

Appendix 7 - The Book of Revelation

Between Text & Sermon: Revelation 1:4-9 (Jeffrey S. Siker, *Interpretation*, Vol 61, Iss. 2, 2007)

Ah, the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse. The book left behind by so much of the church, from early debates over canon, to Luther's derogatory comments, to endless schemes predicting the end of the age. Pre-tribulation, post-tribulation, defibrillated, and more. What might it mean for the church to take this most awkward of all Christian scriptures seriously, and not to cede it to all those who view and 'sell' it primarily as God's little book of horrors for those who have it coming? It means taking Revelation on its own terms, reading and preaching it in light of some central contexts.

The Context of Genre

First and foremost, we need to take seriously the genre of this book. It is an apocalypse; it fits the form of other early Jewish and Christian apocalypses, most of them non-canonical, replete with amazing visions and God's righteous judgment poured out against the enemies of God and God's people (cf., Daniel, 1 & 2; Enoch; the Apocalypse of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas; the Apocalypse of Peter; see also John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 1984). Collins defines an "apocalypse" as a "genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (p. 4). Apocalypses arose, in part, to address situations of crisis, to explain how God was still in charge even though God's faithful were suffering persecution. Apocalypses sought to offer assurance and hope in difficult times; they encouraged and admonished the faithful to hang tough and hold tight.

The vision of Revelation fits this mold pretty well (see David Aune's massive and masterful 1,500-page, three-volume commentary on the Book of Revelation in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, 1997-1998). The prophet John is given access to a heavenly vision, a divine vantage point, from which he can assure the faithful that God has already won the cosmic war, even if a few hard battles remain to be fought (see Martha Himmelfarb's *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, 1993).

The Context of Historical & Social Setting

Second, we need to take seriously the situation and context of the original readers, as best we can discern it. They lived in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) in urban centers scattered around the region. The cities addressed were all part of the Roman proconsular province of Asia, and all were within 100 miles of the city of Ephesus, the first city addressed (2:1-7). It certainly appears that Christians in this region were enduring some form of persecution (cf. Rev. 6:9; 13:15). They were waiting and hoping for the return of Christ very soon, and with it the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom and the heavenly Jerusalem revealed in all its majesty. With God's triumph would also come God's retributive judgment against those responsible for persecuting the Christians. In particular, the Roman authorities seem to be in view here. As these Christians held on to their faith, then, they remained hopeful that the time of the return of Christ, the conquering lamb, would be very soon indeed.

The Context of The History of Interpretation

Third, we need to take seriously the ways in which Revelation has been interpreted (and often badly misread) throughout the centuries of Christian reflection on Scripture. We need to be aware of how and why this book existed on the fringe of the biblical canon for as long as it did (see Lee McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, revised, 1995). We need to understand why Luther thought it was a dangerous book that should be relegated to a little-visited appendix of the NT. We need to understand how and why it became the biblical book to which people turned to predict the end of the world, and how people engaged in wild speculation throughout Christian tradition on the basis of particular words and phrases in the book. Already at the end of the second century, for example, the prominent church figure Tertullian was convinced that the end of the age was at hand, in part because he believed that the heavenly Jerusalem had been spotted hovering in the skies over Jerusalem for forty days (*Against Marcion* 25; see my essay and others in John Carroll, ed., *The Return of Jesus in Early Christianity*, 2000). Taking Revelation seriously, then, means recognizing that seeing it as a temporal map is a fundamentally wrong starting point. The attempt to align its symbols with current events in the modern world may be a popular game, but it demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of Revelation. All who have published such efforts and schemes probably owe their readers refunds, at the very least. (see especially the recent book by Jonathan Kirsch, *A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization*, 2006.)

The Pastoral Context

Fourth, perhaps the most important context for understanding Revelation has to do with its original pastoral concern to address the suffering and persecution of Christian believers, and to reassure and encourage their hope for God's redemption. There are important parallel pastoral contexts in the modern world. We need to take seriously the ways in which Revelation still can and does address those who experience significant suffering because of their faith convictions. This is especially true of those in the two-thirds world. One thinks of the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador, the persecution and jailing of Christian critics of apartheid in South Africa, or the Christians in the French Protestant town of Le Chambon who risked their lives to save 5,000 Jews during World War II (see the Pierre Sauvage documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*). Just as Revelation shows Jesus as the slain yet conquering lamb, so Christians live in trust and hope in the God of redemption who in Jesus identifies with those who are suffering. Indeed, Revelation is in many respects a call for Christians to take the side of the oppressed, as well as a warning against lukewarm faith. (see Allan Boesak's *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos*, 1987, which interprets Revelation from a South African perspective. see also Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 1995, which uses the lens of Latin America to read Revelation.)

Revelation 1:4-9

With this larger set of contexts in view, then, what stands out in this brief but important introductory passage from Revelation 1? Several ideas come to mind.

The address in 1:4 to the seven churches in Asia serves as a helpful reminder that Christian communities are concrete localizations of the body of Christ in particular settings. At

the same time, the number seven surely functions on a symbolic level that shows the connection between these various local churches and the transcendent God who unites them all in Christ.

The reference in 1:4 to the one "who is and who was and who is to come" calls attention to the steadfastness of God in present, past, and future. This same God has been faithful to those who have gone before, and God will be faithful to those who come after us. And so is God merciful and faithful even now.

Revelation 1:5 refers to the life, death, resurrection, and eschatological triumph of Jesus by calling him the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the earthly kings. This invokes the narrative of Jesus' life, as well as the narrative that will follow in the rest of Revelation, especially with the emphasis upon Jesus' eschatological glory in which the faithful will share. This victory, however, comes only after Jesus' own ultimate suffering on the cross, whereby he took on human sin; indeed he died because of human sin.

The doxology in 1:5-6 reminds us of the orientation of the faithful towards God even amidst suffering. God has prepared a kingdom for these believers, and with it comes both the joy and the responsibility of serving as God's priests.

The citations from Dan 7:13 and Zech 12:10 in Rev 1:7 show the importance of connecting the story of Jesus to the story of Israel and Israel's scriptures. The Christian story is intimately bound together with the Jewish story (the reference to the synagogue of Satan in Rev 2:9 notwithstanding!). The citation of Dan 7:13 echoes a similar citation in Mark's Gospel (in the section of Mark known as the "little apocalypse" -13:1-37). The motif of Jesus coming with the clouds brings with it the assurance of the culmination of both salvation and judgment. The end of v. 7 is a resounding affirmation - nai, amen - "yes indeed!"

Revelation 1:8 once again emphasizes the utter all-encompassing identity of God, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the one "who is and who was and who is to come." Just as surely as God was present with God's people in times of old, and just as God remains fully present in the here and now, so God will be faithful to God's promises in the future also. (see also Rev 21:6 and 22:13.)

Revelation 1:9 really begins a new subsection of the book, as John begins to relate his vision when he was caught up in the Spirit. Still, it is significant to note the three things that John says he shares with his readers in Jesus: the tribulation, the kingdom, and patient endurance. The well-known tradition is that John was exiled on the island of Patmos because of his faithful witness. (On the question of the identity of "John," see Aune's commentary.)

In sum, the Book of Revelation is part of the Christian scriptures that should not be relegated to fringe movements or to those trying to predict the end of the age. Rather, Revelation speaks powerfully about God's embrace of human suffering in Jesus, about God's redemption in Christ, and about the kingdom of God that is coming-even as the faithful endure suffering here and now with patient and persistent resolve, especially as they side with those most oppressed in the world.