

Revelation: Introduction

What is Revelation?

- It is similar to much of the New Testament, containing narrative & epistle
- And yet, very distinctly unlike the rest of the NT
 - Filled with heavy symbolism
- It is rooted in 1st century themes and history
- It is also rooted deeply in the OT
 - Referencing it over 250 times
- It is also future-oriented
- It is probably the most difficult book of the Bible to understand
 - And they most divided in its interpretation
 - There are at least 5 major schools on how to interpret the text
- Like all Scripture, we must be careful not to jump right to hermeneutics
 - But rather start in the original context of the writing to understand it on its own terms

The Nature of Revelation

- Revelation must be treated on its own terms among the books of the Bible
 - It is its own genre
 - But has characteristics of:
 - Apocalypse
 - Prophecy
 - Epistle

Revelation as Apocalypse

- Apocalypse: “A Jewish literary genre that details the authors' visions of the end of the present age as revealed by an angel or other heavenly messenger.”
- Apocalypse is a literary form that does NOT exist in modern writing
 - Though there were dozens of non-canonical examples written between 200 BC and AD 200
- As a genre, Apocalypses share 5 key features in common:
 1. Its roots are in the OT prophetic literature
 - Especially as found in Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and parts of Isaiah
 - They are both concerned with coming judgment and salvation
 - But apocalyptic literature was born out of persecution or great oppression
 - Thus, it is concerned less with God’s activity *within history*
 - But looks exclusively forward to a time when God would bring a violent, radical end to history
 - Focusing on the triumph of good and the final judgment of evil
 2. Unlike the OT Prophets, apocalypses were written works from the start
 - Whereas the Prophets spoke first
 - Thus, apocalypse is a literary form
 - And has a particular written structure and form (Rev. 1:19)

3. The bulk of content of apocalypses are presented in the form of visions and dreams; and its language is cryptic and symbolic
 - Often the books were written under pseudonyms
 - An attempt to make them seem older than they were
 - And to give them validity because of the false author (i.e. Enoch, Baruch, et al.)
4. The images of apocalypses are often forms of fantasy rather than reality
 - Ex.) A beast with 7 heads & ten horns (13:1); a woman clothed with the sun (12:1); locust with scorpion tails and human heads (9:10)
 - The fantasy is often in the unearthly combination of items
 - By contrast, the Prophets and Jesus often used symbolic language, but most often involving real images (salt, vultures, half-baked bread, etc.)
5. Because they were literary, the apocalypses normally very formally stylized
 - This includes:
 - Dividing time into neat packages
 - Symbolic use of numbers
 - The result is often numbered sets that express something (e.g. judgment) without necessarily suggesting that each separate picture immediately follows its predecessor
- Revelation fits all these characteristics except one
 - And this one difference makes it stand apart
 - It is not pseudonymous
 - John was known to his audience
 - And he was told specifically not to “seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near.” (22:10)

Revelation as Prophecy

- The major reason that John’s apocalypse is not pseudonymous is related to his sense of inaugurated eschatology
 - Inaugurated eschatology: “Jesus’ teaching, and the Evangelists’ message, that the Messianic Age has begun, but has not come in fullness”
 - John was not simply anticipating the end
 - He knew that it had already begun with the coming of Jesus
- Crucial to this understanding is the advent of the Spirit
 - The other apocalypses had to rely in pseudonyms because they were writing in a time when the Spirit was ‘quiet’ and prophecy had ceased
 - Thus, the need to claim to be written during a time when prophecy was active
 - John, however, claims to be ‘in the Spirit’ when he was told to write what he saw (1:10-11)
 - He calls his book prophecy (1:3; 22:18-19)
 - And he claims that the churches are suffering because of their “testimony about Jesus” (20:4; cf. 1:9)
 - Which he calls “the Spirit of prophecy” (19:10)
- Thus, John is claiming that the message of Jesus, attested to by John and the church, is the clear evidence that the prophetic Spirit had come

- John's apocalypse stands apart because of its combination of both apocalyptic and prophetic elements
 - Apocalyptic:
 - It is cast in the apocalyptic mold and has most of the literary characteristics of apocalypse
 - It is born in persecution and speaks about the end with the triumph of Christ and His church
 - It uses cryptic language and symbolism of fantasy and numbers
 - Prophetic:
 - It was not to be sealed for the future
 - But was a word for that day, speaking to the original audience's present situation
 - Just like the OT Prophets
 - This is especially seen in the 7 letters

Revelation as Epistles

- This combination of apocalypse & prophecy has been cast in the form of a letter
 - Revelation both opens (1:4-7) and closes (22:21) just like a 1st century letter
- John also speaks to his readers in the first person/second person formula (I...you)
- In its final form, Revelation is sent as an epistle to the seven churches of Asia Minor
- And just like other epistles, there is an occasion for its writing
 - Which was, at least in part, based in the needs of the specific churches it is addressed to
- Thus, to interpret it correctly, we must try to understand its original historical context