



Conducted by
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"I find great difficulty in understanding the Book of the Revelation of John in the New Testament. Is it a Book which it is important to understand?"

Dear questioner, you are not alone in your non-understanding of this important portion of God's Word, and in the past many so-called expositions of it have tended only to confuse rather than to illuminate. However, what we **do** know is that the Revelation is an accepted part of the Canon of Scripture, and consequently it **must** be important for us to try to understand what it teaches. The problem, it seems to me, is one of approach.

The Problem of Approach

The book is remarkable for its vivid symbolism and imagery. We read of a 'great prostitute, beasts, monsters, a great red dragon, false prophets,' etc., and a younger person of today could be excused for thinking that he was pre-viewing an episode of 'Dr. Who' for showing later on T.V. Because of this vivid symbolism many Christians have given up the study in despair, and consequently have not understood the important link with all that has gone before.

There are two basic approaches to the study of the Revelation. The starting point for the first approach is the pre-supposition that the content is wholly prophetic and the fulfilment futuristic. This approach has led to all sorts of problems, not the least of which has been the interpretation of the symbolism in terms of contemporary world events. Consequently, events which have had a perfectly rational explanation in social, economic, or political terms have had attributed to them unwarranted religious overtones. In other words, because the Revelation has been approached in **futuristic** terms, the interpretation has been **made to fit** with contemporary events, even when it has been obvious that there could have been no valid connection. This is **not** a very good method of scriptural exegesis.

The second method of approach pre-supposes that the recorded events had **already** been fulfilled when the Canon of Scripture was formulated into what we now know to be the Bible. The opening verses of the Revelation seem to lend some support to this view because the stated objective in verse 1 was "to show unto his servants things which must **shortly** come to pass", and in verse 3 the exhortation was "to keep those things which are written therein: for the time is **at hand**". As one of the tenets of sound interpretation is to give words their normal grammatical meaning, unless the context forbids it, the serious student must conclude that the phrases 'shortly come to pass', and 'the time is at hand', bespeak imminent fulfilment. Even so, it must be realised that the theory of making events 'fit in' with the interpretation can be applied in this approach also.

Therefore, there must be an approach to the understanding of the Revelation which is wholly consistent with the main thrust of the teaching in the Old and New Testaments, and as this teaching is concerned prophetically and actually with the Messiah then it would seem to follow that what was revealed to John on the Isle of Patmos should be vitally connected with Him and necessary for the affirmation of belief and faith in Him.

The Christological Approach

It seems to me that the whole cosmic drama has crystallised into one great conflict – the conflict between good and evil. The protagonists are Christ and Satan. God defines the outcome in the cradle of creative history, the Garden of Eden, when He says to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15 N.I.V.). In the very last book of the Bible, John is given an ‘unveiling’ (apocalypse) of this great unseen conflict, and it is portrayed in startling symbolism. There is a clear message at each stage. So, what is revealed to John, and how important are the messages?

The Candlesticks

There are seven of them, and they symbolise seven churches which are identified geographically. Even though these churches are symbolised by candlesticks they are nonetheless real. The Lord looks at them in turn, assesses their performance, and pronounces judgment.

The message to succeeding generations from that time onwards is plain and unambiguous. The Lord knows all about us wherever we are. He fought the initial great fight against Satan and defeated Him, but He knows that Satan is still rampant in the world. He desposited the Truth with those who should follow Him. The Church is His extended arm, and in its several localities He expects that the truth of the Gospel will burn brightly and with undiminished intensity. We Christians should **never** denigrate the value of the Church to the Lord. It is His executive arm in the unremitting battle against Satan in the quest for the souls of men.

Worthy the Lamb

John now sees a book sealed with seven seals. He wept because there was no one worthy in heaven, or in earth, or under the earth to open the seals. He is told not to weep because the Lion of Juda, the Root of David, had prevailed to open the book. John now sees a Lamb as it had been slain, and it took the book out of the hand of He who sat upon the throne. Then the thousands around the throne cried, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing” (5:12). John also saw a great multitude which no man could number arrayed in white robes. They had come out of great tribulation and had washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (ch.7). Surely this is a re-affirmation that only Christ can save, and that any righteousness we can claim is directly attributable to Him. Only **He** is worthy.

The White Horse

John saw heaven opened, and a white horse whose rider was called Faithful and True. He went out to judge and to make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and he had many crowns on his head. He had a name written on His thigh, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. Prior to this (ch. 17) John had seen Satan symbolised as a red beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. Sitting on him was a prostitute with a golden cup filled with abominations and filthiness of her fornications. On her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS. There were also ten kings who were accomplices of Satan and the harlot, and an angel said to John, “These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of Lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful”.

Here, surely, is unveiled to John the majestic power of Christ and His saints. What a conquering Saviour! The Lion of Juda shall break every chain, and give us the victory again and again! The beast and the false prophet are cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone. But we must remember that evil is still the weapon which Satan wields against the Church, but the message is that he cannot prevail against our champion, our Saviour and our Redeemer, the Christ of God.

The New Jerusalem

John is now shown the consummation of this apocalyptic vision. He sees the glorified Church, the Bride of Christ, coming down out of heaven, adorned for her husband. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride for her husband (21:1,2). What could be more appropriate? A glorified Christ and a glorified Church! The message from God is, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God and he shall by my son" (21:7). We overcome by our faith and obedience to Christ. We overcome because He overcame. He is our righteousness, and the promises of God are secure in Him, as Paul says, "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4:13).

During my Christian life other Christians have said to me, 'You are obsessed with the Church'. Why should we not be obsessed with the Church? It is our spiritual heritage. It is the Bride of Christ. The beautiful picture that John paints of the glorified Church is breathtaking in its splendour and should make us echo the final words of the Revelation, "Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Conclusion

Is it important for us to understand the Revelation? We may as well ask, "Is it important for us to understand the Bible." Over the years I have come to realise that the whole Bible is concerned with Christ and the battle with Satan. I feel sure that the Revelation gives us a real insight into that struggle, and expresses the ultimate outcome. Christians should feel uplifted and strengthened and ever ready to contend as their Lord and Master has, knowing that the victory is assured in Him.

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