

Tom Coop
 Revelation 1:1-7, 21:1-7
 August 19, 2018

Just Plain Weird!

I don't know what I was thinking when I thought I could explain the New Testament book of Revelation in 20 minutes! So ... this will have to last 90 minutes. Get comfortable!

Just kidding. I'm kidding Dave! Still let me hopefully at least give you an introduction to this fascinating book in the time I do have.

So, let me ask you – how many of you have actually read the Book of Revelation?
(wait for hands to go up)

If you had to come up with a word or two to describe it, what would it be? *(wait for responses)*

Let's all admit it – Revelation is, well ... weird!

Some people, after slogging through Revelation, seem to suffer from what we call PTRRD: Post-Traumatic Revelation Reading Disorder.

Maybe you've had this experience. You start reading Revelation with a rush of enthusiasm, and all goes well through the first three chapters and their letters to the seven churches.

Interesting. Mostly understandable.

But, then things start to get bizarre: Not only are there malicious monsters, but even the good guys strike us as bizarre creatures – a lion, an ox, a human face, and an eagle, each with six wings and covered all over with eyes.

In addition, some of the settings – bottomless pits, rivers of blood – are nothing we've seen before, nor are we sure we ever want to.

Not only that, but the action often seems incongruous, disjunctive.

One moment we are listening to the heavenly choir sing praises around God's throne, and the next we hear angels pronounce terrible plagues upon the earth and its inhabitants.

Jesus himself transmogrifies (isn't that a great word?) into strange shapes throughout this vision.

Often, we see him as a bloody, slaughtered lamb. But then later, he is portrayed as a warrior with fiery eyes, arrayed in an equally bloody robe, with a sword protruding from his mouth.

But, I guess, when you open yourself up to a vision, as John did, you don't get to choose its contents.

It's not like going on Netflix and picking out a movie that fits your taste and mood.

Revelation actually receives its name from its opening words, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The Greek word for “revelation” is *apokalypsis*, from which the English word “apocalypse” derives.

And contrary to popular usage, the primary meaning of apocalypse is not “the cataclysmic end of the world,” but revelation, or more literally, “unveiling.”

The author of the text tells us that his name is John. Christian tradition has taken him to be the apostle John, author of the Fourth Gospel.

However, nowhere in the Book of Revelation does John claim to be one of Jesus’ disciples or to have even known Jesus.

What scholars can say about the John of Revelation is that he was a significant figure in the early church in the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

The text starts with a series of seven letters addressed to the Christian communities in seven important cities in the area - Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

He mentions details about these communities that indicate he knew and was known by them.

So, it is clear his letter was to Christian churches he knew and for whom he felt a pastoral responsibility.

And in verse 3 of the 1st chapter, we discover it was not intended for private, silent reading, but was written to be read aloud in its entirety during a single worship service in the churches of Asia.

We might think it strange to read an entire book of the bible in one worship service – but that is what this letter was meant to do and what was certainly done then.

Much of what is contained in the letter is therefore best perceived by the ear and the imagination, as the visions of Revelation unfold in the mind’s eye.

Those of you who remember the great days of radio drama will appreciate this.

And because Revelation is clearly a letter, we must never ever forget that it was first and foremost meant for its **original audience**.

Which means that the text cannot mean something that would have been totally incomprehensible to the original hearers, right? What would be the point?

Therefore, our reading of Revelation must make at least as much sense in their world as it does in our own.

I think if we remember this, we will be protected from many of the ridiculous things being said about Revelation in our world today.

It is generally accepted that Revelation was written around 96 AD. It was a time of intense persecution for Christians.

Toward the end of the first century of the Christian era, emperor worship was fairly well established, not only in the city of Rome but in the outlying regions that formed a part of the empire.

When Christians refused to worship the emperor, they were accused of all sorts of crimes and subjected to severe penalties.

Some of them even suffered martyrdom rather than deny their faith.

It was a critical time for the entire Christian movement, and many of its members wondered whether the persecution would ever end, while others were perplexed about the course they should follow.

Some were even tempted to abandon their faith or at least to make concessions to Rome sufficient to enable them to save their lives.

So, Revelation's letters to the churches, and the book as a whole, were needed to encourage them to stand firm. That God is in control, no matter how things may look.

Christ, not the emperor, is Lord of history.

It is an admonition to Christians of the first century to avoid compromise with paganism, despite the threat of adversity and martyrdom.

And that they should never forget that in the end there is a glorious, wonderful future for every faithful believer.

Another important point to understand when you are reading the Book of Revelation is that it was written in an "apocalyptic" style, common to that day.

The characteristics of apocalyptic writing are fairly well known. They were produced in times of crises. They describe the conflict between the forces of good and evil.

Future events are made known through dreams and visions. The end of the conflict is to come shortly.

Those who remain faithful through persecution and trial are promised a reward in the messianic kingdom soon to be established.

And the messages are for the benefit of the persecuted and are usually conveyed by means of symbols that only the faithful can understand.

Symbolic language is one of the chief characteristics of apocalyptic literature. Such literature enjoyed wide popularity in both Jewish and Christian circles from ca. 200 B.C. to A.D. 200.

So, it is no wonder that the Book of Revelation is hard for modern people to read. We are not used to this kind of literature.

But remember, that wasn't so for people in the ancient world who would have been more accustomed to the complex nature of apocalyptic literature and who already knew something of the situation and of the symbols that were used to portray it.

So, for the original audience of the Revelation of John, all the strange scenes would have been immediately intelligible.

Well, that's great for them, but how about us?

Since the early church, a few dominant perspectives on how to interpret John's book have emerged.

Some, called IDEALISTS, argue that John is speaking figuratively, merely expressing spiritual themes relevant in any age.

Therefore, they don't look for prophecy to be fulfilled in actual, literal events.

IDEALISTS see Revelation as a book that John wrote to encourage believers in his day of God's eventual victory over evil and to call them to persevere during tough times.

Others, known as FUTURISTS, believe the symbolic language represents actual events that are going to take place in a literal time period in the future. (think of the Left Behind books and movie series).

This, to me, is the scariest of all interpretations – both in a literal and figurative sense!

And although a favorite of evangelicals and Pentecostals, it is not generally accepted by most biblical scholars today.

What is, especially by the mainline denominations, is the way of interpretation that says that the prophecies discussed in Revelation correspond not to future events but to events that *already* took place back in the early centuries of the Christian church. They are called PRETERISTS.

According to this approach, John wrote the entire book of Revelation as a promise of deliverance for the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor that were suffering intense persecution from Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire.

Given the different ways of understanding Revelation, it might be interesting to see how a few of the better known symbols are interpreted.

While almost everyone has heard of THE RAPTURE (the theory that believers living in the End Times will be physically removed from the earth and transported directly to heaven), the Bible never uses the word.

Only FUTURISTS hold this view.

How about the FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE? If you look at the front of your bulletin, they can be more than just a bit scary. Conquest riding a white horse, Famine on a black horse, Plague riding a pale horse, and War on the red.

And that is what the FUTURIST would have you believe. For them, these four horsemen literally bring with them multiple catastrophes in the last days.

The PRETERIST see them as merely symbols of Roman occupation and conquest.

Then there is the ANTICHRIST. It also never appears in Revelation.

FUTURISTS believe that the Antichrist is actually "the beast" (which is in Revelation) who will emerge in the future as a rising star, but filled with evil and will bring on the final battle of Armageddon.

PRETERISTS often understand the Roman emperor Nero as the Antichrist (or Beast).

Then the IDEALISTS don't identify the beast or Antichrist with a single individual; rather, he symbolizes the evil socio-political systems of the world.

You choose what to believe!

Now let's turn to the mark of the beast – 666.

FUTURISTS believe that the Antichrist will use the mark of the beast (666) during the Tribulation as a way to control the economic system of the world.

Theories about how technology could play a part in the beast's plans range from computer-chip implants to fingerprint-scanning devices.

PRETERISTS hold that the mark of the beast refers to the economic persecution that existed against Christians in the first century..

IDEALISTS teach that the mark of the beast is a figurative symbol of false religion.

Interestingly, recent scholarship has indicated that the mark of the beast should be 612, not 666.

That being said, here are some interesting facts about the number 666.

Did you know that 666 is the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 36 [which just happens to be the sum of all the numbers on a roulette wheel!]

ZIP Codes: There are no Zip Codes 00666, 06660, 66600, or 66666 in the USA,

Area Codes: There is no 666 area code for telephone numbers in the USA

NT Statistic: There are 678 verses in the full Gospel of Mark; but the last 12 verses (Mark 16:9-20) were added later as an appendix; so Mark's Gospel originally contained exactly 666 verses!

Another interesting fact: Revelation is the only book in the New Testament that uses the word "Alleluia," indicating praise to God, and it appears four times – all in Chapter 19.

Although, it has long been accepted as Holy Scripture, not everyone was so stoked about Revelation.

Martin Luther said that it was "neither apostolic or prophetic."

It was the only New Testament book on which John Calvin did not write a commentary.

Thomas Jefferson thought Revelation was so weird that he didn't even bother to include it in his reedited version of the Bible.

And George Bernard Shaw called it "a peculiar record of the visions of a drug addict."

All that being said, what are we to make of Revelation? Well, for starters, Revelation exhorts Christ's followers to faithful witness even in the most harrowing of circumstances.

It challenges believers to faithful living in the midst of cultural pressure to compromise.

And Revelation reveals how God's reign of justice and peace will displace oppressive and violent systems.

The chief value of the book seems to lie in its testimony to the faith and hope of persecuted Christians and in the comfort and inspiration it has brought to downcast and oppressed souls of every age.

And in the end, it points out that there will be an end of conflict, that God and the Lamb will triumph and there will be no more tears and pain, but there will be peace.

Worth a Read? I think so!

Amen