

Return of the King

(A guide to reading and teaching the book of Revelation)

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1. Introduction

The book of Revelation comes at the end of the Bible. It's a fantastic book and should make for exciting, challenging and encouraging reading. Sadly at times, the book has become a source of controversy as people have raided it for secret coded messages and novel ideas. As a result many Christians and churches have tended to stay clear of it. That's a shame as those who read the book are promised a blessing!

In this little e-book we have a look at how to read and teach Revelation in a way that does it justice enable it to serve it's purpose of revealing God's will to us so that we can respond in love, worship and service.

The premise of this book is that Revelation gives Heaven's perspective on the whole of Salvation History from the perspective of the end when Christ The King Returns. It does this to enable believers to live faithfully in their present circumstances.

2. Reading Revelation

What is the book of Revelation?

It is self-identified as “prophecy”¹ in other words, it reveals what God has to say to his people. We may also expect it to include predictions about the future as well as a verdict on what God’s people are doing at a specific time.

The genre is usually described as “apocalyptic literature.”² This is a particular genre, a strand of prophetic literature often associated with the inter-testament period (2nd Temple Judaism). Much of this type of literature, especially the extra-biblical material is usually regarded as pseudepigrapha (written under a pseudonym).³ Though as we will see later on Revelation differs in this regard.⁴

Fee says:

“We begin then with the Revelation as an apocalypse, a word used to describe a kind of literature that flourished among Jews and then Christians for roughly the 400-year period between 20BCE and 200 CE, although its roots lie much earlier. The taproot of apocalyptic was deeply embedded in the Old Testament Prophets, which means that whatever else, these writers including John were concerned about judgement and salvation.”⁵

Apocalyptic literature employs vivid symbolic imagery usually associated with dreams and visions.⁶ It expresses concern about rising evil and suffering that overwhelms God’s people⁷ It focus on a faithful or “righteous” remnant of God’s people who will remain faithful through trials and testing⁸ It often takes place in the absence recognised Biblical prophecy (so as we’ve mentioned it was at its peak during the inter-testament period.⁹ It gives the sense that the future will break into and influence the present.¹⁰

One OT book that stands out and is seen as the precursor of Revelation is the book of Daniel.¹¹ I guess we could regard the two books as siblings and it may well be worth reading both books together to get a sense of how they relate.

¹ Revelation 1:3.

² Robert T Mounce, *The book of Revelation* (NICNT. Revised 1997. Grand Rapids MI.: Eerdmans, 1977), 1.

³ Mounce, *Revelation*, 5

⁴ I also believe that the book of Daniel which is part of the same genre was written by the historical Daniel who lived in Babylon and served Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. I will probably pick up on this in a later article.

⁵ Gordon Fee, *Revelation, A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books. Kindle Edition), Location 217.

⁶ Mounce, *Revelation*, 4-5.

⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 2-3.

⁸ Mounce, *Revelation*, 2-3.

⁹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 2-3.

¹⁰ Mounce, *Revelation*, 2-3.

¹¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 5.

So Revelation is a prophetic book employing a particular literary style but it is also written as a letter to real people who were part of churches in what is now modern day Turkey.¹² Fee comments

“What one must understand before reading John’s Revelation is that he has purposely set out to write something that has not been done before, something that he sets up his readers to understand at the very beginning. Thus in 1:1 he identifies what he is about to write as an *apocalypse*, translated ‘revelation’ in the NIV, which in 1:3 he refers to as a *prophecy*. But in the next two verses he begins again with all the formal aspects of an ancient letter. So the reader is given these three different pieces of information at the outset.” What is unique about John’s Apocalypse is the fine blending of each of these three kinds of literature – apocalypse, prophecy, letter- into a single whole piece.”¹³

The Author

He introduces himself as “John.” Who was this John? Possibilities suggested include

- John the Apostle
- A separate “John the Elder” who lived and served in Ephesus

There is good external evidence for assuming it is John the Apostle author of the Gospel as this was the assumption of many in the early church.¹⁴

Arguments against John being the apostle include differences in vocabulary, grammar and syntax style, though explanations for this may include the difference of genre, different scribes and editing processes, John’s age and situation when writing.¹⁵

I believe that the author was the apostle John. The same disciple who was an eye witness to Jesus’s life, death and resurrection receives a vision from this same Jesus later on in life.

Date

Option 1 -late option about 95AD -consensus view¹⁶

Option 2 – early -pre AD 70 during reign of Nero.¹⁷

We’ll probably go into this in more detail later. The key thing at this stage is that both contexts would fit a situation of great turmoil and persecution. Both options would fit with John being the Apostle. John was a young man when Jesus was on earth so these options would allow for him to be somewhere between middle age and a ripe old age.

¹² Revelation 1:4.

¹³ Gordon Fee, *Revelation, A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books. Kindle Edition), Location 217.

¹⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 11.

¹⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, 12-13.

¹⁶ Mounce, *Revelation*, 15.

¹⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 15.

3. Dating Revelation

There are two main options -an early date pre AD70 under Emperor Nero or a later date around about AD90- AD95 under Emperor Domitian.

JAT Robinson favours an early date -his book "Redating the New Testament" he strongly argues that the whole of the New Testament must be understood as written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

He notes that there is strong external evidence for a later date based on the early traditions of the church.

"For what it is worth, however, the credit of this witness is good. Irenaeus, himself a native of Asia Minor, who claims to have known Polycarp who knew John, writes in c. 180+ with regards to the name of the beast in Rev 13.18;¹⁸

Irenaeus says:

'If it had been necessary that his name should be publicly proclaimed at the present season, it would have ben uttered by him who saw the Apocalypse. For it was seen no such long time ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian.'¹⁹

This is twice quoted by Eusebius, who supplies us with the original Greek. "²⁰

Robinson isn't convinced however, that Irenaeus was right

"It would be easier to believe that the Apocalypse was written by an unknown John than that both books belong alike to John's extreme old age...it is difficult to credit that a work as vigorous as the Apocalypse could really be the product of a nonagenarian, as John the son of Zebedee must by then have been, even if he was as much as ten years younger than Jesus."²¹

There's also evidence that John was banished much earlier.

"For what it is worth, both the title to the Syriac version of Revelation and *The History of John, the Son of Zebedee* in Syriac say that it was Nero who banished John."²²

The mainstream 19th Century view was that Revelation was written early²³

"Hort, together with Lightfoot and Westcott, none of whom can be accused of sitting light to ancient tradition, still rejected a Domitianic date in favour of one between the death of Nero in AD68 and the fall of Jerusalem in 70."²⁴

However:

¹⁸ JAT Robinson, *Redating the New Testament.*, 221.

¹⁹ Cited in JAT Robinson, *Redating the New Testament.*, 221.

²⁰ JAT Robinson, *Redating the New Testament.*, 221.

²¹ Robinson, *Redating*, 222.

²² Robinson, *Redating*, 224.

²³ Robinson, *Redating*, 224.

²⁴ Robinson, *Redating*, 224.

“Since then the pendulum has swung completely the other way.”²⁵

Some good reasons for supporting an early date include games contemporary to Nero’s life that played with numerical values for his name. For example, one little rhyme went:

“Count the numerical values
Of the letters in Nero’s name
And in ‘murdered his own mother’
You will find that their sum is the same.”²⁶

It is possible that “666” is a variant on this game. He also sees internal evidence to suggest that Jerusalem hasn’t fallen yet.

“If Jerusalem had actually been destroyed, it is surely incredible that the worst judgement upon it should be that in a violent earthquake (and not by enemy action) ‘a tenth of the city fell’ (11:13). Rather we should expect as Moule has said, a description of the doom of the city ‘where the Lord was crucified’ parallel to that other great city also with its allegorical name of evil (cf 11.8 with 18.10) where ‘the blood of the prophets and God’s people was found (18:24). If in the case of Jerusalem ‘the smoke of her conflagration’ (18.9, 18), so vividly described by Jospheus had already been seen, it is astonishing that it receives no mention.”²⁷

One objection to an early date is that it does not allow Laodicea time to recover from a massive 60-61AD earthquake and be “wealthy”

“But the city took pride in having rebuilt itself without waiting for help from imperial funds, and by the end of the decade may well have boasted, ‘How well I have done! I have everything I want in the world.’ (Rev 3.17). Ironically Moffart holds that I is irrelevant to connect this with the reconstruction after the earthquake because by the 90s the incident is too far back.”²⁸

Carson, Moo and Morris note the following arguments

For a late date

“A date for Revelation in the reign of Domitian, and probably towards the end of that reign (say 95-96), receives the most support from the early fathers. Irenaeus, who is a key source for this tradition, was in the position, to have direct information about the matter. Most scholars have been inclined to follow Irenaeus in his dating of Revelation at the close of the reign of Domitian.”²⁹

For an early date

²⁵ Robinson, *Redating*, 225.

²⁶ Cited in Robinson, *Redating*, 235.

²⁷ Robinson, *Redating*, 240.

²⁸ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 230.

²⁹ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 473.

“Advocates of the Domitianic date have generally appealed to the early Christian tradition that pictured the years 95-96 as a period of intense persecution. Advocates of the earlier date, for their part point out that the evidence for the persecution is quite slim. The clearest evidence comes from later writers (Orosius, Eusebius, Sulpicius, Severus), while those more contemporary to Domitian’s time say nothing about a systematic persecution of Christians. In contrast, evidence for a persecution of Christians under Nero is clear and irrefutable. We have no evidence that Nero’s persecution extended beyond Rome, but if we are looking for a period when Christians in Asia Minor were likely to be persecuted, a time when Christians were being persecuted elsewhere is more likely than a time when we are not sure that they were being persecuted at all.”³⁰

Another major argument for a later date is that Emperor worship looks to have become a significant issue in Domitian’s time and appears to be an issue in Revelation -eg.13:4, 15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2³¹ The condition of the churches at the time needs to be taken into account. That there had been decline and stagnation may suggest a long period from the start. However, Paul’s letters show that decline and stagnation could be very rapid.³² They also note the question about Laodicea needing time to recover from the earthquake in AD60-61³³

On the Nero myth, they comment.

“Popular hatred and fear of Nero led to stories circulating after his death to the effect that he would return to Rome leading a Parthian army. Passages in Revelation that speak of the beast recovering from a mortal wound (13: 3-4) it is argued, allude to a Nero-redivivus myth, and it must have taken time for the myth to circulate and become known. However, the Nero myth is not really very close to what is actually said of the beast in the Revelation, so the argument carries little weight.”³⁴

Overall they favour later date³⁵

Conclusion

There are strong arguments for both dates. Whilst generally speaking I find Robinson’s willingness to defend the earliest dating of the NT persuasive and helpful, I do think we need to give some weight to the external evidence here. Dating Revelation to AD90 still puts it within the sphere of eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Even with a later date, there is the strong sense that John and the church are still living in the shadow of Nero with myths and rumors circulating about him and his enduring power.

³⁰ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 474.

³¹ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 474-5.

³² Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 475.

³³ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 475.

³⁴ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 475.

³⁵ Carson, Moo, Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 476.

4. Interpreting Revelation

Revelation has proved one of the most controversial books in the New Testament. One reason for this is that different people have taken different approaches to interpreting it

Different Approaches

Kistemaker helpfully lists the following different approaches.

Preterist

“that which has gone past”³⁶ to do with the time it was written -focusing on the events when John wrote.

Preterists often see Jesus’s words in Mark 13 as all being fulfilled in AD 70. Revelation is all about the persecution the Church faced in either the 60s or 70s³⁷

Problems

“Preterists either neglect or ignore the predictive element, for their focus is entirely on historical events of the first century.”³⁸

“Although, the preterists say that the message of Revelation can be applied to any age or generation, they fail to appreciate the progress in this book. The Apocalypse depicts progress in the predictive events that eventually culminate in the coming of the Judge with the attendant judgement on all people.”³⁹

Historicist

Sees Revelation as continuous chronological prophecy of history from John’s day until the end.⁴⁰

Often includes attempts to identify where we are in that chain -e.g. Calvin and reformers identified Pope as the antichrist.⁴¹

Tendency is to place your own time as at the end.

Problems

Kistemaker says “The text of the Apocalypse does not lend itself to a continuous historical presentation; history and apocalyptic literature are ill suited.”⁴²

Also means “the early church and successive generations would have been unable to benefit from a message that did not apply to them.”⁴³

Futurist

-after 4:1 belongs to the far future -end times

³⁶ Simon J Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 38.

³⁷ See Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 38-39

³⁸ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 39.

³⁹ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 39.

⁴⁰ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 40.

⁴¹ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 40.

⁴² Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 41.

⁴³ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 41.

“Indeed, the writer of the Apocalypse points throughout this book to the day of Christ’s return.”⁴⁴

Again “makes all but the first three chapters of Revelation irrelevant to the contemporary church.”⁴⁵
But “The book is filled with words of comfort for God’s people in every place and in all times.”⁴⁶

Idealist

Principles that can be applied to all times and reflect God’s control over all history⁴⁷

“Objections to the idealist school concern the lack of emphasis on history and prophecy. These are legitimate concerns, for every careful exegete must see to it that no part of the Apocalypse is neglected. Indeed, God’s curse is resting on all those who omit parts of his revelation (Rev. 22:19). The idealist, however, acknowledges that many parts of the Apocalypse lend themselves to historical settings but these may be applied to many epochs in the history of the Christian church. John was able to assign a number of visions to his own day, but likewise believers who have suffered or are suffering persecution even today have been able to see their situation mirrored in Revelation.”⁴⁸

Millennialism

This is another interpretation/hermeneutical factor --how will the events of Christ’s return unfold

Pre-millennialism⁴⁹

Jesus’ return on the clouds will inaugurate a 1000 year literal reign on earth before a last rebellion and the final judgement.

Variants include dispensationalism and emphasis on a secret rapture of the church prior to the tribulation and the coming of the anti-Christ.

It requires a futurist reading and makes much of Revelation irrelevant to the whole age of the church becoming a book of secret coded clues for those who live during the reign of the anti-Christ

Post Millennialism

That Christ will return at the end of a “1000” year reign of the Church that will see increased response to the Gospel and even the setting up of a Christian state as the whole world seeks to follow God’s law.

The 1000 year reign may not be literal

A-Millennialism⁵⁰

This view sees the 1000 years as figurative and fits with an idealist approach. The Millennial reign is one perspective on history between Christ’s first and second coming as we see the Gospel advance. Alongside this is Tribulation as there is ongoing persecution and resistance.

⁴⁴ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 41.

⁴⁵ Johnson, cited in Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 41.

⁴⁶ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 42.

⁴⁷ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 42-43.

⁴⁸ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 43.

⁴⁹ See Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 44.

⁵⁰ See Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 45-47.

Comments

Pre-millennialism - especially the dispensational form tends to over-divide history -so that each dispensation involves a different way of responding to God. Those who live post the rapture relate differently to the Gospel of Grace. There is often an over distinction between a covenant of Law pre-Christ and Grace during the Church era.

It seems to lock Revelation off from applicability to the church today and turns it into a secret code book to be plundered for esoteric meaning.

Post-millennialism seems over presumptive to me about the Church's power and risks an over-realised eschatology.

However, I think the big problem here is that we end up with a distorted hermeneutic where our whole reading of Revelation and other parts of Scripture that touch on the end (e.g. Peter's letters, Daniel, Mark) on the basis of a disputed interpretation of on two verses

The key bit is Revelation 20:4-5

"⁴ Then I saw thrones, and the people sitting on them had been given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony about Jesus and for proclaiming the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his statue, nor accepted his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They all came to life again, and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ This is the first resurrection. (The rest of the dead did not come back to life until the thousand years had ended.)"⁵¹

The issue is that the word translated as lived, lived again or came to life is found in both v 4 to describe the martyrs who reign with Christ through the Millennium and the rest of the dead who stay dead until the end.

You can't really have two different meanings that close together. So does this mean that verse 4 must describe a physical resurrection as must verse 5?⁵²

Kistemaker -does not see an issue here.

It's the souls that live in verse 4 and this points to a heavenly reign with Christ - suggesting a conscious existence after death and prior to Christ's second coming. This is the first Resurrection⁵³

The point in verse 5 is that the other dead (those outside of Christ do not live again) -they stay dead throughout the 1000 year reign -and are only raised to judgement. ⁵⁴

Conclusion

My preference for the above reasons is for an a-millennial approach to the 1000 years' question. Generally speaking I find the "Idealist" approach to interpretation the most helpful. However, this approach should not ignore the strong prophetic flavour of Revelation as it shows the progression of history towards the final day when Christ returns.

⁵¹ NLT

⁵² Mounce, *Revelation*, 366-367.

⁵³ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 47-48 and 539-40.

⁵⁴ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 540.

I think that Revelation can best be described as follows. It takes us to God's throne room in order that we might see the whole sweep of history from the perspective of the last day. It does that so that we may make sense of what it means to live as God's people now in our present context in the light of future hope.

5. Revelation Structure

The Book of Revelations contains a series of messages and visions. It can be broken down as follows.

Prologue – A vision of the risen Jesus (ch 1)

Seven Churches -a series of letters to the churches of Asia Minor (ch 2 -3)

Seven seals – The lamb is the only one worthy to open the scroll and read it (ch 4:1 -8:5)

Seven Trumpets – Warning sounds that announce judgement and terror (Ch 8:6-14:20)

Seven bowls -God's wrath is poured out (ch 15-16)

A tale of two cities – the fall of Babylon and the rise of the New Jerusalem. New Creation -a New heavens and a new earth (ch 17:1-22:6)

Epilogue – Jesus is coming (ch 22:7-21).

6. Revelation Overview

Prologue – A vision of the risen Jesus (ch 1)

Revelation 1 The Lord of the church

Prologue and Greeting to the churches

From “John” -see introductory notes on authorship -he is a partner in suffering – not removed from it. An exile. Strong NT theme -exiles, strangers in this world (literal and many cases) but citizens of Heaven.

Greetings from

“the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit^[d] before his throne; ⁵ and from Jesus Christ.”⁵⁵

A Trinitarian formula – Father, Son and Holy Spirit

“Is, was...still to come” – echoes of the covenant name “Yahweh” “I am who I am”

Also contrast with the Beast - one of the “Kings” or Emperors who was but is no longer (Rev 17⁵⁶) - the identification of the true God is contrasted in Revelation with pretenders to His throne.

The Holy Spirit – sevenfold . 7 a number representing completeness. The 7 churches are real churches but also a representative of the wholeness too. The Spirit is the spirit of the church.

Jesus Christ

Jesus is “Alpha and Omega” -first/beginning and last/end – picked up again in Revelation 22:12. Reflects eternal nature. Jesus is God The Son – the one who was there at the beginning when Creation was made -and the End -the final judge. The goal of Creation is his glory (Ephesians 1:10). Everything was made through him and for him.

Links to John’s Gospel “In the beginning was the Word” – focus on the fullness of God’s revelation (Alpha and Omega as first and last letters of the alphabet)

These things point to Christ’s divine nature -shared with the Father.

Echoes from Daniel

Look he comes with the clouds

Someone like the Son of Man – remember the title Jesus takes on himself

Hair white as wool and snow

-The imagery signposts us -we are in prophecy – God’s Word is unchanging, God is faithful and keeps his promises.

Seven Churches -a series of letters to the churches of Asia Minor (ch 2 -3)

Revelation 2-3 – Health Check

⁵⁵ Revelation 1:4.

⁵⁶ Cf Revelation 13 -the Beast who recovers from a fatal wound. There were rumours around that Nero would return to life and some think this is a reference to him. C.f. Mounce, *Revelation*, 19.

We can split up this section and look at each church and its issues individually but it's also helpful to see a holistic picture of the Church. Here is a vision of the Bride of Christ. By the end of Revelation, we will see the bride ready, beautifully dressed

Here we

"...see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:"⁵⁷

Seven churches are in Turkey (Asia Minor)

Context – suffering. Persecution (2:9, 3:8) -note Satan's Synagogue – oponents who pretend to be part of God's people ("Jews") but are not really. The idea may be linked to Romans 11 here – that true Spiritual Israel is not about physical descent but response to the Messiah -opposition to Him and his people marks people out as not truly belonging to Him.

Positives

Endurance even in suffering (2:2, 9, 19; 3:8)

A refusal by some to tolerate evil people (2:4, 6, 9, 13; 3:4)

Loving and faithful service (2:2; 19)

But

Negatives

Losing first love/growing lukewarm (2:4)

Consequences

Overcomers -a theme of victory and conquest -which we will see later on in the vision is wrapped up in (2: 7, 11,17,26 3: 5. 12, 21

Christ as the victorious conqueror

The promise to martyrs experiencing extreme persecution even to death that they we be raised to life again.

Note Biblical themes like the fruit of the tree of life- picked up later in Revelation authority to rule (Beatitudes) and the pre-warning of "the second death" "the book of Life" which is expanded on later.

But also a warning of corporate judgement -removal of lampstands (2:5) -Christ will fight against (2:15) just deserts (2:23) sudden and unexpected judgement (3:3), spat out (3:16)

NB -these churches disappeared.

Seven seals – The lamb is the only one worthy to open the scroll and read it (ch 4:1 -8:5

Revelation 4 The Chorus of Creation

A glimpse into the throne room of heaven. Radiant beauty and glory

⁵⁷ Samuel J Stone, *The Church's One Foundation*.

We see the “seven spirits” or “sevenfold spirit” again

24 thrones surrounding. 12 Tribes and 12 apostles -Israel and the Church – the completeness of God’s people.

4 living beasts -echoes imagery from Ezekiel and Daniel here

We are in Isaiah 6 – the Seraphim calling out to God who is “Holy, Holy, Holy” – triple repetition is another Hebraic way of describing completeness “Most Holy”

The 24 elders lay down their crowns – human rule must submit to God’s rule. God’s people do this willingly whilst the Kings of the earth resist and rage against Him *cf Psalm 2)

Revelation 5-6 & 8:1--5 “Worthy is the Lamb

The first vision cycle has a scroll with 7 seals no-one can open them. However, we are told that the Lion of Judah is able and worthy. John looks to see the Lion, it is a lamb that has been sacrificed.

The sacrificial Lamb – OT sacrifices and Passover, Isaiah 53 – the one led like a lamb to the slaughter. John in his Gospel points to Jesus as the lamb who takes away the sins of the world

Jesus is the Lion of Judah and the lamb who is worthy

The lamb opens the scroll, breaking each seal in turn – this takes us through to chapter 8. Each seal is associated with a vision

Horsemen representing conquest. War, economic crisis, famine and plague (cf Zechariah 6:2). Nb the white horse representing conquerors probably here is about conquering kings in General but the image will focus on Christ in ch 19 as the ultimate conqueror.

Martyrs -witnesses who have given their lives -under the altar. The altar as the place of sacrificial worship. The altar representing safety through Christ’s sacrifice. They plead for vindication.

Then earthquakes, eclipses and blood moons -the shaking of the Universe/earth shattering events – the final judgement will see physical universal upheaval but cosmic language about the final end here is probably more focused on political upheaval in the present time.

The final seal is broken in ch 8 following a vision of God’s people. Silence - then giving of trumpets - overlapping the visions.

Incense offered -worship

Key things –

1. The revelation of the solution needs truth to be told about the reality of life on earth caused by the problem of sin and evil⁵⁸
2. The seals are not the revelation itself -the revelation is the scroll. War, famine, trouble etc may seem to hinder us from seeing God’s goodness and plan but the Lamb is sovereign and so these things cannot hinder his word. The Gospel will succeed
3. Our focus in the midst of chaos should be on the Lamb.

Revelation 7 The people of God

⁵⁸ NT Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Kindle version: location 1042).

Two sights

144,000 – 12000 from each tribe of Israel.

A great multitude.

144,000 a symbolic number 12x12x1000 – a large number representing the fullness of God's people Israel.⁵⁹

Two possibilities

1. The 144000 = Jews who are saved and belong to God, coupled with the great multitude representing the Gentiles
2. The 144000 and the Great multitude are the same people but from two perspectives. The second sight emphasises that the number is symbolic but the great number sealed and saved are practically uncountable.⁶⁰

Romans 11 links in here – All Israel will be saved both in that true Israel is really those who believe in the promise with Gentiles who believe in Jesus grafted in and that the full number will be saved.

Seven Trumpets – Warning sounds that announce judgement and terror (Ch 8:6-14:20)

Revelation 8:5 -9:21 – Terror

The next cycle has a series of trumpet calls. The trumpeters act as heralds of what is to come. There are further vivid pictures of frightening cosmic and political events.

The enduring sense is of woe, calamity, distress, terror.

Yet despite the fearful chaos -people do not repent or turn. Human hearts are hard

The final trumpet call comes in ch 11 -the Messiah is revealed and God's true temple. Human hearts may be hard but the coming King will still triumph

Revelation 10-11 Witnesses

Thunders that sound and speak -but their message is not to be recorded. The full mystery will be revealed later. We may not and will not understand everything now but God is still sovereign and reveals what we need to know, when we need to know it.

A scroll which is eaten -bitter/sweet – echoes of Ezekiel 2:3; 3:1-3. God's word has both a sweetness -the good news of the Gospel but there is bitterness because of rejection too. God's word is good but will also cause discomfort.⁶¹

Measuring the Temple -again echoes of Ezekiel -this is symbolic of marking out God's space and the place of protection⁶² -a physical temple or think about how God's people are now his temple.

Witnesses – olive trees – this is symbolic of Israel.

2 witnesses -suggestions have included Israel and the Church, Spirit and Word etc

⁵⁹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 158.

⁶⁰ Mounce, *Revelation*, 158.

⁶¹ Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Kindle: location 1560)

⁶² Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Kindle: location 1626)

However, the point of having two witnesses is that this was the legal requirement for reliability. So maybe the emphasis is not on having 2 witnesses but on how God has not left the world without a witness – focus probably on God’s people as his witness here. May be crushed and beaten down by the World but cannot be destroyed.

Also Wright notes that John has two great OT heroes in mind Moses and Elijah. The idea is

“That the prophetic witness of the church, in the great tradition of Moses and Elijah, will perform powerful signs and thereby torment the surrounding unbelievers, but that the climax of their work will be their martyr-death at the hands of ‘the monster that comes up from the Abyss.’”⁶³

Think also of Jesus as the ultimate witness who is killed but is raised to life again.

Revelation 12-13 Beasts and Dragons

A woman with a crown of 12 stars -representative of Israel and giving birth to a child. Focus on the Messiah who must come from Israel

Opposed by dragons and beasts. Beasts represent human systems and empires -permission to buy and sell etc.

The Dragon – or serpent -a clue. Our battle is not with flesh and blood but the powers of this world when opposing Christ, The Gospel and God’s people serve Satan.

Revelation 14 – Harvest Time

Further reference to 144,000 with Jesus who have his seal/mark on them in contrast to those who have received the Beast’s mark. Kept themselves pure like virgins -not that they are virgins but that like we associate virginity with purity -so too them.

Purchased – or redeemed

Those who have received the beast’s mark face eternal judgement -and so this is a reminder for believers that they should endure patiently through persecution

The Good news goes out (Gospel) -here it’s focus is on the fall of Babylon.

Babylon – The Empire that stands in opposition to God’s people -going back to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The place where God’s people went into captivity (cf Daniel). But back in Daniel 2 we saw that all human empires must one day fall to God’s kingdom Babylon as head of the statue in Daniel 2 can be seen as representative of all empires. Here in Revelation we will see its close association with Rome.

There is a harvest of God’s people -an offering to him -first fruits

However, there’s also a further harvest and the focus is not on the harvest being to redemption but the earth is harvest for judgement.

Seven bowls -God’s wrath is poured out (ch 15-16)

Revelation 15-16 Plagues

⁶³ Wright, Revelation for Everyone (Kindle: location 1642)

The next vision cycle has seven bowls representing God's wrath being poured out on the earth. Seven angels hold them. They are described as "the last." They bring God's wrath to completion. So we cannot ignore a sense of progression in Revelation towards the end.

Those who have overcome and endured are singing and praising. Perhaps there's a sense of cheerleading here. This is not gross triumphalism but that sense of justice and vindication leading to rejoicing

A tale of two cities – the fall of Babylon and the rise of the New Jerusalem. New Creation - a New heavens and a new earth (ch 17:1-22:6)

Revelation 17-18 The Enemy of God's People

The focus is now on Babylon -the enemy of God's people

A harlot/prostitute – prostitution/sexual immorality in the Bible represents spiritual unfaithfulness. The book of Proverbs distinguishes wisdom as a faithful, modest wife and folly as unfaithful. Israel herself is often portrayed as acting like a harlot by being unfaithful to God (see e.g, Hosea)

Babylon is described as sitting on 7 hills and having 7 kings. The imagery here provides clues as to her true identity -we have the geography and history to locate it as Rome towards the end of the 1st Century AD.

Rome will one-day fall. Those who benefit from her will turn against her. Christians are not to invest their trust in her (come out from her).

NB -Some people note 24:18 with its reference to the city where the prophets were killed and think that there may be a further representation. Rome has persecuted the church but also Jerusalem has been the city where the prophets died. Was Jerusalem really acting like Babylon and Rome rather than being God's city. Will Jerusalem one day fall (especially if this is written pre AD70). Note this is a plausible interpretation but given it's a minority report I wouldn't spend too much time on it.

The important thing is that God's enemies will be defeated. Human empires will fall and we should not put our trust in them.

Revelation 19 Victory

God's people celebrate the defeat of the enemy with joyful song.

Victory is portrayed with the image of Christ as the one on the white horse. He is the conqueror who defeats the kings of this world (Psalm 2).

Christ defeated sin on the Cross and will be the final victor over evil and human rebellion.

The beast and the dragon are captured and thrown into the lake of fire. Their pride comes to nothing.

Satan has lost and will lose

Revelation 20-22:6 Tomorrow's World

Babylon/Rome/The false Jerusalem v The New Jerusalem which is the Bride of Christ -i.e. The Church. There's a promise of God's people reigning in the New Creation and of safety and peace -a city where evil is banished. A world with no sea (not a lack of water but the metaphor here was of chaos, fear and disorder).

The devil will meet his final defeat.

In the meantime -Christ will reign for a 1000 years (symbolic) and his people -those who have already died with him -the first resurrection is spiritual

The dead will be raised to life for the final judgement and then those who have sided with Satan and fought against God will be judged to eternity in the lake of fire

Revelation 22 tells us that in the city is the River of Life and the tree of life. The image is of a Garden City with Eden restored (cf Genesis 2, Psalm 1, Ezekiel 40)

Epilogue – Jesus is coming (ch 22:7-21).

Revelation 22:7-21 The Wedding Day

The final message is that Jesus is coming back soon. The Bride will be ready.

7. Teaching Revelation

So we've learnt lots about the book of Revelation in terms of its genre, authorship, date and all the different approaches to interpreting it. This is all well and good but could leave us with just an interesting intellectual exercise.

"¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."⁶⁴

Revelation is Scripture and so it was written to teach us. Our aim should be to apply it practically to the church so that they can be encouraged, corrected and built up. Otherwise, we have not allowed to do its intended work.

Revelation can be applied to our current circumstances because as we have seen already, it takes us to God's throne room in order that we might see the whole sweep of history from the perspective of the last day. It does that so that we may make sense of what it means to live as God's people now in our present context in the light of future hope.

So how should we go about teaching Revelation

Approach

I think that too often people have treated Revelation as a source from which to scavenge out the weird and wonderful. This means three things.

1. That we miss the big picture. We end up debating what each detailed symbol means and miss the overarching themes and messages.
2. We end up trying to interpret the whole book and all eschatology in the light of our interpretation of one or two verses. For example your position on the Millennium and the Rapture have become the controlling themes and the crucial tests of orthodoxy in much of the church despite the fact that these are just found in 2 or three verses
3. It all becomes very controversial. People argue over it, people get confused and Revelation becomes a book we stay away from. Given that this book promises blessing to its readers, that is extremely sad.

The approach I would take when preaching in church is as follows.

1. Treat large sections in each sitting. That enables the congregation to get the whole picture - and see how a particular part of the vision (e.g. The Seals, The Trumpets, The churches) unfolds.
2. Help people to see the different big themes that run through the text, that God is King, seated on his throne, that this World is judged, that Jesus the lamb is worthy, that God's word is opened and revealed not hidden, that the Church is Christ's bride called to be ready and that Christ the Bridegroom is returning.
3. Help people to understand what is going on with the language. This will help them to grasp it better.
 - That the literary genre is apocalyptic
 - That John is reporting a vision. This means there's visual language and even a sense that he is struggling to put down in words the incredible things he has seen.

⁶⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT).

-That as John describes his vision, he will use language that will resonate and make sense to his immediate audience. This means that he will use images they may associate with from their time and culture but also and most importantly from Scripture. He expects them to know their Old Testament, Gospels and the letters to the churches (especially those from him!). We will want to help people see where the particular images are drawn from.

Note that putting all of these things together means that it's not "Big picture versus detail." I'm not advocating that we sit at high altitude and just deal in generalisms. Rather, sometimes to get the depth and to understand phrases and words, seeing the big picture is vital. It means we go with the natural breaks in the text and follow a them through to it's conclusion to see what it is saying. This is the opposite of taking a small phrase out of its context and trying to guess at a hidden meaning. Seeing the whole narrative enables us to understand how a phrase, metaphor, image, simile, etc. functions.

Make sure that you teach Revelation in a practical, applied way. This means that you need to know your own context.

Some application

Here are some applications we might want to draw out through a teaching series in Revelation. I am thinking primarily of our local circumstances in Bearwood but some of the points will be common across churches and may prompt other thoughts too.

God is King

Several times we see images of God's beauty and greatness. We see this in the vision of the one seated on the throne and in the description of Jesus. There is a strong Trinitarian current throughout the book as we meet the sevenfold Spirit too.⁶⁵

A primary application should be the call to worship God with our whole lives. We should sense something of his holiness and transcendence. Does our whole life worship show respect and love for Him?

God's Word is revealed

Jesus, the Lion-Lamb was able to open the Scroll. Scripture is the written word from the living word.

Two things spring to mind here:

First of all the challenge to read Scripture, privately and in church. We see that God's Word is essential and central. All of our ministries should be Word centred.

Secondly -it should give us great confidence. Scripture has power. It is also something we can read and understand (even Revelation)

The Church will face persecution

But we are to persevere and not let our love grow cold. We persevere in hope knowing that God is sovereign and will defeat evil. Even when our efforts seem to end in failure and even if believers face

⁶⁵ Strong evidence of the Apostle John's authorship.

certain death, God has not lost. We are promised resurrection. We will reign with Christ. We will be raised to new life.

This is important for our congregations to know. Many of those who attend Bearwood Chapel have experienced real suffering. Some have fled from other countries to escape danger, others have been challenged and made costly sacrifices here. The temptation is to ask "Is it worth it?" The answer is yes because believers are always looking forward in hope.

I also believe that our application shouldn't be too localised. It shouldn't become "me" or "us" focused. Revelation reminds me that I'm part of God's wider church. Around the globe, people are serving and suffering. In some places, belonging to Jesus will mean prison, torture and even death. Revelation calls us to pray for the world wide church, to send people into the world mission field and for some of us to go. It motivates us to work in our mission field here.

Revelation points us to a people from every tribe and tongue gathered around the throne. Shouldn't there be a little foretaste of that today. Isn't it a joy to gather with believers from different backgrounds in a multi-generational congregation? Doesn't this future vision rule out any place for segregation and racism?

The Gospel Must Go out

Trumpets are sounded, heralds announce, prophecy is spoken (and not to be sealed up and hidden), witnesses die for their faith but in hope of the Resurrection. Central to the book of Revelation is the sacrificed lamb. Central to the book is the theme that salvation comes from God through being washed in the blood of The Lamb.

Revelation is about the Gospel. It calls those who do not know God yet to come to him now before judgement comes. It reminds us that there is both a harvest of God's people and a harvest of those who do not know him-to judgement. This must motivate us to share the good news.

God is victorious

The empires of this world rise and fall but God is still sovereign. Evil seems to have the upper-hand but He will reign forever. The church seems weak and failing but Christ will come for his bride and she will be dressed, ready and beautiful.

This gives us confidence in the upheaval and storms of life. Brexit, Presidential Elections and military posturing may cause us worry -but human tyrants will one day die and their powerbases crumble. It should warn us against trusting in systems whether that's nationalism, socialism, Marxism, capitalism, liberalism, conservatism or whatever. Those systems will fail and fall. If we trust in them, they will fail us.

It means that we can serve God in the context of the little empires and dominions we face in the workplace. It should warn us to work for his kingdom rather than building our own empires.

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away:
Thy kingdom stands, and grows forever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ John Ellerton, *The Day Thou Gavest Lord is Ended* (1870).

8. Preaching Revelation - Going Long

When preaching through Revelation, I suggest picking up on large sections (1-2 chapters at a time). This enables the congregation to stand back and see the big picture – which I've suggested is the priority with a book like this.

What are the risks/challenges to doing this? Well a couple have been suggested as follows:

- It makes it difficult to ensure that the whole passage is read in church and we cannot rely on congregation members to have read it in advance
- It makes it difficult for the preacher to cover everything at a reasonable level of detail risking either a shallow surface treatment or appearing to cram too much in.

Let's take them in turn:

1. Reading the Text

It's true that we cannot rely on everyone to read the text at home -but we still can encourage this. For example, we could encourage people to follow the same book for personal quiet times. What about producing a readings card along with some questions/suggestions for each day. Whilst not everyone may join in, this may raise the bar in encouraging people to see that they cannot rely on one 25-30 minute slot to feed on God's Word each week.

Also at Bearwood Chapel we have a variety of small groups during the week for prayer and Bible study. Some groups might choose to follow the Sunday morning teaching series giving group members to read the whole section together, discuss, ask questions and go into further depth.

At the same time, I think there are ways of including the whole passage for reading in the services. Do we just have to rely on one Bible reading (many churches already will normally have an OT and NT reading). What about spreading the reading out throughout the service. Read a short section to begin with, maybe interweave verses with songs, get people to read in different styles etc. In some cases, part of the reading may be best heard after the exposition to conclude the service.

2. Preaching width and depth

I want to suggest that you can preach deep when covering 1 or 2 verses or a whole section of 2-3 chapters. Both Martyn Lloyd Jones and John Stott preached rich meaty sermons, the former taking one sentence or verse as his text, the later a paragraph or chapter.

The different lengths of passage also reflect that we are dealing with different genres. A propositional section such as one of Paul's letters may encourage us to look at the syntax and grammar of each verse lending itself to short readings. Even in that case, the aim should not be to work verse by verse picking up meaning and application in verse 1 and then moving on to verse 2 and so on. Rather, the aim is to get a sense of the logical and thematic flow of the text in order to identify the writer's central theme.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ This may also mean that there are times even with this genre when you want to preach a larger section. For example, recently I chose to preach on the whole of 1 Corinthians 7. The aim was to get the whole sense of faithfulness in different circumstances. I could have preached separate sermons on singleness, celibacy in marriage, marriage to unbelievers and separation. However, I felt that with our diverse congregation it was better to preach the whole chapter and then offer people the opportunity to pick up on individual aspects. Another example would be 1 Corinthians 14:26-40. It is possible to preach on tongue speakers, prophecy and the women separately but that way we might miss the triple repetition about times for silence. In fact this

With narrative, we may need to read several chapters in order to get the sense of the story, its context and why it is being told. That does not mean that you won't want to pause and dwell on specific conversations, images and events but you will keep thinking about how they fit into the whole.

Similarly, with Revelation, I think that there's a way of preaching in depth by picking up themes, images and words and seeing how they are repeated throughout a section to illustrate a central lesson. We will of course want to stop and pause to answer big questions – particularly where confusion and controversy needs to be cleared up but also where a little phrase may have special significance leading to powerful application. For example, I would take time to pick up on

- Jesus as Alpha and Omega -First and Last
- The Lion-Lamb
- Who are the 144,000 people with Christ?
- What is the 1000-year reign all about?
- The Beast and the number 666.
- Who/what is Babylon
- Who/what is The New Jerusalem.

Now an advantage we have with Revelation is that (if my understanding of how the book works is right) then we are going to see cycles and repetitions of themes throughout the book. This means that if I cannot cover the detail of one aspect in this week's sermon, then it can be picked up at a later date.

For example, with Revelation 5-6 I would focus on the Lamb who is worthy to open the scrolls. The big picture is his sovereignty over revelation in Scripture and in world history. There probably won't be time to go into each of the seals in detail at this stage but we don't need to worry because the seals focus us on the terror and suffering that come with a world ruled by evil and under judgement. We will be able to explore these things in more detail as we look at the trumpets being sounded and the bowls being poured out.

Conclusion

When preaching Revelation. I think one of our key aims should be to help people see the richness of the vision and from there to grasp the depth of insight John gives us into God's sovereign care. This should provide fantastic veins of application to explore.

might lead us to misunderstand Paul's instructions by losing the context and rhythm. We would not necessarily go deeper and indeed I would suggest that the deeper exposition arises out of seeing the way the three instructions link up challenging us to make sure that we are hearing God when we gather and not simply following our own priorities.

9. Preaching Revelation: Preaching long and preaching for eternity

When we preach, we are constantly thinking about how we apply Scripture to our lives today. What does a Bible passage have to say about what we should be doing as a church family? How does the main application help me to think about the week ahead at home and work? This is good and right. However, as I've looked at Revelation, I've been struck by the challenge of preaching which applies God's Word to our eternal future.

You see, if God is at work in us, sanctifying us and preparing us for his return, for the day when we will be raised and live with him for ever, then shouldn't the preaching of God's Word play its part in preparing and shaping us for eternity, for life after death. Of course, we do that when we preach Gospel sermons but shouldn't this be ongoing for believers too?

Think about what Revelation tells us about the church. We are the bride of Christ and one day we will be made ready and beautifully dressed for the return of the bridegroom and the wedding feast of the lamb.

This means that when we preach about marriage, we are not just preaching about how to live as families now. Of course, it's important to give application to married couples about what things like headship and mutual submission mean. It means we will deal with issues like divorce and re-marriage and it means we'll talk about why you shouldn't marry an unbeliever. We'll also see what the Bible says about sex and marriage.

However, that's not the sum total of the Bible's teaching on marriage. The end goal is to teach that we as the church (together not individually) are the bride of Christ and what does it mean to belong to him. Revelation shows that and the perspective from the end will ripple back through all the Bible passages that teach about marriage.

This means that sermons on marriage are deeply relevant to single people, to those who long to get married but fear they never will, to those who never want to get married, to those who have been widowed or divorced. We are always looking forward and we will all (together) have a wedding day.

It means that when I go back to Ephesians 5 and it tells wives to submit to husbands that this is application for all of us. We as the bride of Christ must submit to him. If we resent the idea of submission, then that may risk us resenting the idea that we must submit to him. If we delight in the idea that others should submit to us, then we may completely miss the point that we must submit to Him. We all need to be learning to submit now, to one another mutually and to Christ as our head.

Preaching for eternity will help us to see how what we do this week can have value that lasts into eternity.

10. Further Reading

Recommended commentaries and background books include:

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation* (New Testament Theology. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Gordon Fee, *Revelation* (New Covenant Commentary Series).

Simon J Kistemaker, *Revelation* (New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids MI.: Baker Academic, 2001).

Robert H Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids MI.: Eerdmans, 1977, Revised 1997).

Michael Wilcock, *Revelation: I saw Heaven Opened* (Bible Speaks Today. IVP).