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BREAKING THE CODE

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF
REVELATION

CONTENTS

Preface to the Revised Edition	9
Preface to the First Edition	13
1. Introducing the Book of Revelation	15
2. John's Vision of the Heavenly Christ (1:1-20)	27
3. Prophetic Words to the Churches (2:1-29)	37
4. More Prophetic Words to Churches (3:1-22)	49
5. John's Vision of God and the Lamb (4:1-5:14)	59
6. Opening the Seven Seals of God's Scroll (6:1-8:5)	69
7. Sounding the Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)	79
8. The Satanic Counterfeit: The Dragon and the Two Beasts (12:1-14:5) ..	91
9. The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath (14:6-16:21)	99
10. Babylon the Great: Toppling Empire and Its Evils (17:1-18:24)	109
11. The Final Victory and the Last Judgment (19:1-20:15)	117
12. John's Vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-22:21)	127
For Further Reading	137
Notes	141

1

INTRODUCING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The entire Bible is a library, containing different types of books. Different types of literature make their appeal to the reader through different avenues. For example, the Psalms of David touch one's *emotions*: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name" (Psalm 103:1). In the Bible are also books of law that involve commands: "Do this!" "Don't do that!" Such books speak to our *will*, requiring us to respond positively or negatively. Still other biblical writings, such as Paul's Letter to the Romans, appeal primarily to our *intellect*. We need to think carefully and patiently as we seek to follow the apostle's theological reasoning.

The Book of Revelation is unique in appealing primarily to our *imagination*—not, however, a freewheeling imagination, but a disciplined imagination. This book contains a series of word pictures, as though a number of slides were being shown upon a great screen. As we watch, we allow ourselves to be carried along by impressions created by these pictures. Many of the details of the pictures are intended to contribute to the total impression and are not to be isolated and interpreted with wooden literalism.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

In order to become oriented to the Book of Revelation one must take seriously what the author says happened. John tells us that he had a series of visions. He says that he “heard” certain words and “saw” certain visions. Over the centuries there have been occasional individuals with the gift of being susceptible to visionary experiences. The author of Revelation seems to have been such a person.

In order to understand what is involved in a visionary experience we may consider Ezekiel’s vision of a valley full of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-4). In this vision the prophet saw the assembling of the bones into skeletons and the coming of sinews and flesh, climaxed by restoration to life, so that “they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (Ezekiel 37:10). We are not to understand that bones were actually scattered around in a valley; the account is purely symbolic. The prophet’s visionary experience pictured the revival of the dead nation of Israel, hopelessly scattered in exile. Through this vision, Ezekiel was assured that the dispersed Israelites, living as exiles in foreign lands, would be reestablished as a nation in their own land.

INTRODUCING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The Acts of the Apostles reports several instances of visionary experiences (9:10; 10:11; 16:9; 18:9; 22:17; compare 27:23). One of the most significant was the apostle Peter's experience at the house of Simon, a tanner, in Joppa. In this case a natural cause cooperated in producing the vision. Hungry, and waiting for a meal to be prepared, Peter fell into a trance and saw "something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners" (Acts 10:11). In it were all kinds of quadrupeds, reptiles, and birds, both fit and unfit for food according to Jewish law and custom. The vision was accompanied by a heavenly voice bidding Peter to slaughter and eat what was provided (Acts 10:13). Peter objected that he had never before eaten unclean foods. A heavenly voice declared: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). In what followed, Peter understood that the vision was leading him to accept the Gentile centurion Cornelius's invitation to come to his house and stay as a guest, contrary to dominant Jewish custom regarding boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, resulting in Peter baptizing Cornelius's whole household (Acts 10:17-48). We are not to think that there was literally a sheet filled with various creatures, nor that the vision was primarily about eating.

Similarly, when the Book of Revelation reports that John "saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads" (13:1), there is no reason to imagine that such a creature actually existed. Nevertheless, the vision had profound significance for John—and still has for the reader today (see pp. 94–97). Such accounts combine cognitive insight with emotional response. They invite the reader or listener to enter into the experience being recounted and to participate in it, triggering mental images of that which is described.

JOHN'S SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

In reporting his visionary experiences, John frequently uses symbolic language. Sometimes he explains the meaning of the symbols. Other symbols really need no explanation; for example, the number *seven*. Everyone knows that there are seven days in a week; then another week begins. And so seven means completion or perfection. Other symbols in Revelation can be understood in the light of the symbolism used in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. It is clear that John had studied the Old Testament very thoroughly. Of the 404 verses that comprise the twenty-two chapters of the Book of Revelation, 278 verses contain one or more allusions to an Old Testament passage. John had so thoroughly pondered the Old Testament that when it came to recording the import of his visions of God and of heaven, he expressed himself by using phrases borrowed from the prophets of Israel. Therefore, in attempting to understand John's symbolism, we must consider not only the book itself but also his use of the Old Testament.

No doubt some of John's symbols seem exceedingly strange to readers today. For example, the Roman Empire is symbolized as a beast like a leopard with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's mouth (13:2)—all very horrible indeed, as those people who were being persecuted by Rome especially knew well. Such strange beasts were more or less commonplace features in apocalyptic literature—and the Book of Revelation is a notable example of that literary genre. More will be said later about such literature, but for the moment it is sufficient to remind ourselves that we, too, make use of animals as symbols of nations and groups: the British lion, the Russian bear, the American eagle, the Democratic donkey, the Republican elephant. A newspaper cartoonist may

INTRODUCING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

show a donkey tugging at one end of a rope and an elephant tugging at the other. Young children or new immigrants may not understand that symbolism. Later, they will recognize the competition within a two-party system. In the same way, some of the imagery in Revelation may seem unusual or even bizarre, but on further reflection, and with the use of a disciplined imagination, the meaning will usually become clear. In any case, it is important to recognize that the descriptions are *descriptions of symbols, not of the reality conveyed by the symbols.*

IDENTITY OF THE AUTHOR

The author four times calls himself “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). This name was common among Jews from the time of the Exile onward and among the early Christians. Four persons are mentioned in the New Testament who bore this name. Which of these is intended, or whether the author was some other early Christian leader with this name, has been extensively debated. The absence of any specific data in the book itself makes it difficult to come to a firm decision. Since there is no qualifying identification (such as “John the elder” or “John Mark”), it is probable that the author feels himself to be well known to his hearers in the seven congregations that he addresses.

From the mid-second century onward the book was widely, though not universally, ascribed to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee. This attribution was accepted in the West beginning with Justin Martyr of Rome (AD 150), Irenaeus of Gaul (180), and Tertullian of North Africa (200). In the East, however, apostolic authorship was sometimes rejected, notably by the so-called Alogi (a group of heretics in Asia Minor, about AD 170), as well as by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (after 247). Dionysius argued

on the basis of differences of vocabulary and grammatical style between the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse and believed the latter to be the work of another person named John, whom he nevertheless affirmed as “holy and inspired.”¹

From this point on, the apostolic origin of Revelation was frequently disputed in the East. Eusebius (AD 325) wavered between regarding the book as “recognized” or as “spurious.” But after Athanasius of Alexandria (AD 367) and the Latin church under the influence of Augustine toward the end of the fourth century had accepted Revelation in their lists of the canon, the book was no longer officially contested as part of the New Testament. Even though the precise identity of “John” is still debated today, interpretation of the book does not depend on certainty concerning this matter.

TIME OF WRITING OF REVELATION

The Book of Revelation was composed and sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia at some point between AD 69 and 96 in order to persuade them that remaining loyal to Christ and bold in their witness to the one God was ultimately the path to victory. John wanted his congregations to resist both the promises that Rome held out to those who would cooperate with its domination and the pressures and persecutions that Rome and its local supporters would inflict on those who resisted and even critiqued its rule and its practices. It is common to hear Revelation described simply as a book written to encourage persecuted Christians. John does indeed hold in memory many Christians who were martyred by the representatives of Roman power (6:9-11; 17:6; 18:24), but it is noteworthy that he only refers to a single martyrdom among the seven congregations he

INTRODUCING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

addresses (2:13). Most of the persecution that he envisions is yet to come—and will come in part as a result of his congregations heeding his own call to uncompromising loyalty and witness to the God of Israel and God’s Messiah! John is every bit as concerned that some among his congregations either are oblivious to the ills of Roman imperialism (3:1-6, 14-22) or are actively seeking some path of coexistence to hold on to Christ while mingling with their neighbors in idolatrous settings (2:14-16, 20-25).

While some internal evidence can be understood to point to a date around AD 69, it seems more likely that Revelation addresses a situation later in the first century, probably during the reign of the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). The prominence of the imperial cult—the worship of “the image of the beast”—in Revelation reflects the increased enthusiasm among the seven cities addressed by Revelation for the imperial cult after the end of the brief but devastating civil wars of AD 68–69. Ephesus, the oldest and probably most important Christian center among the seven cities addressed, especially witnessed a renaissance of the cult of the emperors during this time. While the more balanced emperors were a bit embarrassed by the enthusiasm of provincials to worship them while they were alive, some emperors—and Domitian appears to have been one—relished being addressed as “our lord and god.” Ephesus made a bid for and won the “honor” of the right to build a grand temple to the living emperor Domitian, inaugurated in AD 90. This was so important to the city that almost all official inscriptions would thenceforth refer to this honor as part of Ephesus’s self-identification. Also by this period, all seven cities addressed by Revelation had some combination of temples, altars, and shrines to various emperors and members of their family. Pressure to participate in the imperial cult would never have been greater.

Augustus had granted the Jewish people immunity from the expectation of participating in emperor worship. At first the Roman authorities regarded the Christians as a sect within Judaism. But toward the close of the first century it was becoming clear that the synagogue did not “own” the Christian movement and, thus, the latter did not fall under the former’s aegis. Gentile Christians who refused to participate in emperor worship and the cults of the traditional gods therefore exposed themselves to the charge not only of being unpatriotic, but also of being subversive and enemies of the common good. Consequently, at various times and places they suffered persecution because of their faith. This could take the form of harassment or escalate to economic embargo, physical assault, lynching, or official action.

Also favoring the close of the first century as the time of the composition of Revelation is the fact that, according to 2:8-11, the church in Smyrna had been persevering under trials for a long time, whereas according to Polycarp,² the bishop of Smyrna in the first half of the second century, the church there did not yet exist until after the time of Paul (that is, in the 60s). Furthermore, in 3:17 the church in Laodicea is described as rich, though this city had been almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in AD 61 (see p. 55). It would have required some decades for the city and its population to recover economically.

One may conclude, therefore, that the Book of Revelation was written toward the end of Domitian’s reign, about AD 90–95. This date is corroborated by the testimony of early church fathers, such as Irenaeus (AD 180), Clement of Alexandria (200), Origen (254), and Eusebius (325).

LITERARY GENRE OF THE BOOK

John called his book an “Apocalypse” (or “revelation”), meaning an unveiling, a disclosure (1:1). While the word refers, on the one hand, to divine revelations given and shared in the context of early Christian worship (1 Corinthians 14:6, 26; 2 Corinthians 12:1, 7), it has also come to name a body of literature that shares some common features and literary strategies and that also claims to be, in some form, divine disclosures. We can find some examples of this kind of literature in the Bible, particularly in the second half of the Book of Daniel, and apocalyptic tendencies can be seen in Isaiah 24–27, Ezekiel 38–39, and Zechariah 9–14, where there are frequent references to the approaching “day of the LORD.” The genre blossomed, however, in the period between the testaments. Important examples include 1 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Fourth Book of Ezra, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and parts of the Sibylline Oracles.³

Writings of this sort typically present the dreams, visions, and conversations of the seer with angelic guides and other super-human figures. They typically paint the broader canvas against which the author and the audience live their daily lives, looking both to the grand timetable from before history to the “Day of the Lord” and after and to the spaces beyond human experience (the heavenly realms, the infernal realms, the presently invisible abodes of the spirits). The “bigger picture” provides an interpretative frame that casts the present situation and its challenges in a way that encourages fidelity to the group’s faith and practice. These works typically use colorful and figurative language, for example representing kingdoms and people as animals. They typically present the cosmos in starkly dualistic terms—good and evil, often locked in age-long combat, with the authors urging the hearers

to align themselves with the former in the struggle. Apocalypses usually contain predictions about the final outcome of human affairs, focusing on the last age of the world, when good will triumph and evil will be judged. Present troubles are represented as “birth pangs” that will usher in the End. God has set a limit to the era of wickedness and will intervene at the appointed time to execute judgment. In the final battle the powers of evil, together with the evil nations they inhabit, will be utterly destroyed. Then a new order will be established, when the End will be as the Beginning, and Paradise will be restored.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The focus of the Book of Revelation is the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and the definitive establishment of God’s kingdom at the end of time. Corresponding to this, the structure of the book involves a series of parallel yet ever-progressing sections. These bring before the reader, over and over again, the struggle of the church and its victory over the world in the providence of God. Recapitulation—introducing the same event several times from different angles—is an important feature of the book, making a linear outline of its events impossible. We find ourselves repeatedly at the “Day of the Lord” (1:7; 6:12-17; 14:14-20; 19:11-20:15) only to return to more visions illuminating the challenges on this side of that day. A number of series of sevens provide an overall sense of linear progression to the book (the seven oracles to the churches, 2:1-3:22; the seven seals, 6:1-8:1; the seven trumpets, 8:1-11:19; the seven bowls, 15:1-16:21), with John pausing to focus his hearers on visions of special importance to their situation (John’s commission and the models of witness, 10:1-11:14; the forces of Satan at work in the church’s situation and the consequences

INTRODUCING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

of various responses, 12:1–14:13; the unveiling of Rome and its imperialist practices, 17:1–18:24; the alternative city of God, 21:1–22:5).⁴

Here and there in John's account of his visionary experiences he uses the word *then*. There is, however, no reason to assume that the order in which John received his visions must be the order in which the contents of the visions are to be fulfilled. In chapter 12, for example, we will find a vision that takes us back to the time of the birth of Jesus. Such features in the book should make us wary of turning Revelation into a kind of almanac or time chart of the last days based on the sequence of the visions that John experienced. Like any good teacher, he knows that repetition is a helpful learning device, and so he repeats his messages more than once from differing points of view.

BREAKING THE CODE



A trustworthy guide to understanding the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation contains passages of great beauty and comfort, as well as passages that strike us as bizarre, bewildering, and sometimes frightening. How can we discern God's message in this peculiar part of the Bible?

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