

Logos study Guide

Book of Revelation (10-16)

Introduction

Revelation, the book which appears at the end of the Bible, is perhaps the one which is read the least. Anyone who intends to read this book is often blocked by the veil of suspicion that hangs before it from the very early period of the Church. Cyril of Jerusalem forbade private or public reading of it. The lectionary of some Churches has hardly any reading from Revelation, and even the mainstream Churches take only a few readings from it.

However, no other book has such a mesmerising influence as Revelation on various fringe groups, radical reformists, the socially disadvantaged and the alienated minority all over the world, who read it as a prophetic oracle on end times or a model for social change. Many of the pre-millennial eschatological movements take Revelation as their source of inspiration. Some of the classical motifs as Armageddon, the apocalyptic horses, Anti-Christ with the mark of 666 on the head and the New Jerusalem can be traced back to this book.

The influence of Revelation in art and music is unrivalled among the books of the Bible. Many paintings that decorate churches and palaces in Europe take their motifs from Revelation. The works of Michael Angelo in St. Peter's Basilica and Sistine Chapel, glass paintings of Saint Chapel in Paris, films by Igmarr Bergmann and Bunuel are a few examples of the rich artistic works based on Revelation.

Revelation is rich in symbols and symbolic descriptions and many of them are either unfamiliar or perplexing. The symbolic nature of the book of Revelation has baffled many. Jerome writes that the apocalypse of John has as many secrets as the words in it (Ep. 53.9). Dionysius, the church father who lived in the third century writes, "I do not reject the things which I do not comprehend, but rather I marvel that I have not understood them". One of the reasons behind this symbolic style is the nature of the experience of the author itself. The author speaks of a unique and extraordinary experience and expresses his inability to bring it to words. Deep personal experiences cannot be satisfactorily expressed in ordinary language and, therefore, John employs an 'approximate' language: "I heard speaking to me *like* a trumpet" (4,1). We need appropriate tools for interpretation and emotional preparation for entering into the experience narrated in Revelation.

Author

Revelation speaks of certain John at the beginning of the narrative: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ...made it known by sending his angel to his servant John ” (1,1; also 4,9; 22,8). We have 47 occurrences of “I saw” and 27 occurrences of “I heard”, which show that the author himself had a revelatory experience. He is the one who receives and transmits the experience to the churches. He introduces himself as “your brother” who is one with the existential situation (1,9) of the believers. These references about author are understood differently. Justin the martyr who lived in the second century says that the apostle John wrote Revelation. Iraneus also writes that John the son of Zebedee wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation. Most of the church fathers follow them, though there are some who raise doubts. Modern scholars would say that the vision described in the book certainly goes back to John the apostle, but the narrative in the book was later edited by a disciple.

Date

There are a few scholars who would like to place the book of Revelation in a pre-70 period, which was a very turbulent time in the Roman history. The Syriac versions consider it to be written in Nero’s time (54-68 AD). The allusion to the return of an emperor in 16,12, according to some, is a reference to Nero. Iranaeus considers it to be written by the end of the rule of emperor Domitian, who died in AD 96, and, therefore, probably between AD 92-96. Most likely Revelation was written around AD 95.

Place

John writes that he was in an island called Patmos, where he had his visions (1,9). Pliny writes that this was a penal colony in the time of Romans. Such tiny islands were regularly used by the Romans as places of exile for certain type of prisoners. It is possible that John was exiled to this tiny island on account of his witness to Christ. However, this does not necessarily mean that the book itself was written here. Many would like to consider it in the context of a Johannine school, probably in Ephesus.

Genre

One of the problems that an interpreter faces is the genre used in the book of Revelation. It is generally considered as an apocalyptic book, but the prophetic characteristics are so prominent that it is called the prophetic book of the New Testament. Its first chapters that address the seven churches appear to follow the epistolary genre. Many contemporary scholars consider liturgical elements as decisive in the analysis of the genre of Revelation.

Apocalypse

Apocalypses come into existence in a time of crisis, or 'perceived-crisis'. Apocalyptic movements appeared especially during the period of Antiochus Epiphanus, Maccabean revolt, persecution of Christians, or crushing of Bar Kochba's Jewish revolt. Scholars consider BC 200-AD 200 as the flourishing period of apocalypticism. Apocalypists refuse to accommodate to the situation, and denounce vigorously the arrogance and blasphemy of power. In the cultural, political and religious vacuum, it offers a new consciousness and myths and symbols to cope with this situation.

Apocalyptic literature often describes visions, revealed through angelic mediators. It depicts conflicts between the divine and satanic realms. That God rules in spite of the overwhelming power of the evil in this world is the foundation of its vision. It harps on the arrival of a new reality in future where all evil powers will be annihilated. It is no wonder that many of these writings dream of socio-political liberation. Often these books are pseudonym, probably to escape political reprisals or to make them authoritative. It employs symbolic and poetic style to evoke appropriate feelings in the readers and to make them ready for committing themselves for the divine cause.

The Book of Revelation has apocalyptic elements as the conflict between the divine and satanic powers, the last judgment, calculations about the future era, God's involvement in history and the establishment of God's kingdom. But Revelation has no pseudonym, its visions are presented as letters to the churches and no importance is given to the time before Christ.

Prophetic Book

Revelation sees itself as a prophecy (1,3) and demands it to be accepted as prophetic (22,18-19). We find in Revelation many references to prophets, and Nicolaitans and Jezebels probably refer to different competing prophetic groups which existed in those times.

John is convinced of the prophetic message given to him (1,9-20; 10,1-11). He presents his prophetic call in the model of Ezek 2,9-3,3, and he considers himself to be in the prophetic line and as its culmination. At the beginning there is an inaugural vision as in the case of prophets. Many elements of the Old Testament prophecies as the call of God, comforting and threatening oracles, symbolic acts, mission and paraenesis that aim at metanoia are also found in Revelation. Its prophecies are meant to bring churches back to God, to strengthen them in faith, and to offer hope in tribulation. The community is invited to have a divine perspective on human history that it is God who actually reigns in this universe, not the earthly kings.

Liturgical Book

There are many liturgical elements in Revelation. The narrative begins and concludes with liturgical dialogues (1,4-8; 22,20-21). Many interludes of heavenly worship are scattered in it (4,8.11; 5,12-14; 7,9-12.15; 11,15-18; 12,10-12; 15,3-4; 16,7; 19,1-8). The placement of hymnic materials, often at significant structural junctions, highlights their importance for the interpretation of the message in the book. There are many symbols and references to worship in Revelation. The narrative presents true divine worship, and pseudo-worship of the evil powers (13,4.14). The aim of the book is to establish the true worship of God on earth.

Epistolary style

Chapters 2-3 make use of epistolary style to take up the issues in seven churches and to call them to *metanoia* (conversion). We can recognize the use of a particular pattern in the construction of these letters (given below). It is Paul who makes of epistolary style more effectively in the New Testament with introductory greetings, exhortation, warning and final greetings and blessing. The author of Revelation, though takes some of these elements from Pauline letters, does not strictly follow epistolary style in his writing.

Style and Symbolic Language

Revelation is a forest of symbols and metaphors. Its unusual and powerful symbolic language is an important characteristic of the narrative. The experience which John received while he was in Spirit is baffling, and the descriptions are often unrelated to each other. He struggles to express his experience in words and uses often 'as/hos' to show that he is unable to describe his experiences in words. There are different types of symbols which he takes from either the Old Testament or other cultures. Some of them certainly go back to his own creative imagination. The following list is only meant for systematisation of the symbols in Revelation.

1. Cosmic Symbols:

heaven, the New Jerusalem, stars... Also evil forces

2. Anthropomorphic symbols, ie., related to human beings:

followers of the lamb, human organs as head, forehead, voice,

3. Thereomorphic symbols, ie., related to animals:

lamb, lion, animal, dragon, horses, locusts, scorpion...

4. Chromatic symbols, ie., related to colour:

white, black, green, purple ...

The colour white is very important in the book of Revelation and it stands for purity, victory, resurrection, etc. It is used only positively by John.

5. Arithmetic symbols or number symbolism

7, 12, 3 ½, 1260 ...

Some numbers are used positively and negatively as, for example, in 'three' which is seen in divine trinity and satanic trinity. 144000 can be understood as the multiple of 12 (12x12) and so representing 12 tribes and 12 apostles. They stand for the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God, and hence the entire people of God who enter the New Jerusalem. We see the presence of three and half, which is half of seven, in 42 months and in 1260 days. This is the time of Christian witness and Divine providence as explained in Chapters 11-12.

Structure

Many authors have recognized the importance of structure in Revelation and the correlation between the structure and the theological concerns. Unfortunately we do not find any unanimity among scholars about its structure. Here we are only concerned with the general structure based on the textual indices, not with its complex structure.

The book can be structured as follows:

A. Introduction (1,1-20)

B. Background:

of the churches (2,1-3,22)

Theological background - the throne room vision (4,1-5,14)

C. Divine Action (6,1-9,21; 11,14-18)

D. Witness and Providence

Witnesses (10,1-11,13)

Woman and Dragon (12,1-15,4)

C'. Divine Action (15,5-16,21)

B'. Judgment and Salvation:

Removal of Evil (17,1-20,15)

New Heaven and New earth (21,1-22,5)

A'. Epilogue (22,6-21)

There are repetitions and intercalations in the narrative, but also a gradual intensification and a progression towards a goal. There are links between the introductory section and the epistolary section, and the epistolary section and the visionary section. Thus the author presents a unified vision of the reality in this narrative. We shall present below the main themes treated in different sections of the narrative.

Content

The Call of the Prophet (Chap 10)

Two witnesses and Signs in Heaven (11-14)

The Bowl Septenary (15-16)

The Bowl Septenary section deals in great detail the evil powers symbolized in dragon and beasts. Dragon which begins the hostilities is the most formidable opponent and the last conquered. Already in 12,7-12 we have the defeat of the dragon. The beast arising from the sea (chap 13) has all the features of four beasts of Dan 7 that represent different kingdoms and political powers. This is also parodic of Lamb (13,3 –‘as though slaughtered to death’). Dragon can represent Satan; beast is a historical figure.

The state as ideological-totalitarian state claims for itself that which belongs only to God and Christ – so likeness of Satan. Here the tribulation of the end times is interpreted in political and economic terms. This ultimate evil can be understood as systemic evil and structural sin.

14,1-5 presents the heavenly contrast to the evil powers in Lamb and the 144000 on Zion. This can be seen as a continuation and sharpening of “descendants of heavenly woman” (12,17). 1-3 refer to the eschatological protection of the redeemed, promised in 7,1-8 and 11,1f. The author presents here the eschatological people of God in totality and describes its faithfulness and exclusive commitment to the Lamb as its future bridegroom.

The third septenary begins in 15,1 with an introductory presentation of the seven angels with plagues. These plagues portray the wrath of God and narrate the days of man before the eschatological day. The mention of the plagues evokes the Exodus plagues in the Old Testament. there are two sections in the bowl septet: Prologue (15,1-16,1) and Plagues (16,2-21).

A 15,1 (seven angels with plagues)

B 15,2-4 (the faithful in heaven and the hymn to God the Almighty)

A’ 15,5-16,1 (seven angels with plagues)

The section B has very impressive allusions to the Exodus scene in the Old Testament. The sea of glass recalls the Red Sea, and fire the wrathful judgment of God. The song of Moses evidently alludes to the song of victory in Exod 15,1-18. The hymn of praise of God's saving activity in history (vv. 3b-4) is suffused with phrases from the Old Testament, mainly from the Psalms and the major prophets. It describes the magnitude of God's works and the reliability of his ways, eschatological praise of God's justice.

The third septenary of bowl plagues, the last in the series, describing God's punitive judgment of the unrighteous, is parallel to the previous trumpet septenary in form and content. Unlike previous septenaries, the plagues here are intensified and affect humankind directly. Though in these plagues there are some similarities to Egyptian plagues, the Exodus motif plays a greater role here.

The sixth bowl (16,12-16), in itself, is not a plague. It describes the gathering of the kings by the demonic forces for the eschatological battle on the great day. The course of history is now apparently in their control. But the final bowl will overturn the pseudo-priority of the forces of evil and establish beyond doubt who really controls the world. The following theophany (16,18) asserts the power of God manifested in the judgment (cf. 15,3.8). The septenaries of plagues come to a momentous turning point in the sixth bowl, where the evil forces muster three-fold allies for the final assault against God on the great day.

As the seventh bowl is poured out upon the air, however, the pseudo-superiority of the evil forces is overturned and the great city is split into three (16,17-21). At this point, a theophanic moment, God intervenes conclusively against the powers of evil, answering the cries of the saints (6,10), and thus establishing beyond doubt as to who really has the sovereignty over the days of man.

Prepared by
Dr. Johnson Puthussery CST