

The Center for Worship – Seattle Pacific University
Winter Quarter 2010: The Book of Revelation

Introduction (Bob Zurinsky, M.C.S., Center for Worship)

The book of Revelation has a long history of confusion and mystery surrounding it. For today's believer, far-removed from the time and place where this book was written, it can seem like there's too much happening here to even begin to comprehend its message. But with a little bit of background information, some of the mysteries of Revelation come into focus, and the book can become a source of great life and hope for the community that follows Jesus.

Of critical importance to our reading of Revelation is the understanding of its genre. As we all know, not all literature is the same kind of thing. For example, there is a Japanese Haiku, and an American Short Story. We read Harry Potter novels and we read biographies of great men and women. And in all of these cases, we know that we're reading different *kinds* of literature. Each kind has its own set of rules and structure, and if we get the different kinds of writing confused we can find ourselves baffled by what appear to be great mysteries and inconsistencies. What if we tried to read a Harry Potter novel with the assumption that what we were reading was a literal history of Great Britain? What if we read the poetry of Emily Dickinson with the intention of trying to find in it a blueprint for how to build a house or a car?

These examples seem like nonsense to us, but only because we're very familiar with the kinds of literature that have been mentioned, and we know intuitively that each kind has its own rules and its own purpose. But the same is true of the book of Revelation. This is a work of art that was written in a particular literary genre, a genre that most modern readers are not familiar with. The genre is called *apocalyptic*. In the world of the Middle East two thousand years ago, apocalyptic was a well-known style of writing. The word "apocalypse" means something like "revealing" or "unveiling." In this style of writing, another world is revealed before the eyes of the reader using fantastic, theatrical visions. Or maybe you could say that what is revealed is the deeper truth that lies behind the world around us.

Apocalyptic literature uses dramatic imagery to convey the message that the world is more than meets the eye. In the case of the book of Revelation, John's great visions are designed to show the reader that *God alone is sovereign* in the world. Although the forces of evil may seem to prevail, God always has the last word. Likewise, those who follow this God and *refuse to sell their souls* to the values and gods of this world will one day stand in victory. Although God's kind of power may look weak right now ("like a lamb that has been slaughtered"), at the end of the story it is this humble king who rules the whole universe.

The images of Revelation are meant to be *felt* more than analyzed. John isn't writing a history book, he is writing a picture book. Each scene is a powerful story that sweeps us off our feet into a greater awe and reverence for the God who alone holds the keys to life and death.

In our worship services this quarter we will be exploring the book of Revelation through all forms of art, because that is how it is meant to be experienced. We're not trying to find a map of the "end times," as some have tried to do with this book. Instead, what we're doing is inviting God's Spirit to use this text to draw us into a posture of even greater worship of the one living God, and the slain but risen Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

A Brief Overview of Revelation (Eugene Lemcio, Ph.D., School of Theology)

I. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

- A. extremely checkered in the early church:
 - 1. ca. 350, accepted in the Western Mediterranean churches, rejected or uncertain in the Eastern Mediterranean.
 - 2. officially accepted at Council of Carthage in late 400s. But local churches (e.g. in Syria) went their own way.
- B. controversial during the Reformation
 - 1. Luther: “misnamed; the more I read it, the more confused I get. How can something revelatory produce confusion?”
 - 2. Calvin: persuaded by associates not to write a commentary on it—as his opinion would further divide the Protestant movement
- C. The overall situation regarding the millennium
 - 1. that it’s a literal 1,000 years at the end of history
 - a. held by the earliest Christians (mid-100s)
 - b. held by many fundamentalist-evangelicals since the mid-1800s
 - 2. that it symbolizes the entire period between the first and second comings of Jesus
 - a. held by most of the church for most of its history (though quantity not a guarantor of truth)
 - b. the current of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and major Protestant denominations
- D. Therefore, be wary of anyone claiming that his / her views are the only or best ones ever held by true Christians. That person is either
 - 1. ignorant: (s/he doesn’t know the history of interpretation) or
 - 2. deceiving: (s/he knows but hides the information)
- E. Interpretation should be faithful to the book’s having meaning
 - 1. in the first century, to people in a particular time, place, and circumstance
 - 2. to people in all times, places, and circumstances.

II. MATTERS OF FORM

- A. The *sequencing* is not linear or chronological:
 - 1. the story begins in the middle (ch. 12) and
 - 2. there are several endings (chs. 6, 11, 16, and 20)
 - 3. the 3 sets of 7 (seals, trumpets, and bowls) may be recapping the same story line
- B. powerful visual *symbols*
 - 1. often unnatural so as to get the readers’ attention: note the wrathful lamb (the end of ch. 6)
 - 2. not to be taken literally—otherwise, Jesus really is a lamb with 7 eyes and 7 horns (ch. 5)
- C. use of the *OT*
 - 1. not according to a jig saw puzzle method (the simple addition or fitting of texts)
 - 2. texts and themes are transformed: the 4 beasts (kings / kingdoms) of Daniel 7 are merged into the two of ch. 12)
- D. use of *contrasts* (to promote discernment and decision making)
 - 1. two thrones: (sources of power): God’s or Dragon’s (=Snake’s=Devil’s=Satan’s)
 - 2. two animal “logos” (Lamb or Beast)
 - 3. two cities (ways of ordering human community): Babylon or New Jerusalem
 - 4. two women: Prostitute (on sale to anyone) or Bride (faithful to one)
- E. use of *myths* (foundational images in the Lewis and Tolkien sense) well known in the Greco-Roman and Hellenistic Jewish world: woman-child-dragon and war-in-heaven (ch. 12)

III. MATTERS OF CONTENT: dominant themes

A. Who's in charge—really? God or the Dragon? (Note words for *kingdom, authority, rule*)

B. Paradoxes in Christology

1. the glorious frail human (son of man): ch. 1
2. the lion who looked like a slain lamb (ch. 5)
3. the child who is to rule (not the dragon): ch. 12)
4. the Rider on a white horse (King of Kings and Lord of Lords): 19
 - a. who slays with the sword from his mouth (not in his hand)
 - b. whose robe is dipped in blood

C. Attitude towards nature

1. not as a target to be punished
2. but as a means of transformative judgment: for repentance
 - a. against evil doers in general (9:20-21)
 - b. against the throne of the beast in particular (16-10-11)
3. the destroyers of the earth will be destroyed (11:18)

D. The primary category for Christians is not so much “believers” as it is “overcomers” or “victorious ones” (The issue is not mental assent but loyalty in the face of opposition.)

E. No “rapture” (language or description)

F. “The Tribulation” (mentioned only once—at 7:14) without any indication of when or how long

G. No “Battle of Armageddon” but the “Battle on the Day of God Almighty”, where God's power is overwhelming but where no battle is described

H. The final setting of the story is not in heaven but on a new earth with God wanting to be where humans are (3 times in Rev. 21:1-7)