acquainted with them would understand their new usage. It is difficult not to take this picture language too far, and to know when to take the symbols literally or figuratively.

We must be careful not to bind on John the same rules for writing that might be enforced today. New Testament writers in general did not use quotation marks, ellipsis marks, or brackets to introduce their own comments into the quotation. They did not supply the reader with massive footnote references. All of these modern rules might have helped in the solution of our current problem, but the help is simply not available. John may have frequently paraphrased the quotations he used. He may have made free translations from the Hebrew, or slight modifications in the wording so that it would fit his purpose. In some cases, the reference to the Old Testament may not be alluding to any single passage, but simply to a summary of general teaching.

Whatever the case, a study of Revelation will show that John knew his source material well and that the symbols and images of the Old Testament simply flowed into his writing with ease because they fit the circumstances about which he wrote.

Outline Of Revelation #1

SECTION ONE

The Seven Churches of Asia (chapters 1-3)

- I. Chapter 1 -- *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*
 - A. John's Introduction to the Book (vss. 1-3).
 - B. Salutatory Address (vss. 4-7).
 - C. Divine Sanction (vs. 8).
 - D. John's Circumstances in Relationship to the Apocalypse (vss. 9-10).
 - E. The Vision of Christ Among the Lampstands (vss. 11-20).
- II. Chapters 2 and 3 -- *The Epistles to the Churches*
 - A. Ephesus (2:1-7).
 - B. Smyrna (2:8-11).
 - C. Pergamos (2:12-17).
 - D. Thyatira (2:18-29).
 - E. Sardis (3:1-6).
 - F. Philadelphia (3:7-13).
 - G. Laodicea (3:14-22).

SECTION TWO

The Heavenly Apocalypse (chapters 4-11)

- I. Chapter 4 -- *The Old Testament Throne Scene*
 - A. John's Visionary Posture (vss. 1-2a).
 - B. The Throne (vss. 2b-7).
 - C. Heavenly Praise (vss. 8-11).
- II. Chapter 5 -- *The New Testament Throne Scene*
 - A. The Search for One Worthy to Open the Book (vss. 1-5).
 - B. The Lamb at the Right Hand of God (vss. 6-7).
 - C. The Subjection of Heaven and Earth to the Lamb (vss. 8-14).
- III. Chapter 6 -- *The Opening of the First Six Seals*
 - A. The First Seal (vss. 1-2).
 - B. The Second Seal (vss. 3-4).
 - C. The Third Seal (vss. 5-6).
 - D. The Fourth Seal (vss. 7-8).
 - E. The Fifth Seal (vss. 9-11).
- IV. Chapter 7 -- *The First Interlude*
 - A. The Restraining of the Four Winds (vs. 1).
 - B. The Sealing of the Servants of God (vss. 2-3).
 - C. The 144,000 (vss. 4-8).
 - D. The Innumerable Multitude (vss. 9-17).
- V. Chapter 8 -- *Seventh Seal; First Four Trumpets*

- A. Heaven's Reaction (vss. 1-2).
 - B. The Prayers of the Saints Ascend (vss. 3-4).
 - C. The Prayers Are Answered (vs. 5).
 - D. The First Trumpet (vss. 6-7).
 - E. The Second Trumpet (vss. 8-9).
 - F. The Third Trumpet (vss 10-11).
 - G. The Fourth Trumpet (vs. 12).
 - H. The Eagle's Warning (vs. 13).
- VI. Chapter 9 -- *The Fifth and Sixth Trumpets*
- A. The Fifth Trumpet, the First Woe (vss. 1-12).
 - B. The Sixth Trumpet, the Second Woe (vss. 13-21).
- VII. Chapter 10 -- *The Second Interlude*
- A. The Mighty Angel with the Little Book (vss. 1-2).
 - B. The Seven Thunders (vss. 3-4).
 - C. The Oath (vss. 5-7).
 - D. John's Commission to Eat the Book (vss. 8-10).
 - E. The Promise (vs. 11).
- VIII. Chapter 11 -- *The Seventh Trumpet, The Final Woe*
- A. The Measuring of the Temple (vss. 1-2).
 - B. The Two Witnesses (vss. 3-12).
 - C. The Fall of One Tenth of the City (vss. 13-14).
 - D. The Final Trumpet, Heaven Rejoices (vss. 15-19).

SECTION THREE

The Earthly Apocalypse (chapters 12-20)

- I. Chapter 12 -- *The Underlying Conflict*
- A. The Glorious Woman with Child (vss. 1-2).
 - B. The Great Red Dragon (vss. 3-4).
 - C. The Man Child (vss. 5-6).
 - D. The Spiritual War (vss. 7-9).
 - E. Rejoicing in Heaven (vss. 10-11).
 - F. The Dragon Persecutes the Woman (vss. 12-17).
- II. Chapter 13 -- *The Emerging of the Dragon's Helpers*
- A. The Sea Beast (vss. 1-8).
 - B. The Patience and Faith of the Saints (vss. 9-10).
 - C. The Earth Beast (vss. 11-18).
- III. Chapter 14 -- *God's Righteous Judgments*
- A. The Beginning of Christianity (vss. 1-5).
 - B. The Gospel is Preached (vss. 6-7).
 - C. Babylon's Fall Proclaimed (vs. 8).
 - D. Empire and Emperor Worshipers Warned (vss. 9-11).
 - E. The Patience of Saints (vss. 12-13).

- F. The Reaping of the Good Harvest (vss. 14-16).
- G. The Reaping of the Vine of the Earth (vss. 17-20).
- IV. Chapter 15 -- *The Seven Last Plagues*
 - A. The Angels of the Last Plagues Introduced (vs. 1).
 - B. The Testimony of Redeemed Jewish Christians (vss. 2-4).
 - C. From the Temple of God in Heaven (vss. 5-8).
- V. Chapter 16 -- *The Bowls of Wrath*
 - A. Orders From Heaven (vs. 1).
 - B. The First Bowl (vs. 2).
 - C. The Second Bowl (vs. 3).
 - D. The Third Bowl (vss. 4-7).
 - E. The Fourth Bowl (vss. 8-9).
 - F. The Fifth Bowl (vss. 10-11).
 - G. The Sixth Bowl (vss. 12-14).
 - H. Blessed Assurance (vs. 15).
 - I. Armageddon (vs. 16).
 - J. The Seventh Bowl (vss. 17-21).
- VI. Chapter 17-- *Babylon the Great*
 - A. Babylon's Characteristics (vss. 1-6).
 - B. Babylon's Relationship to the Sea Beast (vss. 7-14).
 - C. Babylon's Unmistakable Identity (vss. 15-18).
- VII. Chapter 18 -- *The Fall of Babylon*
 - A. Reasons for Babylon's Fall (vss. 1-3).
 - B. A Call to the Saints to Leave Babylon (vss. 4-5).
 - C. The Call for Double Punishment (vss. 6-8).
 - D. Lamentations Over Babylon's Destruction (vss. 9-19).
 - E. The Heavens, Apostles and Prophets Rejoice (vs. 20).
 - F. The Desolation of Babylon (vss. 21-24).
- VIII. Chapter 19 -- *The Victory of Christ Over All Foes*
 - A. Victory Celebration Over Babylon's Fall (vss. 1-6).
 - B. Continued Celebration Over the Lamb's Marriage (vss. 7-10).
 - C. The King of Kings and His Armies (vss. 11-16).
 - D. The Defeat of the Sea and Earth Beasts (vss. 17-21).
- IX. Chapter 20 -- *Unto the End of the World*
 - A. The Binding of Satan (vss. 1-3).
 - B. The Reign of Saints (vss. 4-6).
 - C. The Loosing of Satan (vss. 7-10).
 - D. The Final Judgment (vss. 11-15).

SECTION FOUR

The New Jerusalem (chapters 21-22)

- I. Chapter 21:1-22:5 -- *The Eternal State*

- A. Descent of the New Jerusalem (21:1-8).
- B. Description of the New Jerusalem (21:9-27).
- C. Delights of the New Jerusalem (22:1-5).
- II. Chapter 22:6-21 -- *Epilogue*
 - A. Words of Comfort (22:6-17).
 - B. Words of Warning (22:18-19).
 - C. Closing Prayer (22:20-21).

Outline Of Revelation #2

- I. Chapters 1-11 -- *The Struggle on Earth*
 - A. Chapters 1-3 -- Christ Among the Lampstands
 - B. Chapters 4-5 -- The Throne Scene
 - C. Chapters 6-8:2 -- Loosing of the Seven Seals
 - D. Chapters 8:3-11 -- The Seven Trumpets
- II. Chapters 12-22 -- *The Deeper Spiritual Background*
 - A. Chapters 12-14 -- War
 - B. Chapters 15-16 -- The Bowls of Wrath
 - C. Chapters 17-19:10 -- The Fall of Babylon (The Harlot)
 - D. Chapters 19:11-22 -- the Complete and Final Victory of Christ

Outline Of Revelation #3

- I. Chapter 1:1-8 -- *The Prologue*
- II. Chapter 1:9-20 -- *"The Things Which You Have Seen"*
- III. Chapters 2-5 -- *"The Things Which Are"*
- IV. Chapters 6-22:5 -- *"The Things Which Shall Take Place After These Things"*
- V. Chapter 22:6-21 -- *The Epilogue*