

Revelation Introduction

The Book of Revelation is often seen as so foreign and strange that it is read infrequently and rarely studied. It is also one of the most debated and disputed texts of Scripture and there are numerous schools of thought that guide interpreters. I was blessed to study this past summer with a group of pastors and NT scholar Dr. Sean McDonough of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, which led me to continue my study with you this year. It may be that we can complete our study of the first 7 chapters of Revelation in the first semester but it also possible that we will continue through both semesters. I read a short book I commend to you, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham. This is a short book, around 160 pages. It is non-technical and I thought very helpful. I came away thinking that normal people could read this book and be helped by it. I have been reading it out loud with a small group and recording our reading and discussions which is available on the church's website if you wish. Also this class will also be available on the website so that even if you are unable to attend you can keep up or catch up at your convenience. I will be writing classnotes each week, that will be available in hard copy before each class in the narthex and on the web as well. I also will be away for two classes in September potentially traveling to Israel and so I will have substitute teachers fill in for me then.

By way of introduction the book of Revelation is often misnamed "Revelations" its proper name is Apocalupsis or The Revelation...referring to the revealing of Jesus in glory. This distinction is important and actually helpful because this book needs to be understood as a whole rather than as a series of disconnected 'visions'. It is given to John, in a certain historical context, some of which he relates in the text itself. Some believe that Revelation was written late in the first century during the reign of Domitian, others as early as just prior to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. Perhaps even during the reign of Nero 54-68. Most scholars today think based on the conditions of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 that the mid 90's is the more likely date. Assuming the later date, John weaves into the images events from the not so distant past as 'types' of what the Church is facing as he writes and will face in the future.

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Critical to our understanding, is the connection between Revelation and the OT. If as I have suggested, that the best way to understand the NT, is as Jesus' authoritative commentary or Rabbinic interpretation of the OT, so that we should as we read the NT be alert for OT background, connection, quotation, and or allusion, the Book of Revelation is saturated with OT reference and dependence.

By way of overview, The Bible operates as a Covenant or constitutional document. The Book of Exodus, is the Covenant document that constitutes Israel as a nation, albeit a nation without land. Genesis serves as the Historical Prologue identifying the Covenanting parties and explaining their relationship. Leviticus lays out a system of maintaining the Covenant relationship. Numbers begins to trace the relationship following the actual sealing of the Covenant...and begins the judicial applications and adjustments to the relationship. Finally Deuteronomy is a recovenanting and updates the constitution for life with a new generation in a new situation, life in the land. The so called historical books, known in the Hebrew Bible as the Former Prophets chronicle the performance of the parties in the covenant relationship over time. These are followed by the so called Writing Prophets, who pronounce the coming judgment and doom of the nation but preach hope to a faithful remnant. The Writings, form a repository of the reflections and responses of God's people to the Covenant relationship with Yahweh. Revelation, is the climax of the outcome of the fallenness of the world and God's people. Revelation is also the climax of the promises of God spoken in the midst of this fallen world. Revelation is a call to stand fast in the face of great tribulation and opposition, to persevere, to keep believing and to keep obeying...even when it looks as if it will cost everything to do so.

What kind of literature is Revelation? It is often referred to in terms of its name...Apocalyptic. It is eschatologically oriented, that is it anticipates the end, the intervention of Yahweh into this present Evil Age. It does so in a highly graphic image driven genre. It is, in the case of Revelation intimately geared to OT revelation, prophetic literature.

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Revelation calls itself prophecy in Rev. 1. Prophecy means something Biblically that is often nuanced differently than we use the word. Often when we speak of prophecy, we mean some kind of prediction of future events...Biblically there is a predictive element but predictions are made in light of the Sanctions of the Covenant, not some kind of crystal balling of the future by a particularly insightful person. The Covenant document has a section like Lev 26 and Deut 28 that describe the future in light of covenant performance with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. In Revelation we see the Church experiencing in many cases the fallen world arrayed against them, threatening them and their future. The temptation to conform to the standards and behavior of the world is strong. The prophecy seeks to motivate the Church to stay the course and not turn back even in the face of opposition. It is also a call to those who have conformed to repent before judgment comes...this is the essence of Biblical prophecy and Revelation is a classic example of it. Finally, Revelation is a letter to the Church of John's day, in Asia Minor, in the latter part of the first century, under Roman domination, with the current geo-political and religious and economic issues of its day exerting pressure on believers individually and corporately.

In many ways, Revelation is the capstone of Biblical revelation. It serves as Paul Harvey would put it, as "The Rest of The Story!"

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Revelation has a positive attitude toward Creation...like Hebrew thinking tended to. It neither deifies Creation nor does it abhor the material as much Greek thought and religion tended to do. Revelation rehearses Israel's original experience of deliverance from captivity in Egypt and through the wilderness. In the wilderness encountered many surprising things seemingly out of nowhere. But one can learn the rhythms of the wilderness and come to understand its ways...it remains out of one's control, yet one can learn to live in it. Revelation serves as the climax and pinnacle of the entire story of the history of God's deliverance of His people and His rescue of His entire Creation. As such it should not surprise us to see Revelation as the completion of the story of Genesis. John depicts God as Creator in Rev 4 and 14. In Rev 4:11 Yahweh is worshipped in Heaven because He called all things into being and sustained His Creation throughout history. In chapter 4 God is pictured as worthy of worship because He is Creator even apart from and with no mention of redemption. But Revelation adds is The Rest of the Story...The Consummation/Restoration of Eden Rev 22...in which we see the River of Life flowing from the Throne, The Tree of Life whose leaves are used for the healing of the nations. The Remnant end up in the Garden City as God de-creates the corruption of the Garden to plant anew...as anti-creation is replaced by New Creation/New Genesis.

Revelation serves as The Rest of the Story of the Exodus...it is the end time story of the New Exodus, the redemption/rescue of God's people out from oppression and oppressive rulers into the Gracious Kingdom of Yahweh. The Exodus is the single most important story for Israel...it is Israel's creation story as Yahweh brought a people from the chaos of Egypt. Moses, the rescuer is born his mother declares in Ex 2:2 that Moses was a 'good' child. This has nothing to do with his behavior...it is the same declaration that God make of Creation in Genesis 1...this is purposeful as Moses tells the story of the Exodus. He intentionally links this story of rescue and new birth to the rescue of the story of Creation story in Gen 1. This word is used only in Gen 1 and 2. Then she places him in a basket...but that is not the Hebrew word...she places him in an ark...this word only appears in the story of Noah. So Exodus tells us of a story of the hope of the world floating in demonic chaotic waters of death. Then in Exodus 14 Moses divides the Sea as God's ruah/Spirit moves upon the waters and divides them to expose dry land exactly like Gen 1...Salvation in Exodus is tied directly to Genesis. Revelation speaks of God visiting judgments upon the Earth like He visited judgments upon Egypt in the plagues. In Rev 15 we see the Song of Moses from Exodus 15 as they sing of God's victory.

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