

New Testament Session #8
The Book of Revelation:
A Confusing and Important Vision
Of the Past, Present, and Future

Structure of the Book of Revelation¹

- A. Prologue, Address, and Inaugural Vision (1:1-1:20)
- B. The Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
- C. The Scroll Vision (4:1-5:14)
- D. The Seven Seals (6:1-8:5)
- E. The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)
- F. The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-18)
- G. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)
- H. Salvation and Judgment (14:1-20)
- I. The Last Plagues (15:1-16:21)
- J. The Harlot and the Beast (17:1-18)
- K. The End of Babylon (18:1-19:10)
- L. The End of Evil (19:11-20:15)
- M. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)
- N. Epilogue and Conclusion (22:6-22:21)

Authorship and Date of Composition

The vast majority of early church commentators say that the Apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation. Among the second and third century authorities who agree with this position are St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen. The first person to break with this consensus, in the 3rd century, was a Roman priest named Gaius. He rejected the apostolic authorship of this text because it was being quoted by members heretical groups who had placed themselves outside of the church.² In our own day, the overwhelming consensus of modern liberal and mainline scholars is that this book was not written by the Apostle John.

We won't discuss authorship in as much detail as we have for some previous texts, but I do not find any of the arguments against Johannine authorship to be convincing. The second century authorities who said that the apostles wrote this text himself were so close to the timeframe in which this book was written (opponents and proponents of Johannine authorship agree that this book was in all likelihood written in the closing decade of the 1st century) that it would take a very convincing argument to show that there was enough evidence to believe that they had gotten this wrong. Those from the early church who rejected the idea that St. John wrote this text himself did not do so on the basis of any particularly strong evidence that this was the case, but because they did not agree with how some people interpreted this text. This doesn't mean that John didn't write it, this just means that the book is at times difficult to understand. This discussion could go

¹ Wilfred J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press: 1993), vii-ix.

² *Ibid*, 8.

much deeper, but I feel comfortable saying that the apostle St. John, the same man who authored the fourth Gospel, is the author of the Book of Revelation. I take the word of 2nd century witnesses over those of 21st century scholars, and I do not feel any obligation to follow in the footsteps of those who rejected the Book of Revelation because it's hard to understand.

General Introduction

The Book of Revelation is a complex book filled with dramatic imagery. This means that one is thing is certain about this book, which is if responsible scholars don't interpret Revelation then others will.³ We will not have time to discuss every passage in this book, many important and dramatic passages are going to have to be skipped over tonight because of time constraints.

The book starts out pretty typically by New Testament standards as we hear words of encouragement and correction directed to seven particular churches. (Rev 2:1-3:22) All seven of these churches were located in what is now western Turkey. This part of Asia Minor was a major center of Christian life during the late 1st century. John addresses particular concerns as he writes to these churches, and he also speaks more generally about the struggle between good and evil in the world, as throughout history the forces of sin oppose the work of God.

Now let's move on to some of the most significant passage in Revelation, as well as some of the major issues discussed in this book. This is not by any stretch of the imagination going to be a comprehensive study of the Book of Revelation, but we will have the chance to examine some of the most important passages in this work, and get some idea of the importance of this inspired text.

When?

The Book of Revelation speaks about the battle between good and evil; the battle that has been in progress for ages, which was being engaged in when the book is written, is evident in our own day and age, and will be concluded when Christ returns in glory. This last aspect has received a great deal of attention, and many people wonder if the Book of Revelation provides us with any insight into when this will occur.

In the Acts of the Apostles we hear of Christ's disciples asking him a question:

When they had gathered together they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'" (Acts 1:6)

We then hear from Jesus:

It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. (Acts 1:7)

³ Ibid, xiii.

Elsewhere Jesus said:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mark 13:31-:32)

We should take these simple and direct words of Christ, which tell us that we will not know when the world is going to end and we cannot know with precision when Christ's Second Coming will occur, and use them to guide us as we interpret the more complex and difficult words of the Book of Revelation. Whatever St. John's text might tell us about the end of the world and the events that will lead up to it, we cannot know or predict precisely when this will happen. Unfortunately not everyone follows this principle. Throughout Christian history an innumerable quantity of theories have arisen concerning the date the world will end. To use the Book of Revelation to try to determine this is to misunderstand the book. God has not given this text to us as a mathematical problem to solve in order to determine when the end times will come.

This book addressed the suffering of the churches it was directed to, so it was written to address what were at the time present concerns. This book also refers to past events. We will see how the book of Revelation discusses Christ's birth and in all likelihood also gives us a depiction of the Church's persecution at the hands of the Emperor Nero, who died before this text was written. The symbolic imagery used to describe past events is more flashy and dramatic than the actual historic events which are being referred to. This use of dramatic imagery to discuss the past and present, a standard part of apocalyptic literature, should show us that caution is needed when understanding how to interpret what Revelation has to say about future events.

Revelation 12:4 tells us that "the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth."

Did the Devil resist Christ's mission on earth?

Yes.

Did this take the form of a physical dragon stalking the Holy Family?

No.

When Revelation 13:18 refers to the number of the beast, this in all likelihood refers to the Emperor Nero.

Was the Emperor Nero a cruel tyrant?

Yes.

Did he oppress, and at times kill Christians?

Yes.

Is the branding of every human being with a mark (Rev 13:16-:17) a literal description of how he exercised his power?

No.

The book of Revelation clearly uses symbolic non-literal imagery to describe past events. Given that, does it makes sense to think that Revelation used non-literal imagery and language when discussing the past, but literal images and exact figures when discussing the future? Obviously not. Trying to figure out exactly what year the Second Coming will occur, or precisely which political figure will be the Anti-Christ, is an anti-intellectual, anti-biblical, waste of time which serves no purpose and gets in the way of a correct understanding of the Book of Revelation.

The Lamb Standing as if Slain (Revelation 5:1-:14)

*I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. One of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. **The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed**, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals." **Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders, a Lamb that seemed to have been slain.** He had seven horns and seven eyes; these are the (seven) spirits of God sent out into the whole world. He came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. They sang a new hymn: "Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign on earth." I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. **They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing."** Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out: "To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever." The four living creatures answered, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped. Revelation 5:1-:14*

Here we have one of the bible's most dramatic images of Christ. He is encountered as a slain lamb. A dead farm animal is not our typical image of power and triumph. And yet Christ encountered in this way is worshipped by a countless multitude. He alone is able to open the scroll and break the seals which reveal God's judgment on evil in the world.

(Revelation 6:1-:17, 8:1-:5) Jesus is the instrument of the punishment that is brought upon all wickedness, and the powerful and royal image of “the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David” is used to describe him. Yet simultaneously the reality of his suffering and death is portrayed.

This should remind of Christ’s appearance in the Gospel of John after his resurrection:

Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" John 20:24-:28

Here we see Jesus risen and triumphant over death. He is acknowledged as God, and his ability to appear in a locked room shows the incredible nature and power of his post-resurrection body. But he still bears the marks of his wounds. This reality doesn’t limit his glory or power. He is not in pain or suffering. The wounds are not something which remain because he was unable to overcome them , or because his triumph over death was not sufficient to get rid of them. His wounds are there not as a limit on his glory, but as a testimony to his glory being displayed through his acceptance and defeat of death. Similarly, Christ’s appearance as a slain lamb in Revelation does not show any weakness or any lasting limitations placed on him by his suffering and death. Christ is triumphant over death and suffering, but his appearance gives testimony to the death and suffering he embraced for our sake.

I believe these biblical depictions of the triumphant Christ, both given to us by the apostle St. John, are very important when it comes to a proper understanding of the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Mass. The Eucharist, as a participation in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, is not a re-sacrificing of Christ. It does not mean there is continued or renewed suffering on Christ’s part. In the glory of his resurrected body Christ’s wounds are displayed. In Heaven his glory is shown in such a way that it is clear that he offered himself as a lamb of sacrifice. Christ’s wounds and death don’t stand in opposition to his glory, this is how his glory is displayed.

In the Eucharist we encounter the lamb of sacrifice, and the lion of Judah. We encounter the one who is marked by wounds, and the one who is triumphant over death.

The Cry of the Martyrs (Revelation 6:9-:11)

When he broke open the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God. They cried out in a loud voice, "How long will it be, holy and true master, before you sit in judgment and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" Each of them was given a white robe,

and they were told to be patient a little while longer until the number was filled of their fellow servants and brothers who were going to be killed as they had been.

This passage shows an interest, on the part of the Christian dead, in the affairs of the world. I think this shows the relevance of this passage when it comes to an understanding of the intercessory role of the saints in Heaven. They are aware of, and concerned about what takes place in this world. Those who have entered into God's presence are not blind or indifferent to the state of the world they have left.

The fact that the saints are told to be patient, that their request is not answered right away, should not be a matter of concern for us. We know that Christ has told that whatever we ask in his name will be given to us, and we also know that not every prayer is granted immediately. Just as there is a mystery to how God responds to our own prayer requests, there is mystery to how God responds to the intercession of the saints. This doesn't show that there is anything wrong or pointless about devotion to the saints, it just means there is a mystery surrounding prayer. Our understanding of the nature and effectiveness of prayer is limited, but in this passage we see the saints in Heaven praying about earthly matters, so as part of our prayer life it certainly seems worth our time to bring these issues before them.

The Ark of the Covenant and the Woman and her Offspring (Revelation 11:19-12:17)

*Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. **She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod.** Her child was caught up to God and his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days. Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have salvation and power come, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Anointed. For the accuser of our brothers is cast out, who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; love for life did not deter them from death. Therefore, rejoice, you heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has come down to you in great fury, for he knows he has but a short time." When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth,*

it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she was taken care of for a year, two years, and a half-year. The serpent, however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with the current. But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon spewed out of its mouth. Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus. It took its position on the sand of the sea.

The chapter and verse designations that we have in the scriptures were not part of the original texts. These designations, which do help us to find and recall specific portions of the bible with greater ease, sometimes can divide the text in ways that can at least potentially mislead us. If we start reading Revelation 11:19, continue reading, and ignore the chapter and verse designations as we do, then it seems reasonable to connect the ark of the covenant referred to in 11:19 with the woman referred to in 12:1. Certainly if this woman gives birth to a child who will rule all the nations, a clear reference to Christ, then it seems reasonable that the title Ark of the Covenant could be given to her. She who carries the Messiah within her certainly seems worthy to be spoken of in the same terms as the sacred object which contained which contained the tablets the 10 Commandments were written on.

The woman referred to should all in likelihood be seen as referring to the Virgin Mary. Commentators who disagree with this seem to be ignoring the obvious, but this imagery of the woman who gives birth to the Messiah is probably not meant to be understood as only referring to Mary. Female imagery was sometimes used in referring to Israel's relationship to God, so while this text is in all likelihood to some extent referring to the Virgin Mary, it should probably also be understood as referring to Israel as the persecuted people from whom Christ came. This passage serves as a biblical support for using various titles of respect to refer to our Blessed Mother. But we should also note that a proper understanding of this passage also points to the fact that Jesus came from the Jewish people, who throughout history have suffered at the hands of their enemies.

The Mark of the Beast (Revelation 13:15-:18)

It was then permitted to breathe life into the beast's image, so that the beast's image could speak and (could) have anyone who did not worship it put to death. It forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to be given a stamped image on their right hands or their foreheads, so that no one could buy or sell except one who had the stamped image of the beast's name or the number that stood for its name. Wisdom is needed here; one who understands can calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number that stands for a person. His number is six hundred and sixty-six.

There has been much made of this image of the number which is the mark of the beast. Various modern apocalyptic groups have speculated about this being some sort of implanted microchip, or have seen various systems of national ID cards, social security

numbers, etc. as being the means by which would people would be marked with the beast's number.

The reality is probably more mundane. One option is that the number 666 is simply a reference to the falling short of perfection which is sin. Seven is seen in the bible as a symbol of perfection and fullness, so being marked three times as falling short of perfection is a plausible symbol for sin.⁴ The number could also be referring the Roman Emperor Nero. Nero ruled as Roman Emperor from 54 to 68 AD. During his reign Christians were brutally persecuted. If the letters of the Greek form of the title Nero Caesar are given numerical values they add up to 666. Some ancient translations of the bible give this number as 616 instead of 666. Interestingly, if the letters of the Hebrew form of Nero Caesar are given numerical values they add up to 616.⁵

So in all likelihood the number of the beast is a general reference to sin being a falling short of perfection, or a specific reference to a particular persecutor of the church who lived a few decades before the writing of the Book of Revelation. The text does not seem to leave us with a lot of room for wild speculation about which current or future political leader might be the one who is pointed to by this number.

The New Heavens and the New Earth

Here are some excerpts from the closing chapters of Revelation, which tell us about what God has in store for those who die united to Christ:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them (as their God). He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, (for) the old order has passed away." The one who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." Then he said, "Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true." He said to me, "They are accomplished. I (am) the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give a gift from the spring of life-giving water. The victor will inherit these gifts, and I shall be his God, and he will be my son. (Revelation 21:1-:7)

"Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." He took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal. (Revelation 21:9b-:11)

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its

⁴ Ibid, 144.

⁵ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 793.

lamp was the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and to it the kings of the earth will bring their treasure. During the day its gates will never be shut, and there will be no night there. (Revelation 21:22-:25)

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of its street. On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the trees serve as medicine for the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will look upon his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-:5)

Obviously sorting out the symbolic imagery used to describe the blessedness of God's people from the literal description of the new creation at the end of time is essentially an impossible task. Is this what it's really going to look like? Maybe, maybe not. The important point is the blessedness, peacefulness, joy, and glory of what God has in store for his people. This is what the Book of Revelation is meant to help us understand. This work was written primarily to point to the glory in store for those who die united to Christ.

Many, if not most, people tend to think of Revelation as a frightening and intimidating text. There are images of fire (Rev 8:5, 8:7-:8, 9:17-:18, and elsewhere), of a dragon (Rev 16:13, 20:2 and elsewhere), death, and war. This is what most people think of when they approach the book of Revelation. But that's probably not how we are supposed to think about this text. The most important theme of the text is not these images, it is what is shown to us in Revelation 21 and 22. The depiction of the blessedness of God's saints is the last image the author of Revelation gives to us. The dramatic imagery used to depict the presence of evil in the world throughout the course of history is not what is meant to be most striking about the Book of Revelation. The comforting and consoling imagery of the closing two chapters is what is meant to be most memorable.

Further Study

Harrington's book on Revelation is the one that I have cited the most as part of this presentation, but is not the one that I would recommend for further study for most of you here. The depth of his commentary makes it useful as one source among many, but if you are only going to read on book on Revelation I would strongly recommend that it not be this one.

There are some very problematic passages in his book. One element that I found very unhelpful and extremely unconvincing was Harrington's overstatement of the differences we see between Revelation and other New Testament books when it comes to understanding the relationship of Christians to the rest of the society.⁶ The closing section on "universal salvation", in which Harrington denies eternal punishment and says that

⁶ Wilfred J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: Revelation*, 9-14.

only the redeemed will exist for eternity, is particularly problematic.⁷ This is an unfounded idea which has nothing to do with what the bible actually teaches and has no legitimacy within any system of thought which claims in any way to have been influenced by Jesus Christ.

Because of the shortcomings of Harrington's text I would say that if you are only going to pick up one book on the Book of Revelation that it be *The Navarre Bible* commentary on this text, or the soon to be published *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* volume which will contain commentary on this book and several other New Testament books.

⁷ Ibid, 229-235.