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Digging Deeper

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Saturday, November 02, 2024

REVEALING REVELATION WHAT WAS JOHN REVEALING: BLUE, GRAY OR CLOUDY SKIES?

Rationale & Background

FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

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Unlike most of the New Testament, we have only “300+” copies of the text for the book we call “Revelation.” We have three to four **thousand** copies of the other books in the New Testament. Most of the ancient manuscripts, both Alexandrian and especially the Byzantine, were actually church “lectionaries;” i.e., manuscripts/codexes read during aloud worship gatherings. Revelation was not a popular reading for it required much more knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Daniel and Ezekiel. The idioms, metaphors and literary figures of Revelation do not come easy to the un-initiated.

Actually, named the “Apocalypse”¹ (απο-κλυπ-την) means “revealing” or “un-covers.” It was an attempt by John to provide a forward look to what the Christ had taught about what we call “end times” (chapters 4-22), and a current warning to the church in at least seven cities in what we now call Turkey (then, “Asia Minor;” chapters 1-3); to wit,

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| A. Ephesus (2:1-7) | E. Sardis (3:1-6) |
| B. Smyrna (2:8-11) | F. Philadelphia (3:7-13) |
| C. Pergamum (2:12-17) | G. Laodicea (3:14-22) |
| D. Thyatira (2:18-29) | |

The church at each city had different strengths and challenges, many of which will be recognizable today in the church. We can learn a lot from these three chapters, if we simply do not view those people in the church as “them.” They are us, sometimes and often.

WAS JOHN THE APOSTLE THE AUTHOR OF REVELATION?²

Authorship is a rich discussion for most scholars. Four times the author identifies himself as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8). From as early the second century Justin Martyr argued this John was the apostle, the son of Zebedee, “the one whom Jesus loved.” Revelation itself reveals the author was a Jew, well versed in Scripture, a church leader who was well known to the seven churches of Asia Minor, and a deeply religious person fully convinced the Christian faith would soon triumph over evil in the world.

¹Unfortunately, *apocalypse* has become to mean something much different than what John the apostle intended. Modern synonyms for *apocalypse* include *annihilation*, *cataclysm*, *catastrophe*, *devastation*, *Armageddon*, and *decimation*. (See <https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/Apocalypse>; as downloaded 10/27/2024.) Ironically, none are correct, especially *decimation* which initially did not mean annihilation, but a military tactic of ancient Rome to instill respect and fear after their army conquered a village; i.e., every 10th person would be randomly killed, presumably enforcing perception of and respect for Rome's power.

²Adapted from Compton's Interactive NIV © 1996 as corrected and edited by D. Thomas Porter.

In the third century, however, an African bishop named Dionysius compared the language, style and thought of the Apocalypse (Revelation) with that of the other writings of John and decided the book could not have been written by the apostle John. He suggested the author was a certain John the Presbyter, whose name appears elsewhere in ancient writings. Although many today assert Dionysius is the author, the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view; i.e., John the Apostle.

DATES AND MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS

Persecution of Christianity rose and fell with who was in charge; sometimes every part of the Roman empire was killing believers. Other times, only certain parts were active, and sometimes it was quite quiet—oddly and ironically one of the more difficult times for Christianity. Revelation was written when Christians were entering a time of officially broad persecution. The two periods most often asserted are the latter part of Nero's reign (54-68AD) or the latter part of Domitian's reign (81-96). Some scholars date the book around 95. Others suggest a date during the reign of Vespasian: 69-79.

The Author's View. Given the powerful and well known prediction by the Christ that the temple would be destroyed (which historical records affirm happening in 70AD), it makes sense to this author that John and other writers would have mentioned this dramatically fulfilled prophecy as an argument for the Christ's divinity. Ergo, this author asserts a date *preceding* 70AD.

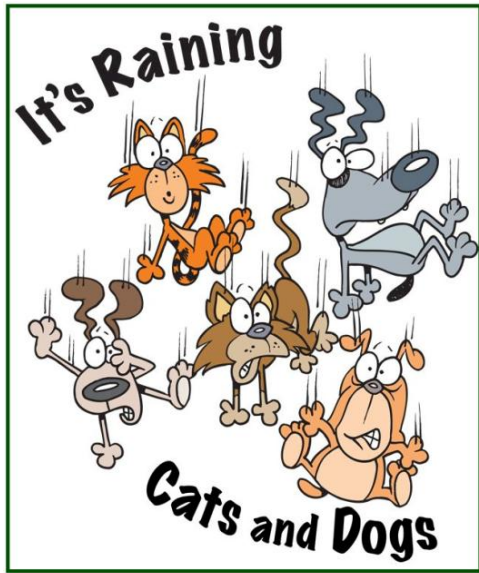
Since Roman authorities at this time were beginning to enforce the cult of emperor worship, Christians—who held the Christ, not Caesar, was sovereign—faced increasing hostility. Believers at Smyrna are warned against coming opposition (2:10), and the church at Philadelphia is told of an hour of trial coming on the world (3:10). Antipas has already given his life (2:13) along with others (6:9). John has been exiled to the island of Patmos (probably the site of a Roman penal colony) for his activities as a Christian missionary (1:9). Some within the church are advocating a policy of compromise (2:14-15, 20), which has to be corrected before its subtle influence can undermine the determination of believers to stand fast in the perilous days that lie ahead.³

The compromises we took during these periods of hostility remain with us today. For example, our arguments over what constitutes “legitimate” immersion (baptism) and the role of immersion in sanctification and salvation began over people wanting to return to the church after succumbing to “emperor worship;” e.g., giving sacrifices on behalf of the emperor of the day. Who are legitimate leaders of the church became fuel for church wildfires because of these returns. Make no mistake about it, persecution was good for the church, not bad. Was then; is now.

JUST WHAT IS THE REVELATION

Purpose. John encourages the faithful to resist resolutely the demands of emperor worship. He informs his readers that the final showdown between God and Satan is imminent. Satan will increase his persecution of believers, but they must stand fast, even to death. They are sealed against any spiritual harm and will be vindicated when the Christ returns, when the wicked are placed in hell, and when God's people enter an eternity in the presence of the LORD GOD.

³Ibid.



Literary Form. For an adequate understanding of Revelation, readers must recognize Revelation is a distinct kind of literature. Revelation is highly symbolic. Although its visions often seem bizarre to Westerners, fortunately the book provides a number of clues for its own interpretation (e.g., stars are angels, lamp stands are churches, 1:20; "the great prostitute," 17:1, is "Babylon" [or perhaps Rome], 17:5,18; and the heavenly Jerusalem is the "wife of the Lamb," 21:9-10).⁴

Metaphors, similes, idioms are part of all language, even iconic languages like ASL. Consider this. Many cultures have an idiom synonymous for the American and English phrase "It's raining cats and dogs outside." But, learning English would require, for example, a native speaker of Hindi to learn that this English phrase is equivalent to their saying, "It's raining like a pestle [on a mortar]" or a speaker of Persian (Farsi), it is "Raining jackals." Our responsibility as responsible students of the Scripture is to understand the

metaphors, simile, and idioms of the 1st century in *their* time, *their* culture, and *their* values.

Distinctive Feature. A distinctive feature is the frequent use of the number seven (52 times). There are seven blessings, seven churches (1:4,11), seven spirits (1:4), seven golden lamp stands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1), seven horns and seven eyes (5:6), seven trumpets (8:2), seven thunders (10:3), seven signs (12:1,3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20), seven crowns (12:3), seven plagues (15:6), seven golden bowls (15:7), seven hills (17:9) and seven kings (17:10), as well as other sevens. Symbolically, the number seven stands for completeness.⁵

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Interpretation. Interpreters of Revelation normally fall into four groups:

1. *Preterists* understand the book exclusively in terms of its first-century setting, claiming most of its events have already taken place.
2. *Historicists* take it as describing the long chain of events from Patmos to the end of "history."
3. *Futurists* place the book primarily in the "end times."
4. *Idealists* view it as symbolic pictures of such timeless truths as the victory of the LORD GOD over evil.

So what? There is a lot to understand about Revelation. There is a lot of humility to learn. There is a blessing we can gain from studying Revelation. We know who wins. We know how the win takes place. We can revel in revelation for the revealings will inspire—IF we keep our minds, and our hearts, open.

A NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The success of any Bible study is entirely dependent upon three entities: you, your teacher and Holy Spirit. He therefore exhorts you to study—do your homework; encourage your teacher by prayer and active participation; most importantly, continually pray to Father God for Holy Spirit to guide us as we learn what He taught John 1900+ years ago.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.