

Revelation: Historical & Literary Context

The Historical Context

- Just like other genres, the place to begin one's exegesis of Revelation is with a reconstruction of the situation in which it was written
 - The best way to start this is by reading through all of it in a single sitting, looking for the big picture
 - Don't get bogged down in trying to decipher it, but rather get a feel for the book and its message
- About the author and his readers
 - Notice that John's readers are companion in his suffering (1:9)
 - In the 7 letters, note 2:3, 8-9, 13; 3:10
 - The repeated "to those who are victorious"
 - The 5th seal (6:9-11) reveals Christian martyrs who have been slain because of the 'word' and the 'testimony'
 - Exactly why John was in exile (1:9)
 - The great multitude, who will never suffer *again*, has 'come out of the great tribulation' (7:16)
 - Suffering and death are again linked to bearing 'Jesus' testimony' (12:11, 17)
 - In chapters 13-20 the suffering and death are specifically attributed to the 'beast' (13:7; 14:9-13; 16:5-6; 18:20, 24; 19:2)
 - The motif of sharing in suffering is the key to understanding the historical context and fully explain the occasion and purpose of the book
 - John was in exile for his faith
 - Others were experiencing suffering and at least one had even died (2:13) for the testimony of Jesus
- John's prophetic visions shows that this is just the beginning woes for those who would refuse to 'worship the beast'
 - And he was not sure that all the church was ready for what was ahead of them
 - So he wrote this prophecy that he had seen
- The main themes are clear:
 - The church and the state are on a collision course
 - An initial victory will appear to belong to the state
 - The church will suffer and even die
 - And it will get worse before it gets better (6:9-11)
 - John is concerned that they do not give in to the world in times of distress (14:11-12; 21:7-8)
 - It is also an encouragement that God is in control of all things
 - Christ holds the keys of history and the churches in his hands (1:17-20)
 - Thus, the Church triumphs even over death (12:11)
 - And God will finally pour out his wrath on those who caused this suffering and death
 - And bring eternal rest to those who remain faithful

'Tribulation' vs. 'Wrath'

- John does NOT use these two terms interchangeably
 - And confusing them leads to severe interpretative issues
- Tribulation: Suffering and death that the church clearly was enduring and was yet to endure
- Wrath: His judgment that is to be poured out on those who have afflicted God's people
- It is clear that God's people will NOT have to endure God's wrath when it is poured out on their enemies
- But, it is equally clear that they will suffer at the hands of their enemies
 - This is in keeping with the rest of the NT (2 Thess. 1:3-10)
 - Also note the opening of seals 5 & 6 (6:9-17)
 - In seal 5 the Christian martyrs ask how long before the earth is judged, and their blood avenged
 - They are told to wait because there will be more martyrs
 - Judgment is still certain
- In seal 6, when God's judgment comes, the question is posed, "Who can withstand [the coming wrath of the Lamb]?"
 - The answer is given in chapter 7: those whom God has sealed, who "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (7:14)

Literary Context

- To understand any one of the specific visions in Revelation it is especially important to wrestle with the background and meaning of the images
 - But also to ask how any particular vision functions in the book as a whole
- In this way, Revelation is more like the Epistles than the Prophets
 - The Prophets are a collection of oracles whose arrangement does not always have a clear purpose
 - The Epistles every paragraph builds on the whole argument
 - Like Revelation, which is a creatively structured whole, with each vision being an integral part of that whole
- Fee & Stuart offer an excellent outline to Revelation that is helpful
 - There is no debate about the structure, even though there is about how it is interpreted
- There are a few visions that present difficulty within this structure
 - Commentaries can offer good insight into their function