

Bible Study: The Book of Revelation

Week 1: The Birth of Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic is a distinct kind of sacred writing. It is esoteric and seems very strange to the modern reader. It is present in both the OT and NT, in a limited way, and the symbolism presents some challenges to understanding the message of the author. Naturally any interpretation can be controversial because it is open to a multitude of understandings – some even more fantastic than the source documents!

It may be fun to try to identify the ‘Anti-Christ’ in our modern age or to decode numbers such as 666, but arguably this is to miss the point. It is to indulge in wild speculation and ultimately foolishness. As any historical review of figures so identified from the reformers (Pope=Anti-Christ) to Hal Lindsay’s *Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970). This was a favourite when I first became a Christian.

Part of what is strange is the prominence of mythological features. But such themes were present in the earliest writings of the Old Testament.

The Song of Miriam was “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exodus 15:21). This uses language associated with the primordial conflict between Baal and Yam, which becomes Yahweh triumphing over Pharaoh. Also, this shows the divine warrior (cf. Song of Moses, “the LORD is a man of war” (15:3). Note that the re-emergence of mythic material in apocalyptic literature was long at home on Israelite soil. (cf. Song of Deborah, Judges 5).

In the prophetic tradition divine activity occurred on a cosmic plane and the earth was a reflection of the drama of the gods. The role of temple worship, or the cult, was to “to make the primeval activities of the gods efficacious for this world through re-enactment of cosmic activities in the cult ritual” (Hanson, in *Interpretation*, p. 457). The prophet was able to maintain the tension of being in the council of God, but having a role in speaking about what God is doing in the realm of history [well, mostly judgment]. Isaiah showed he was uncomfortable in the presence of God “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). The prophet was a spokesman for Yahweh, constantly confronting the King with God’s will. The prophet was called to

maintain the balance between reality and vision, since he was called by the LORD to straddle two worlds, listening in one and speaking to the other.

The OT has various streams, which I will not try to oversimplify, for example Deuteronomistic theology tried to purge mythic elements - in part because of the struggle with the pagan influence of Baal upon the Israelites. Similarly, the wisdom tradition does not have an interventionist God or any evidence of the language of myth.

Why did this shift occur? We can trace through the later prophets a growing pessimism, for example in the Book of Ezekiel there is more of the shift to visions at a cosmic level. The Second Isaiah brings a vision of a cosmic and universal God (40:22) and myth returns (51:9-11). Hanson proposed a clash of political parties, one of which produced the apocalyptic literature (see Zachariah chapter 9 where he sees the Royal cult pattern).

There is a profound shift in genuine apocalyptic. For example, Daniel in chapter 12 is not sent back to the people, as was the case with Isaiah “Go and say to this people”, instead, “But you, Daniel, shut up these words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” (12:4) Apocalyptic becomes a matter of secret knowledge hidden until the time is right. Daniel Chapter 7 the “son of man” which becomes a title that uses of himself in the NT Gospels. Already we can see that this is not a sign of humility, but an apocalyptic claim to be a divine judge of the end of time. In Daniel we see the emergence of apocalyptic characteristics such as (a) seemingly predicting events which establish the credibility of the seer; (b) history is used as a timetable indicating how close we are to the end of time final judgement.

We also see apocalyptic in the Gospels spoken by Jesus. What do you see in Matthew 24?

Concluding, there is a profound pessimism in the apocalyptic perspective which loses the tension between the prophet and events in the real world. There is a delayed hope that God will act in the final days, not having fully given up on the world or the wickedness of humanity. In the next study we will move to the Book of Revelation in which apocalyptic is revealed on a cosmic stage.

Week 2: Introduction to the Book of Revelation

Now we get to the actual book of Revelation. We will consider some technical details such as author, dating and historical context.

- (a) **Author** Like everything about the book of Revelation, authorship is considered somewhat problematic. The author identifies himself as John, described as a servant but literally as a slave (Rev 1:1). The early church, for example Justin Martyr mid-second century, accepted the Apostle John as the author of this book. But some scholars question this authorship maintaining that the Greek is different in style to the gospel and theological themes differ. But equally, many scholars accept the apostle John as making the best sense [since there are no convincing contenders for the role].
- (b) **Date** The book is usually dated in relation to an outbreak of persecution of the early church. Possible dates have included Claudius (A.D. 41 to 54) Nero (A.D. 54-68), Domitian (A.D. 81-96) and Trajan (A.D. 98-117). Most contemporary scholars opt for either Nero or Domitian. Although there are arguments for both sides Osborne concluded that the Domitian date is a slightly better fit.
- (c) **Context** This includes the rise of Emperor worship which was especially strong in Asia Minor, where the letters to the churches were addressed. Temples were built to the Emperor who was declared a living God. The intention of Emperor worship was to bind the province of Asia together under the Pax Romana. This area was known for its pro-Roman zeal especially in terms of the imperial cult. The earliest persecutors of Christians were the Jews but later persecution was by the pagan emperors significant from in the time of Domitian. Certainly, the early church faced hostility from both the Jewish and Roman worlds. The Jews had some privilege in the Roman world as exempt from an obligation to worship the Roman gods and participate in cult. Initially Christianity was considered part of Judaism at least through to the Jewish war (A.D. 66 to 70), however Judaism tried more and more to separate itself from Christianity and to get the empire to recognise that Christianity was not Jewish. While there was little official Roman persecution of Christians, except for relatively brief periods, they felt a great deal of economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life including the trade guilds with their idolatrous feasts and cultic practices as well as the imperial cult.
- (d) **Literary Genre** It is universally accepted that the book of Revelation is composed of three genres: apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter-style. As we have seen in the first study there is no absolute distinction between prophecy and apocalyptic because both focus on salvation for the faithful and judgement for

the wicked. Certain aspects of Revelation are not typically apocalyptic such as the author is not pseudonymous or pretending to be written by a famous person. However there are obvious features of apocalyptic such as revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an otherworldly being to a seer who then presents the visions in the narrative framework, the visions guide reader into a transcendent reality that takes precedent over the current situation, and encourages the faithful to persevere in the midst of their trials. The focus is on the heavenly mysteries as the real world and presenting the present crisis is temporary. All this is righted when God transforms the world for the faithful. Revelation is an obvious apocalyptic form of literature, but there is also an apocalyptic mindset. In this present world of temptation there will be pressure to conform to secular demands and this needs to be endured while the believer realises that God “is the one who is and who was and who is to come” (1: 4b).

- (e) **Symbols** One of the great challenges to understanding the book of Revelation is the interpretation of the symbols. Colourful poetic imagery has led to fanciful interpretations in the past and present. It is necessary to have some sense of balance. While Revelation is a symbolic book it does not mean that the symbols do not depict literal events such as the great tribulation (7:14). Many of the symbols derive from biblical traditions in the use of imagery in myth and poetry. The goal is to seek a “language of equivalents” and to use background knowledge from the first century to unlock the symbols and see what the original readers would have understood when they read them. This is, of course, not easy and countless PhD theses in written on every imaginable symbol in the Bible.
- (f) **Interpretation** Generally people interpret the book in the following ways:
- *Historicist* which includes preachers who see every detail in the OT and NT apocalyptic symbolism as fulfilled in current events (the newspaper approach to prophecy).
 - *Preterist* argues that the details of the book relate to the present situation in which John lived rather than a future period. This approach is not as much fun but certainly more sensible than the first approach.
 - *Idealist* This argues that the symbols do not relate to historical events but timeless spiritual truth such as the battle between God and evil and the church and the world. Such truths, of course, are relevant to any period in history.
 - *Futurist* This approach believes that chapters 4 to 22 refer primarily to events that will take place at the end of history and bring in the eschaton.

- *Eclectic* Some scholars prefer to combine elements of each or some of the above. This might cast some light on capturing how John probably intended his book to be understood.

Prologue (Rev 1:1-8)

Read and discuss. What are your first impressions? What stands out?

Rev 1: 5-8 is a very different picture of Jesus. How is it different from the Jesus of the Gospels? How might this be accounted for?

Additional Comments on Passage

In this passage we see indications of all a more developed theology of the early church emerging from the first century A.D. There is a Trinity of the exalted Father on the throne, “the seven spirits” (1:4) or the Holy Spirit and the glorified Jesus. All belong and all are worthy of worship, hence a trio of divine beings. The humanity of Jesus, obvious in the Gospels, is now past tense as far as the writer of the book of Revelation is concerned.

Notice the four-stage process of revelation: God, Jesus, an angel and finally the apocalyptic revealer of secret knowledge John. This made me somewhat uneasy as it is not dissimilar from what some churches claim today for claims of inerrancy. The first of seven Beatitudes in the book of Revelation occurs in verse 3, “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear”. This probably refers to reading the book in a liturgical setting, for both the reader and the listener are blessed. There is an urgency to respond to the message of the book “for the time is near” (1:3). The Greek phrase can mean soon or suddenly.

The greeting (1: 4-5a) is typical of letters in the NT (cf. 1 Peter 1:2 which also has a Trinitarian emphasis). We notice the glorified Jesus who has redeemed the saints (1:5), “the firstborn of the dead” and is sovereign over all the earth. A magnificent second coming is also portrayed (1:7). There is a glorious metaphor of the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The vivid phrase “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (1:8) Some commentators have drawn parallels with the Hellenistic formula of Zeus as “who was and who is and who will be”, but there are significant differences in this probably has more of a Hebraic perspective recalling “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14-15). Verses 7-8 have a hymn-like quality and possibly reflect a fragment of the early church’s liturgy (cf. Phil 2:5-11).

This prologue introduces many of the themes which we will find are important in the book of Revelation.

Week 3 Letters to the Churches

We begin with a rather severe picture of Jesus (Rev 1: 13-16). This uses imagery which is familiar from the O.T. and the purpose is to display the glorified Christ. John, somewhat appropriately, “I fell at his feet as though dead” (1:17). John was commissioned to convey a message to the churches from “the first and the last, and the living one; I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have keys of Death and Hades” (1:17-18). These are powerful truths on which to base our Christian hope.

I would like to focus on letters to the seven churches (2:1-3:22). They are clearly in a letter format conveying a message to each of the churches addressed. There is a strong prophetic flavour with the risen Christ communicating directly to his followers.

The seven churches are in Asia Minor or modern Turkey. The order in which they are addressed would make sense in terms of a natural route for a messenger to visit the churches with his message from John. In terms of the churches: (a) **Ephesus** was one of the four most powerful cities in the Roman Empire (with Rome, Alexandria, and Syrian Antioch) and had more than ¼ of a million people. Ephesus was best known for its temple to the fertility goddess Artemis (Diana). It was a huge temple four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens (425 feet long and 220 feet wide with 127 pillars 60 feet high). The imperial cult thrived there and a temple to Domitian was built. The Ephesian church was the mother church of the region and the mail route would naturally begin there. (b) **Smyrna** is the only city to continue as a city to the present day. It has the modern name Izmir. It is another harbour city about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was well known for its beauty and civic pride claiming to be the birthplace of Homer. Because of this city's loyalty to Rome it beat out 10 other cities for the privilege of building a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. It had a large Jewish population who virulently opposed Christians at the time. In A.D. 155 the famous bishop of Smyrna Polycarp was martyred for refusing to call Caesar Lord. (c) **Pergamum** about 70 miles north of Smyrna and 15 miles inland was a leading religious centre in Asia. Temples, altars and shrines were dedicated to Zeus (king of the gods). A huge area of the city and temple was dedicated to Asklepios and the healing arts. As a result Pergamum became a medical centre. Along with Athens and Alexandria it was an intellectual centre and it gave its name to writing sheets made from animal skins now known as parchment. It was the first city to be allowed to construct a temple to a living ruler when in A.D. 29 Augustus gave permission for a temple to be erected to him. (d) **Thyatira** was the least important of the seven cities. This was a commercial

town situated on the Lycus river. When peace was brought to the area by the Pax Romana the city was well situated on trade routes to take advantage of the commercial and manufacturing opportunities and it thrived in the second and third centuries. It was known for a large number of trade guilds especially of shoemakers, sellers of dyed cloth and bronze smiths. The primary god worshipped there was Apollo (sun god and son of Zeus). (e) **Sardis** was one of the most glorious cities in Asia, but much of its splendour lay in the past. The Acropolis was at the top of one of the hills with a 1500 foot precipice on three sides and the steep approach from the south side. It was almost an impregnable military stronghold. There was a saying that capturing Sardis was achieving the impossible (though it happened at least twice). It was a military power that was feared by all. The city also attained great wealth through commerce and trade. There was a legend that King Midas left his gold in the springs that ran through the city. The people have a special interest in the fertility cycle with death and immortality. There was a large Jewish community and one of the largest synagogues ever evacuated was built there in the second century A.D. (f) **Philadelphia** was ideally placed on trade and postal routes. It was called “the Gateway to the east”. Its volcanic soil was extremely fertile and ideal for growing grapes. It was vulnerable to earthquakes and after a particularly devastating one in A.D. 17 the Emperor removed the obligation to pay tribute to Rome for five years so they could recover economically and reconstruct the city. This shows how closely tied it was to Rome and the Emperor. The patron deity of the city was appropriately Dionysus god of wine. In the first century A.D. it was known as “Little Athens” due to its many temples and cults. (f) And finally **Laodicea** was 100 miles east of Ephesus on the main road to eastern Asia Minor. It became a centre of banking and decaying an increasingly wealthy city. It was known for its soft raven-black wool. There was a famous School of medicine there. They developed a compound for curing eye diseases “Phyrgian powder”. The city had no water supply and had to pipe in water with an aqueduct from Denizli 6 miles away. This made it vulnerable to attack. The two main gods worshipped there were Men and Zeus. There was a strong Jewish community there.

To do: Each of the letters somewhat follows a format. Breakup into groups with each looking at a letter. Can you identify the centre of the letter any strengths or weaknesses identified by Christ? Is there a solution offered? What are the challenges to be overcome?

Week 4 Theme of Worship

There are scenes set in the throne room of God which intersperse the book. There is precedent for heavenly scenes in some of the prophetic books, see [Isa 6:1-13](#). Revelation is the most important NT book for understanding Christian liturgy. The central message is “Only God and the Lamb, not Caesar, are worthy of worship” (4:11). This is what happens in heaven and this is far more important than anything that happens on earth. In the midst of conflict, the triumph of God and his people is not only guaranteed but already celebrated (Osborne, 48). There is no ultimate harm to even to the martyrs who gave their lives as a witness to Christ.

Rev 4-5. The throne of God is the unifying factor in the chapters. John comes up to heaven and sees. There is a glorious picture of God the Father on the throne (4:2-5). In chapter 4 God is the central focus and in chapter 5 Christ is worshipped. The hymns probably reflect early Christian worship with the singers shifting from the living creatures (4:8), to the elders (4:10-11), to both groups together (5:8-9) to the myriads of angels (5:11-12) to every creature (5:13). It may have been early patterns of worship with prostration and recognising the worthiness of God and the Lamb. Some scholars have tried to draw parallels with the synagogue patterns of worship but in fact this is much closer to Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, and Daniel 7. We might conclude that chapter 4 celebrates the God of creation and chapter 5 the God of redemption (Beasley-Murray).

There is the apocalyptic image of the open door to heaven (4:1). This reverses the idea that heaven is closed because of human sin. Only here in the NT is the throne of God described (4:2-3). John does not actually describe God but the radiance of God. There is a picture of concentric circles with the rainbow immediately around the throne, then the four living creatures and finally the 24 elders. There may be a hierarchical order here. The elders are probably saints, given their white robes and crowns. The number 24 might be significant following the 12 tribes of Judah and the new 12 tribes in the church [originating in the apostles]. Hence the church is the new Israel. The seven spirits of God (1:4) depicts the Holy Spirit. A small but highly significant detail in “before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.” (4:6, cf. 21:1) which portrays the defeat of the sea monsters, the OT gods of chaos.

The four living beings (4:6-8) are drawn from Ezk 1:18 with the wheels of the chariot-throne with the rim of the rim lined with eyes. There is diversity among scholars in their interpretations of the identification of the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle (4:7). The early church fathers saw this as representing the four

Gospels that this is unlikely and other explanations have been offered including the zodiac. Some have seen an Assyrian or Babylonian representations of royalty with winged sphinxes or winged lions. One thing is clear. These four beings combine the cherubim of Ezk 1, 10 with the seraphim of Isa 6. beings who continually sing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (4:8). Other hymns are strategically placed throughout the book and call attention to two things: the majesty and sovereignty of God, and the worship of his people, heavenly as well as earthly. This hymn specifically emphasises God’s holiness, omnipotence and eternal nature. The response to the sight of God is unrestrained worship (4:9-11). There is a dramatic touch with the elders casting their crowns before the throne, singing “worthy art thou...” (4:11). The Westminster Confession says that humanity was created to “glorify God and enjoy him forever”. Perhaps we can take from this scene the fundamental importance of grounding our faith in the appreciation of the majesty of God.

To Do: Read chapter 5 which centres on Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. Consider the place of Jesus, is it any different to God the Father? What is the response of the heavenly figures? Are the hymns any different?

There are other scenes of worship in the book for example the saints in chapter 7, the elders in chapter 11:16-19, the 144,000 saints in chapter 14:1-7, the saints in chapter 15:2-6, and the praise of the multitude in heaven chapter 19:1-8. We look at two of these scenes more closely.

Chapter 14:1-7: This is a picture of the elect who have survived various tests and are now numbered among the 144,000 saints in heaven. This represents a church who has remained true to Christ in the midst of great adversity (cf 7:1-8). There are touches which are hard to understand, for example those saints have “his name and his Father’s name written on the forehead” (14:1). It does not seem to make sense if taken literally, but it is in contrast to the followers of the beast who has his mark stamped on their forehead (13:16-17). Jesus, the Lamb, remains in heaven until he comes in glory (19:11-16).

There is a basis for the somewhat clichéd image of the saints playing harps in heaven (14:2). The sense in the original Greek language is that the musicians accompany the singing. The harp was a 10 or 12 string lyre which was used in temple worship (Psalm 33:2). This is an affirmation of an eternal role for music in the worship of God. It seems likely that musical instruments were part of the worship of the early church. The saints “sing a new song before the throne” (14:3). There is an interesting comment that the 144,000 “have not defiled themselves with

women, for they are chaste” (14:4). The Greek word refers to moral defilement and would entail a serious denigration of marriage. It is unlikely that it refers to a monastic or celibate group. There are other indicators of the holiness of the saints “in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.” (14:5).

Chapter 19:6-8. In this passage we are close to the culmination of the victory of Christ over the powers of evil. This is portrayed in his second: coming on a white warhorse with the armies of heaven, carrying a sharp sword to destroy the nations (19:11-16). This victory emerges from the worship in heaven, “hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (19:1). This hallelujah is worthy of Handel’s Messiah. We might also conclude that there is plenty of singing in heaven. I think it’s also likely that the early church was more liturgical than we might expect, rather than seen as largely spontaneous.

The reason for joy is the coming of the wedding of the Lamb. There is a contrast between “the great prostitute” and “the bride” Christ. This imagery of Israel as the bride of Yahweh and the church as the bride of Christ has a rich background in both the OT and NT. The meaning of betrothal in the ancient world needs to be explained. The marriage contract was developed and signed before the betrothal and there was a period between the betrothal and the actual wedding, but the two were considered husband-and-wife. This is why Joseph, when he found out Mary was pregnant intended to divorce her quietly in Matthew 1:19. They were officially husband-and-wife, so a divorce was needed even though the wedding had not yet taken place. Therefore, both betrothal and the wedding are combined throughout the scriptural portrayal of the people of God and his bride. Compare the clothes of the bride (19:8) with the garments of the great prostitute (17:4) and also how Babylon the great city is dressed (18:16).

Worship in the Book of Revelation is not entertainment, it is something powerful. This is where eternal reality is manifest. What is lasting first happens in heaven, with a knock-on effect to the earthly realm. This gives a new meaning to our sense of worship because we can join in this eternal ‘making real in the spiritual realm’. We celebrate God, yes, and that is a worthwhile activity, but our worship is also a realisation of everything yet to come.

Week 5 The Unholy ‘Trinity’ of false Prophet, Beast and Anti-Christ

Revelation may seem like a hall of mirrors, but there are organizing patterns? This book, for example, has many dichotomies of true and false, sacred and profane, genuine and pretense.

Discuss: Do you think God knows the future?

The heavenly scenes rejoice in the presence and activity of the Holy Trinity: the Father as the ‘ancient of days’, Jesus as the sacrificial lamb and the Holy Spirit as the seven spirits. But there is a shadow in the unholy trinity (16:13-14) which we will now explore.

The Dragon or Satan is never portrayed as all-powerful. Michael the Archangel defeated Satan and his army of fallen angels, so there was no longer any place for them in heaven. John observed, “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” (12:9) There is a sense of desperation in the struggle of Satan for “he knows that his time is short!” (12:12). Apparently, his goal is to create as much chaos in the time that he has left. The counter-point to Satan is God the Father. [note the developed trinitarian thought in this late first century text].

Reflect: Do you think evil is personal? Is there a Satan and demonic forces or is this just myth to you?

There is a scriptural theme that God gives power to Satan. It is assigned and limited and for a time but how does it sit with us today? Discuss the limits of evil.

The Antichrist is the beast who comes out of the sea (13:1, cf. Daniel 7:17 “these four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth”, but 2 Esdras 13:3 “Something like the figure of a man up out of the heart of the sea. And I looked and behold, that man flew with the clouds of heaven”. But in this case, it is a messianic figure, but notice the overlap of apocalyptic imagery). The beast’s power, throne and authority was given by the Dragon or Satan (13:2). He seems to have been wounded but this was healed causing “the whole earth followed the beast with wonder” (13:3). This imitates the death and resurrection of Jesus, but is clearly an Anti-Christ. The people worship the beast saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). The beast seems to be a military leader who was “allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given to this being over every tribe and people and tongue and nation.” (13:7)

The only NT use of the word Antichrist is in the Johannine Epistles 1 John 2:18 “you have heard that the Antichrist is coming”. So, we know from this verse that any early church did have a widespread belief in an apocalyptic figure coming at the end of time. Also, false teachers were equated with forthcoming of the Antichrist (1 John 4:3), since heresy is a precursor of that final deception. Another possible mention of the Antichrist is as “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess 2:1-12). This has some possible historic resident in the emperor Caligula had threatened to set up a statue of himself in the Jerusalem Temple because the Jews were not accepting his divine status. Caligula was assassinated in A.D. 41 about 10 years before the letter to the Thessalonians. It is interesting to compare these NT references to intertestamental Judaism which had some anti-Messiah figures, for example in the Sibylline Oracles 3, 63-74 describes the coming of Beliar to perform seductive miracles and lead astray even some among the faithful. The Apocalypse of Elijah 3: 5-13 “son of lawlessness” will cause the sun to fall and the moon to turn to blood. He will perform any counterfeit miracles and set itself up as a false Messiah. Thus, the anti-Christ theme developed late in the intertestamental period but do not have a full-fledged emphasis until the Christian era.

The false prophet is introduced in Revelation 13:11-15 (cf. 19:20, 20:10 “false prophet”). Whereas the beast was a military leader, the false prophet has a more religious function, deceiving the world into worshipping the Antichrist. As the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), so the false prophet glorifies the Antichrist (13:12) and receives his authority from this figure. The imperial cult was promoted by “the Commune of Asia”, whose president was called the Asiarch, citizens were required to participate in the cult. Of all the emperors Domitian especially encouraged this, calling himself “*Dominus et Deus noster*” (our Lord and God). In Ephesus, for example, there were temples to Julius Caesar, Augustus, Domitian, and later Hadrian. There were imperial statues in these buildings, portico’s, fountains, the city gates and in the streets. Many were sacred places where there were objects of veneration. Incense, wine, and bulls were sacrificed, for instance to seal a marriage. Imperial statues served as places of refuge for slaves fleeing from their masters and slaves were given their freedom in front of such statues. The major temple in Ephesus, which was dedicated to Domitian, had his statue 22-23 feet high.

The great signs mimic the work of Christ (Rev 13:13-14) and counterfeit miracles that deceive were part of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition and in the NT. The “image of the beast” (13:15) recalls Daniel (3:1-6) where King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold to which his subjects were to “fall down and worship the

golden image” and the three wise men were thrown into the furnace of fire. The image of the beast is said to “even speak” (13:15). While the priests at the time were not above using pulleys and trickery with ventriloquism to make their images appear alive, most intelligent people of the ancient world readily distinguished between the image and the pagan god. But among the uneducated there was popular belief that the gods actually inhabited the images and there were magical rituals for animating the idols and getting them to speak in order to secure oracles. A group of magicians called theurgists placed magical materials (usually stones, herbs or scents to appeal to the gods) into the cavity of the statue in order to induce it to talk. Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24) was later said to have given life to statues. We can conclude that the Roman world was enamoured with the magicians and such miracles but according to Revelation the Antichrist will exceed such deeds. He himself will be raised from the dead and his “Minister of Propaganda” will cause the statue to come to life and speak. The writer of Revelation anticipates the execution of anyone who refused to worship the statue. While there is no evidence that the death penalty had been imposed during Domitian’s reign, public pressure was growing and would provide a natural backdrop this prophecy.

The mark of the beast is placed on all “both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead.” (13:16). The mark is a seal indicating ownership. Some commentators have seen this as a parody of baptism, the seal of Christians, but this is doubtful. What is more likely is the reference in Deuteronomy 6:8 when God told the Jews to place the Shema on their hands and foreheads, the basis of the phylacteries (leather pouches containing Scripture passages) worn by Orthodox Jews to this day. In Roman practice, taxes or brands were placed on slaves to indicate ownership as well as soldiers who were members of certain cults who devoted themselves to a particular God. The rule that no one can buy or sell shows economic pressure to conform to the will of the beast has its precedent elsewhere in the Apocalypse based on both Jewish and Gentile persecution. There is no evidence that the Roman government used economic sanctions against Christians but it’s possible local guilds, which controlled the life of the city, placed enormous pressure on Christians to conform to pagan mores.

There is mention of a number of the beast “for it is a human number, its number is 666.” (13:18). The ancient practice called “gamatria” was based on the fact that letters of the alphabet were also used as numbers and counting. The first nine letters with the numbers 1 to 9, the next nine signified the tens to the 90s, and so on. Therefore, every Hebrew name or word had numerical equivalent, and ancient

rabbis would make interesting connections between words or phrases with the same numerical value. An interesting example from the graffiti of Pompeii is the inscription, “I love her whose name is 545.” The number of the beast is drawn and the speculation over the centuries and John’s own observation that this demands wisdom has been largely ignored. Scholars have suggested that the Hebrew for “Nero Caesar” with its letters adds up to 666 but this requires some adjusting in the spelling of the words. This becomes a possibility and indicates that John expected a Nero-like figure in the person of the Antichrist. It is also possible the writer used 666 as a threefold counterpart (similar to “holy holy holy”, Rev 4:8). It is fair to say with Osborne that only the first century readers might have understood, but it’s hard to say how much they knew.

Question: how do you respond to the notion of predictive prophecy which have engaged so many in the church over the centuries? Discuss in groups of 3-4.

Week 6 'Here comes the Judge'

One of the more alarming things about the book of Revelation is the succession of God's judgements on humankind. In chapter 6 we see the famous horses of the Apocalypse beginning the white horse in which the rider went out to conquer (6:2), followed by a red horse whose rider took peace from the earth (6:4), then a black horse with a rider holding scales (6:5-6) and finally the pale horse whose rider's name was Death and Hades (6:8). In chapter 8 Christ opened the seventh seal (cf. Bergman's 1957 film) Which was followed by silence in heaven for about half an hour (8:1). What judgements can you find in chapters 8 to 9? Note that the bearers of judgement are angels acting in un-angelic way. Compare to the seven bowls of wrath in chapter 16. How do you respond emotionally to what you see written here?

In chapter 20 the 'bad guys' are punished (20:1-10). This includes Satan or the Dragon being thrown into the lake of fire "with the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10).

Any belief in a final judgement is not exactly trendy in our day. I think this is curious because we have no trouble supporting courts of law, and say taking away a person's licence to drive for drink-driving. We readily see the risk to ourselves and our children and loved ones from intoxicated drivers. We would probably agree that this is an important means of control in a society in which people depend upon each other. And, curiously, many people's graciousness runs out when it comes to retribution for child sex offenders. Do we see a role for God to act to restore cosmic order and distribute justice? Now let us look closely at the final scene of judgement.

The Great White Throne Judgement (Rev 20:11-15)

The judgement begins with the righteous recalling 1 Peter 4:17, "It is time for judgement to begin with the family of God". We will soon see the new heavens and the new earth, but this begins with the passing of the old heavens and the old earth.

Read: (Rev 20:11-15) discuss your emotional reaction to this vivid image.

The Great White Throne is a final accountability at the end of history. The image of the throne and heavenly court is familiar in the book of Revelation (4:2), but then it was the majesty of God on his throne that now it is the judge on his throne. This is identified as Christ (5:6). In various places in the NT Christ is the final judge (John 5:22, 30, Matthew 7:22-23, 25:31-46). This is the only throne in the

book which is described in further adjectives including great and white. The word ‘Megan’ is used to describe something large or loud such as “loud voice” or “great tribulation” so it refers to both the immensity and the majesty of the throne itself. It is white to sum up the theme of purity and holiness associated with that throughout the book, Christ has white hair (1:14), sits on the white cloud (and returns on a white horse, 19:11).

Before the new age can begin the old must cease (Isaiah 51:6, Romans 8:18-22). Even creation must flee from his presence. The idea is similar to Revelation 16:20 but the idea is total destruction. The statement “no place was found for them” is nearly identical with 12:8 relating to Satan and the fallen angels. Indeed, it prefigures 21:1 “because the first heaven and the first earth passed away”.

The judgement of the righteous (20:12), compare Daniel 12:1-2. I find it quite poignant that all stand before the throne, both “great and small”. We are all equal in death and judgement. The books were open, a vivid image of our final accountability. This has a tradition in the old Testament (Isaiah 4:3, Malachi 3:16 and in later Jewish literature 1 Enoch 90. 20, 2 Esdras 6:20). This is a major theme of teaching through the Scripture in Jewish writings. It recalls a basic judicial principle *lex talionis* (the law of retribution) of the old Testament, the Roman world and is present in the Book of Revelation: what we do to others, God will do to us. For believers the theme is simple: We are saved by grace but will be judged by works (Matthew 16:27, Romans 14:12, 1 Peter 1:17). The logic is inescapable that we will have to face what we’ve done, the good and the bad. Frightening? The good news is that the book of life is open, as Daniel 12:1-2 the righteous will be delivered to everlasting life. As in the ancient world, it is built on the role of citizens in city or nation, thus those written in it are citizens of heaven and God’s favoured people.

The sea, Death and Hades give up their dead (20:13). They to face a final judgement after their resurrection. This has led to considerable speculation in the church. Are the unrighteous judged for both the good and bad deeds, as implied for the saints, and are thus rewarded as implied by Dante’s trilogy or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. However, the imagery in this passage is somewhat absolute. The evil trinity and fallen angels, personified as Death and Hades are thrown in the lake of fire, followed by all whose name was not found in the book of life (20:14-15). This text of the book of life has been the subject of constant debate over the centuries with the question of predestination and free will. Did God foreordain those whose names were not written in the book of life or is it a conscious choice to reject God’s call? I will not pretend to have an answer to this question but

simply to note that is no longer fashionable think in such terms. To do justice to the biblical picture the sovereignty of God as absolute and final.

There is also a possibility, in this bleak scene, that death has finally ended. Paul taught 1 Corinthians 15:26 “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” and ultimately this must mean physical death. The lake of fire is also known as the “second death” (20:14). There is, I think, reassuring note that in the new heavens and the new earth “there will be no more death” (21:4).

Whereas the literal vision is quite terrifying, other possibilities have been suggested:

- (a) Death and Hades are symbols for demonic forces and so the demonic realm is rendered powerless.
- (b) This could symbolise physical death which is now swallowed up and superseded at the end of time. What ceases is earthly existence including our mortality.

One thing is certain, this vivid picture shows the final end of evil and the triumph of God.

The question which we cannot answer with any certainty is how metaphorical this passage is (or other passages in the Book of Revelation). When we look at the fallen world there is no question about human choice leading to injustice, war, and at times unrestrained evil. All we have to do is open the newspaper or listen to the nightly news. I think the fundamental issue is whether we are accountable. This passage argues for universal accountability, which in my sense of fairness is the only possible just outcome. We can also see that there is a limited accountability in this life: some who neglect their health will have physical consequences. Not all, but some. Are we on the brink of eternity? This is the greatest stage on which we live our lives, then surely accountability is ‘writ large’. Of course, this is a matter of faith or belief, but it must be a good thing if it helps us live more genuine and compassionate lives. Of this I am certain.

Week 7 New Heavens and New Earth

Hope has been some time coming but now it has arrived:

John the apocalyptic seer said, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.” (Rev 21:1).

Notice the progression of the sea which in earlier chapters had become like glass, but was now banished and the sea has no place in the new creation. There is no chaos; all creation submits to God’s order.

The hope for a new heaven and a new earth was well-established in the OT (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). In the NT this would come through a fiery destruction of the old heaven and earth (2 Peter 3:13). There is an inherent logic: the bondage to decay was due to sin (Romans 8:21), and so like an old car, one that no longer works properly, it has to be replaced by the new model.

The new Jerusalem comes down from heaven (21:2) and is prepared as a bride for God’s people. The old Jerusalem had profaned itself by crucifying Jesus (11:7) and opposing the two witnesses (11:2). In 11:8 Jerusalem is linked with Babylon and Rome and called the “great city”. It became apostate due to unbelief, but now the Holy City is redeemed to be once more the New Jerusalem. The heavenly Jerusalem is mentioned in the NT (Hebrews 12:22). The descent of the new Jerusalem from heaven is a prophetic fulfilment with a rich history.

Indeed, there is no heaven and no earth, everything is united by the presence of God. I remember the comfort of these words brought to me when I read them at my father’s funeral:

“Behold, the dwelling of God is with humanity. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things are passed away.” (21: 3-4).

Discuss: What is the nature of your hope in the face of death? This question is always personal. And in the pandemic very relevant.

All visions in the Book of Revelation point to this wonderful promise of a new spiritual reality.

The seven angels who had previously brought plagues now bring a vision of the new Jerusalem (21: 9-21). This passage is rich in symbolism. I will look at just the

precious stones. There were precious stones on the breastplate of the high priest in Exodus 28, 39. Compare the list of stones. Are any the same? (I think beryl, topaz, sapphire, emerald, jacinth, amethyst, chrysolite, and jasper). One commentator also listed the stones of the zodiac and there is some similarity.

This glorious vision conveying profound hope for a new spiritual order is culminated by a note of absence, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temples Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb (21: 22-23). In the OT and Jewish writings the new temple is the focus (see: Ezek. 40-48). There is a link to the Shekinah presence of the Lord in the OT (1 Kings 8:10-11). But now there is no need for closed gates or barriers of any kind(cf. Isaiah 60:11). The gates are open, the nations can freely enter (21:26).

While the judgements of the Book of Revelation are terrible and far-reaching, radical hope transforms everything. God is with his people. It is a book of many fulfilments: the new Jerusalem, river, the tree of life with 12 kinds of fruit [one for each month] and leaves for the healing of the nations (22: 1-2). This of course calls the garden of Eden [literally garden of delight]. Here Adam and Eve were to enjoy the abundance and to work in tilling the land. Work can be seen as communion with God and an act of worship. In Genesis the river flowed out of Eden but here it flows from the throne.

The backdrop for this chapter 21 is Ezk 47, look at this and discuss. The first couple were banished from Eden and could no longer able to eat of the tree of life, possessing eternal life. The promise in Rev. 2:7 is that the over-comers will have the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. Here that promise is fulfilled. Finally, the believer will be able to see the face of God. This too was denied to Moses (Exodus 33:20). In this time of eschatological fulfilment the believer will not only live forever but will see the face of God. The believer is restored to a privileged place alongside God, “and night shall be no more; they need no light of lamb or sun, for the Lord God will be there light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.” (22:5)

John again is overwhelmed and falls at the feet of the angel who tells him, “Worship God.”

Discuss: What are the responsibilities of the believer in chapter 22: 7-19?

Note that there are seven sayings of Christ: 12, 13, 14 -15, 16a, 16b, 17, 18 -19 which emphasise right living. Three times in this chapter Christ says, “I am

coming soon.” (22:7, 12, 20). This is a fitting climax to the book. The picture of events that will introduce the return of Christ and the eschaton rightly conclude with this wonderful promise highlighted by “indeed”.

The Book of Revelation [and the Bible] ends with an assurance and a believing response, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I’m coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” Notice that the Amen is in liturgical style, the divine promises followed by the people’s affirmation. The “come, Lord Jesus” might be a fragment of a Eucharistic liturgy [maranatha, which is Aramaic and found in the Didache 10:6, also 1 Corinthians 16:22]. This wonderful promise is at the centre of early Christian hope. Is it relevant today? That is for you to decide.

This complex epilogue serves as a fitting conclusion to the book for it sums up the key emphases: the sovereignty of God, the return of Christ, and the necessity of both conversion for unbelievers and perseverance on the part of believers. The reader must choose for him or herself either God or evil (22:11) for the end is soon to appear. The time for decision is now. But for all, we can find this only in “the grace of our Lord Jesus” (22:21). Without this grace both belief and strength to persevere are impossible goals (Osborne, 2002, page 799).

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