

Book of Revelation

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 Igmar 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. Irenaeus 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. Irenaeus 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

I. The One who is sitting on the Throne and the Lamb (Chaps 4-5)

The second major section in the Book of Revelation begins in chapter 4 and it may be called the Book of Visions (4,1-22,5). The style followed in this section is quite different from the previous section which presented the life of the churches. The author follows simple literary style in Chaps 2-3 to describe the situations in these churches and the messages to them. Though the author uses various symbols in this section too, the language will not be altogether strange for readers. But the visionary section is a world of imagination where the author freely uses symbols which are even unheard of or are not common. This section which profusely uses apocalyptic images describe the conflict between good and evil and the elimination of the evil from this world. The theological basis for the elimination of the evil and the realization of the kingdom of God and the Lamb and the victory of the Lamb and those who follow it are described in Chaps 4-5.

One who is sitting on the Throne

John hears the voice of the risen Lord: 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this' (4,1). The prophet is taken up in the Spirit and what he sees first is the One who is sitting on the Throne. It is God whom the author pictures as the one who is sitting on the throne. Hereby he reminds us that only God is the one who actually rules the world. In contrast to the beautiful throne of the Roman Emperor, John here portrays the awesome and glorious throne room in heaven and convinces the readers that God sitting on the Throne is far greater than the earthly power in Rome. Those who place trust in earthly powers in fact have made a wrong choice as these powers do not last long.

When John presents the picture of the throne room in Revelation, he draws inspiration from the Old Testament images of great theophanies. We can find an allusion to the theophany scene in the Book of Exodus. 'One who is, who was and who is to come' is an exegesis of the revelation of God's name in the Old Testament (Exod 3). The thunders and lightning that accompany the appearance of God to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 19-21) is repeated here. 'Holy, holy, holy' reminds us of the appearance of God to Isaiah (Isa 6,3). The thrones and the beings around them are similar to the theophanic

scenes in Ezekiel (Ezek 1,10). The great theophanies of the Old Testament are brought together and presented in the description of the One who is sitting on the throne.

Lamb standing as if slain

As we come to the next chapter in Revelation, we see an awesome presentation of Christ which is the foundation of the descriptions in the section of the septenaries. The saviour whom God sends appears as 'the one standing as though slain', with weakness of a lamb and the power of the lion. He is the one who will execute the will of God but in the manner God decides. To the question of the mighty angel, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?", the answer is 'No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it'. The declaration that the one from the tribe of Juda is able to open the seals fills the hearts of the worshipping community with hope. The author here presents the realization of the promises of God regarding the salvation of the fallen humanity in and through Jesus Christ.

The portrait of Jesus here makes clear which path he would take to save humanity. It is the lamb that is worthy to open the seals. Lamb is the prime symbol of salvation of the people of God in the Old Testament as described in the Exodus narratives. Here too the lamb stands for the redeemer. But in contrast to the Old Testament description, the lamb is the one standing as though slain. We find here the axis of the Christology in the Book of Revelation.

The term 'slain' refers to the crucifixion of Jesus and 'standing' refers to his resurrection. Jesus Christ is the one who stands victoriously against all powers of evil. He has defeated evil through his death on the cross and this victory is his resurrection. When the author adds 'as though' to 'slain' he wants to show that the death of Jesus on the cross was in the past and now he lives. The power of death has no more power over him.

If Jesus Christ has overcome evil through death, every Christian has to go through the same path to reach divine victory. This picture intends to console and strengthen the church that undergoes suffering and persecution. The church may be tempted to avoid this path of suffering and may go after the riches and glory of this world. But the crucified and risen Christ helps the churches to overcome any temptation and to face persecutions courageously.

Jesus Christ who gained everyone for God through his death on the cross has made them priestly people and hence they are the precious ones of God. The members of the Kingdom of God are not like the subjects in Roman Empire who are destined to toil for the emperor. The visionary narrative concludes with the description of the people of God participating in the kingly rule of God and the Lamb (22,5).

Though John uses the imagery of the lamb of the Old Testament in his narrative, he has made certain important changes here. Instead of the normal Greek term ‘amnos’ which is used in the Gospel of John, he author uses here another term ‘arnion’ which may be translated as ‘ram’, representing the powerful one. He is not the weak lamb of the Gospel, but the powerful one who fights against the powers of evil. Unless one pays attention to such variations in the Book of Revelation, one could miss important theological emphasis here.

These two chapters that describe the One sitting on the throne and the Lamb contain the theological perspectives we have to take in our journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem. The almighty God is the creator and the only one who sustains the whole universe. The creation has its origin in God and He is the ultimate goal too. The symbol of the realization of the promises of God regarding the salvation of the humankind is the New Jerusalem. The only way to reach this ultimate goal is the way shown us by the crucified and risen Jesus. If Jesus brought salvation to people in his cross, the church has also to follow him. The disciples of Jesus are the ‘ones who follow the lamb wherever it goes’ (14,4). The Book of Revelation presents the victory over the powers of evil and their total elimination, paving the way for the realization of our hope for ultimate salvation. This hope in the victory of God is the foundation of the narratives in this last book of the Bible.

II. Visions of the Septenaries

‘What must soon takes place’ mentioned in the prologue of the book starts to unfold itself in chapter six. What is revealed here is the meaning that the Lamb gives to human history. The previous chapter has made clear that it is the Lamb alone who is worthy to open the seals. John describes the opening of the seals in breathtaking manner one by one, followed by the blowing of seven trumpets and the pouring out of seven bowls. These three septenaries present what takes place now and what is to take place in the future.

Seven seals (6,1-8,1)

The visionary section that describes God's involvement in the history of humankind begins with the opening of the seals by the Lamb. This action of opening points to the meaning the risen Christ gives to human history. Opening of the seals represents the revelation of those things that otherwise are hidden from us. What cannot be seen by human eyes are made known in the narrative that follows. The whole creation has its origin in God the Almighty (chap 4) and every event in this world is according to the plan and will of God alone.

When the risen Christ opens the first seal, a white horse comes out 'conquering and to conquer'. The interpretation of this first seal is very important in understanding the theology of Revelation. Many commentators understand this first horse and the one sitting on it as the symbol of evil one along with the next three horses. This is quite misleading and it takes us to wrong interpretation of the book. It is necessary to combine different symbols together to bring out the meaning the author intends here.

The first vision is of the one who is crowned proceeding conquering and to conquer. The white colour in Revelation always stand for positive power, and here for the power of resurrection. The one sitting on the horse is risen Christ who conquers the powers of evil and he continues his victorious march until the total realization of the redemption of the universe. It is important to note that the author presents first this underlying activity of Christ who is actually fighting the evil powers even without our recognition. Our total trust in the risen Christ who has definitively defeated evil on the cross who continues his fight against the evil in this world is the foundation of the witnessing mission of the church.

This appearance of the white horse is followed by the appearance of three other horses in three different colours, representing the totality of evil in this world. Here the author summarises the presence of evil amidst us as violence, injustice and death. In order to show that these powers are contingent and have no ultimate powers, the author uses the expression 'it was permitted'. It is evident that the one who is permitted has a power over him who grants him and controls the power for a fixed period of time. These expressions of evil in this world is to be placed in the context of the white horse, that is, the power of risen Christ who will ultimately eliminate these evil powers from the universe. The narrative here is to underline the ultimate power of Christ and thus to fill the hearts of the faithful with hope in the ultimate victory of God.

Though the author presents here the contingency of the evil powers and their elimination in near future, he does not give any false hope to the church. The fifth seal reminds the churches that they have to go through sufferings. Those who cry out from below the altar are the ones who have sacrificed their lives for the witness of Christ. Their cry represents their painful lament and helplessness before the evil that inflicts suffering on them. It is important to note that God does not promise any immediate action against these evil powers and elimination of every tear from their eyes. God only reminds them that the suffering will go on, but those who have undergone martyrdom are rewarded by white garments, that is, they participate in the resurrection of Christ. No one can run away from suffering in this world and there is no easy way out before us. The call to discipleship is to follow Christ who was crucified.

The sixth seal shows us that there is difference between the suffering of the faithful and the pain of the unfaithful. What we find here is the cry of despair because they do not follow Christ but the earthly masters. When they flee from the catastrophe, the ones in white dress 'stand' (7,9) before the throne of God.

John now takes the readers to the world of new perspectives, away from the suffering and tears of this world. He sees 144000 in white dress, standing before the throne of God and singing with the heavenly beings. This can be describes as the heavenly perspectives given to the faithful amidst their sufferings in this world. Though they undergo suffering in the eyes of those who dwell on the earth, they actually participate in the life offered by God and the Lamb. They will be led to the eternal source of living water and they will thirst no more. This promise is a repetition of the theme of living water in the Gospel of John. The promises given to the people of the Old Testament are now presented as realised here. This theme will be taken up in detail in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation.

The seventh seal surprises us. When we expect the completion of the revelation of salvation in this seventh seal, as seven represents completion and perfection in the Bible, we are brought to moment of silence in heaven. This can be taken as an invitation to come to this heavenly perspective and to meditate over its significance in our lives. It is in silence that we come to the deep mysteries of God.

Seven trumpets (8,2-9,21; 11,14-18)

The second septenary of trumpets follows different narrative style. It begins with the presentation of the angels before the altar and the prayers of the saints. With the blowing of the first four trumpets an event from heaven triggers destruction on the earth. The individual plagues are influenced by the plagues in the Exodus tradition, catastrophes like volcanic eruptions and natural disasters which were common in Mediterranean regions. When the first four trumpets release catastrophes that affect entire regions of the world and involve human beings, the fifth and the sixth affect humanity exclusively. John takes here the motives not only from Exodus (Exod 10-12) but also from Joel 1 and 2 and Isa 14,12. The destructions initiated by the trumpets affect those who are not sealed by God. They however do not succeed in bringing them to conversion. John states that they did not turn to God even after the disasters that they undergo (9,20-21).

The seventh trumpet is described only after an interlude that describes the call of the prophet and the witness of two prophets (10-11). The seventh trumpet proclaims the appearance of the kingdom of God (11,15). Here the temple of God is opened and the ark of his covenant is seen in the temple. We find here the proclamation of the conclusive assuming of the lordship by God and Jesus Christ. God establishes here his sovereignty by overcoming the evil powers. The followers of Jesus Christ recognize the power of

God over evil and the ultimate victory that awaits all who undergo suffering and persecution. This section fills the hearts of the faithful with hope and thanksgiving for not forgetting his people.

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