

Prayer:

Alpha & Omega, Beginning & End, Bright Morning Star: We worship you. We join ourselves with the angels crying "Holy, Holy, Holy," And we rejoice that you have made, and will someday make forever, your home among us.

Introduction:

Today's message is an introduction message. A first of the series, all sorts of information message.

I had a dream last week that Ashland University—where I never went—had announced I'd won a major award for inventing porridge. It started with me, and it was time the world new, you know?

It's not true. But what is true is that today's message is a little like porridge. If you really need it—and we really need it—it's great. Like today's message. But there are other more interesting things than porridge, and there are probably more interesting things than all the introduction stuff I'm going to share. All I can hope is that we realize we need what I'm going to share if we're going to understand Revelation well.

And Revelation, huh? Crazy.

Reactions:

Seriously, though: as far as the book of Revelation

goes, most of us come to it with a weird mix of reluctance and curiosity. It's like an accident of some sort, a train wreck, or a fire. And that's not bad imagery, because Revelation has set fire to the church--in good and bad ways--and it's also wrecked the church now and then--how we incorporate the book into our lives, how we "use it," becomes a source of competition, division, anger, judgment and all sorts of things.

And often, what's had the greatest influence in our understanding of Revelation isn't high-quality biblical, theological, historical research, it's fiction. Totally made up stuff that at best waves to Revelation from a distance as it passes by.

And we react to the book in different ways. Some of us reject it out of hand, because in our experience it's only caused problems. Others obsess about it, because we've been promised it's a map of the future.

I want us to abandon obsession or rejection and try a third thing, which is simply this: Value the book of Revelation for what it is, on its own terms. I hope that we can appreciate it without wanting it to be more than it is. So let's talk about what it is.

We'll start by talking about what gave rise to it. Revelation's historical context.

Interpretation: Historical Context: Domitian

It's likely that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian, between 81 and 96 AD; so we're talking 50 to 70 years after Jesus' death & resurrection.

Domitian was a Roman emperor who was such a persecutor of the church that one early Christian historian thought of him as a second Nero (Eusebius; cf. Keener, 36). Nero, of course, was the guy who set fire to Rome and blamed it on Christians in 64 AD. He was a baddy: he also killed his mom & brother and built a 90 ft. statue of himself people had to worship.

Interpretation: Historical Context: Domitian's Imperial Cult

Domitian expanded and spread Emperor worship throughout the Empire, what's often called "the imperial cult." This is the whole pile ceremonies and demands and festivals and taxes and architecture that centered around worshipping the emperor as a god, and past emperors as previous gods.

This was a huge institution in Roman society.

Cities would long to have temples to the emperor or past emperors built in their town because of the honor and special status they'd gain. This is like the way some cities fight to have prisons built in their town because of the cash & the jobs that'll come their way.

Anybody who was anybody in the Roman Empire--or who wanted to be somebody--would take part in the imperial cult: Go to the temple, Offer incense to the emperor, Give some Cash, March in a parade. It's how you built your resume. To live in the empire was to take part in this, you couldn't help it anymore than we can help using dollars as our unit of exchange.

Interpretation: Author: John

We know who wrote the book. Sort of. We know this book was written by John; that John was a Christian and he's writing from Patmos Island.

Now: what we don't know is who John was, maybe but maybe not the author of the Gospel of John or the letters of John. But he was clearly known and respected by the churches he's writing to, and has journeyed with them. He's on Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," which is probably a reference to some form of persecution. Patmos was sort of an island-prison, a place criminals were banished too.

And we know that there's at least some persecution--different kinds, different levels, but some—is definitely happening against the Christians John is writing to.

And John is in the Spirit on the Lord's Day--the Lord's day is Sunday, and it's in contrast to a monthly "Emperor's Day" that areas in this western part of the

Roman Empire would celebrate monthly. To call Jesus Lord, of course, is to say that the Emperor—any of them, Domitian or anyone else—was not.

Interpretation: Genres

And more so than in other cases, knowing Revelation's genre matters enormously to knowing Revelation's meaning.

A genre is a particular type of writing that has particular characteristics: form, style, language, rules. And particular genres have particular rules related to their interpretation. You don't read a love poem the same way you read an instruction manual or a grocery list, right? I know some people who try, unfortunately.

And Revelation isn't trying to hide its genres. I say genres, because like nearly every written thing, there is more than one of them.

Interpretation: Genres: Prophecy

We see in v3 "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near." Mysterious, eh?

Prophecy is clearly one of Revelation's genres.

And there are two types of prophecy in the Bible: fore-

telling, and forth-telling. We tend to assume that if something is prophetic, it's fore-telling: it's telling us about the future, about what's coming down the line. And this is a tiny part of what Revelation is about. But prophecy is also forth-telling. It speaks forth against our lives right now, and urges us to get in line with what God asks of us. Forth-telling & Fore-telling.

In v8 we learn that Jesus is “the one who was, who is, and who is coming” (most of our versions translate this as “who is to come,” but the greek carries this sense that Jesus is on his way, he's coming.)

Forth-telling & Fore-telling are two sides of the same coin: Jesus is going to show up, things are going to happen, and so you better get in line right now. Because the future is bringing this, you had better change your life right now. Does this make sense?

Interpretation: Genres: A Letter

But Revelation also doesn't hide the fact that it is a letter. It's a letter “to the seven churches that are in Asia.” We'll talk more about this next week, but these are churches that are in sort of western Turkey (cf. Keener, 66), places we saw when we walked through Acts way back in 2019. And the churches John writes to--Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicia--these are in some of the most strategic and important cities in the Roman province of Asia. Ephesus especially was important,

and the city closest to Patmos. It's likely that this letter would have circled from city to city, ending back up at Ephesus, which traced a ministry tour that John may have taken moving from city to city--of course that was before he was banished to prison-island.

And here's a basic, basic thing about letters. They're meant to be understood. Right? This is important. At the end of the day, Revelation is a letter, written to a number of churches, with some crazy looking stuff attached, but it's meant to be understood. John isn't writing something that he hoped these churches would hang onto so that we in America in 2020 could play crisis bingo with. That's really sort of egotistical and narcissistic.

This is fundamental, and it will be one of my assumptions as I guide us through this book: Even though Revelation is weird, it's meant to be understood within its original context, by the churches it was written to. We only get to understand it after they do.

Interpretation: Genres: Worship

And Revelation is a book about worship. Over and over and over we see scenes of worship. Hymns & songs & declarations of God's worthiness appear again and again and again. This is relevant because songs & hymns are a particular type of writing. Praise is a genre.

Interpretation: Genres: Apocalyptic:

And beyond this, the book we're talking about Revelation, right? "The Revelation of John," as some Bible translations put it, although many now say "The Apocalypse of John." Apocalypse is the greek word that means--surprise--"revelation." That is, "disclosure," something that's revealed, especially through a dramatic encounter with God.

But this Greek word is also the name for a particular genre. The genre "Apocalyptic."

We still have letters. We still have songs. We can get our heads around prophecy. But apocalyptic as a genre, as a type of writing, is something that we just don't have. And this causes all sorts of problems for us. Because what we'll do is see this crazy apocalyptic genre stuff in Revelation, and see all the other places it appears in the Bible: in the gospels, in letters, in the Old Testament. And we'll try and snap it all together like a puzzle. We'll take the apocalyptic pieces out of whatever books we find them in, and build ourselves a pair of glasses with them.

Then we put on the glasses and try and read scripture and view the world through this thing we've made up.

But this takes all the passages out of context, and links things together that should never be connected.

It's bad Bible study. It's like if we took all the ads that came in the mail for a month and tried to go shopping at a store that doesn't exist, and expect good sales.

Apocalyptic is a genre that is filled with stock images, standardized language, all the same stuff. Which is why we can, say, read the book of Daniel and read Revelation and see so much matching stuff there. They're pulling things from the same Apocalypse-genre bin.

Here's how it works:

Apocalyptic material tries to say that what we see here and now is bigger than we think. It seeks to reframe our perceptions of what's going on around us. We use apocalyptic language to talk about the way heaven is touching earth. Well—we don't. But Israel did.

It's usually used by those without power to speak against the power that's oppressing them. And it's not for the oppressors. It's coded. It's for those "who have ears to hear," right? It's insider language that the outsiders, with all the power, wouldn't understand, can't understand.

But the apocalyptic material in Revelation was meant to be understandable by the churches John was writing to. And as we talk about apocalyptic language, we'll

talk about the connections John's first readers, these churches, would have likely made between their situation and the passages they read.

Finally, Apocalyptic material takes seriously spiritual realities that we often don't. Most of us would say, maybe reluctantly, "Yes, the devil's real, angels & demons are real, there are supernatural beings that can manipulate this world." But we don't typically draw on that belief for our general day-to-day living. The supernatural just isn't as important to most of us as the natural. Apocalyptic material assumes that we take the supernatural world seriously, and that whatever's going on in the world around us connected to supernatural truths.

So, a number of different genres. Apocalyptic, Worship, Letter, Prophecy. Understanding Revelation means we acknowledge them all. The book isn't a pane of glass, it's a diamond with many faces, and it's more valuable because of it.

Interpretation: Features

As we walk through Revelation we will see so much stuff. Visions. Scenes in the throne room of God. Imagery that's stock apocalyptic language: angels, and voices, and trumpets, lamp-stands, the parting of the heavens & heavenly worship. This is standard stuff that's only weird because we're not used to it.

We'll see a black & white universe; where things are

good and of God, or they are bad and of Satan. There's the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world; whose do you want to be a part of? Revelation forces us to choose between loyalty to God and disloyalty to God. We're told very early on:

"To the one who is loving us and freeing us from our sins with his blood--and he made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father--to him be the glory and the sovereign power, into the ages of ages. Amen"

We're told that we are a kingdom, a kingdom of priests. This echoes God's promise to Israel after He freed them from Egypt. And in this we see another feature of Revelation, that it is just grabbing Bible by the handful: allusions, language, images from all over scripture are used in the thing.

We'll see "witnessing language," "testimony" language. We read earlier that John is the witness to these things; Jesus is the "faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the one ruling over the kingdoms of the earth."

And you know: this word, "witness," comes from the greek word for "martyr." Revelation is a book for martyrs--witnesses, testifiers--sometimes ones who have been killed, like Jesus, because of their faithful witnessing.

And of course, we'll see the devil as an active agent in the world, embodied by Rome and the Imperial Cult, pursuing those Christians who are faithful witnesses.

Interpretation: Approaches

When it comes to the book, though, there are really a few major ways people approach it, try to interpret it. (Keener, 27ff. DeSilva, Revelation, class notes; Note that I'm leaving off the less common historicist approach, which has functionally been overtaken by the futurist.)

Interpretation: Approaches: Preterist:

The first I want to mention is called the "Preterist approach." P-r-e-t-e-r-i-s-t. "Preterist."

In the preterist approach, the "pre" is critical. If you approach Revelation with a preterist view, you assume that a) Revelation is talking about historical events, but b) that they've already all happened. For the preterist, everything Revelation talks about was finished by the 2nd or 3rd century.

And so it stands now as a neat example of apocalyptic language, you can maybe do an article or two on "early Christian perspectives on Rome," or something. But things like the promises of Revelation 21 and 22 aren't future hopes, they're just, you know, coded speech on how the Church is spreading throughout the Roman Empire. I was taught this was the "crowd it in"

approach; because you crowd the whole book into the first couple hundred years after Jesus' death & resurrection. Preterist. It's historical, but it's all done.

Interpretation: Approaches: Futurist:

Then there's the futurist approach. Futurist. In this model, Revelation is telling its first readers about today. Which means, basically, that the book was useless to every Christian until we arrived. (Cf. Keener, 28). This can be a little bit self-centered, you know? Whenever Christians try to use Revelation in this way, they almost always end up in strange theological places. It gets weird. Anyone who thinks that Revelation is talking about contemporary American politics, contemporary global pandemics, contemporary protests for racial justice is taking a futurist approach, whether they realize it or not, and saying that they believe Revelation had no relevance for anyone but those living right now.

Interpretation: Approaches: Idealist:

There's also the idealist approach. In this approach, Revelation is just a book filled with timeless truths. It's one big symbolic commentary on life, full of principles, but nothing in it has any connection to any historical event or situation.

And, yeah, Revelation has powerful imagery that Christians have always turned to, and powerful hopes that the oppressed have especially needed in

persecuted places during persecuting times. But to say that the book isn't talking about anything that's legitimately occurred in history seems to make Jesus a liar, because it starts by saying he's got a message for the churches in Turkey.

Interpretation: Approaches: Rich

So: I tend to fall primarily near the preterist camp. I believe much of Revelation is talking about the situation that John's readers were facing. But I also tend to fall near the idealist camp: there are some powerful calls to loyalty, to faithfulness, to Jesus that are applicable for Christians no matter where we are. But I also tend to fall within view of the futurist camp, because God hasn't triumphed over all his enemies yet, right? We aren't living in the New Jerusalem, where no fear or sadness or hunger or need exists that God doesn't meet.

But let me just say this: I don't think, can't think, that Jesus' return is close. Is tomorrow. Even if, in grief, I wish it were. I don't think all the bad stuff we're hearing about means the world is about to end. What we really mean, most of the time, is that we feel as if the world as we know it is about to end. And what that reveals is that we've had an incredibly privileged, stable life. All throughout history people have experienced their worlds ending, their ways of life gone—genocides and wars and nuclear bombs and forced slavery and economic collapses and famines,

and on and on and on and Jesus hasn't yet returned, and all the Bible actually ever gives us is that he will and we can't know when. So if we want to say "Now is the time! It sure seems like things are coming to a head! It sure seems like this is the end of the world!" what we're actually revealing is just how stable and privileged a life we've led, one in which we've never before felt like the world as we know it was coming to an end. What we're saying when we say that, whether we realize it or not, is that "Their genocide, their economic collapses, their national disintegrations, their civil wars, their conscription, their overthrow, their bombs and famines and wars and deaths and plagues—they didn't count, what counts is mine." And we don't mean to communicate that, but it's what we're saying. Because if we read Revelation with a futurist view, or if, as we sense the loss of our routine way of life, we say that this moment in time is what Revelation must be talking about, what we're really doing is saying that it's us and our loss that matters, and we're ignoring all those other important genres in this book that show up far more than foretelling prophecy does.

This is why I'm a little bit idealist, because the book gives voice to our pain. It's why I'm mostly preterist, because it wasn't written for us. It's why I'm a little bit futurist, because Jesus isn't back yet although I want the world's troubles to end.

Before we end, here, let me just summarize what Revelation is trying to say, really. What's the point this apocalyptic, worship-filled letter trying to say to those seven churches.

Interpretation: Main Points

Jesus is the “faithful witness,” he is the “firstborn of the dead,” he’s “ruler of all the world,” and he’s on his way, right now. So no matter what you hear, seven churches, no matter what you see, seven churches, no matter what’s going on around you: organize yourself around Jesus' return in power. This is the prophetic truth about Revelation: Jesus is coming, he’s going to win; you better start acting like it right now.

And the flip-side of these things is that Rome, and particularly its Emperor--who claimed to rule the world, and sure did seem too--they are not the ultimate power in the universe. In fact, Rome is evil and their Emperor is demonic.

And we seven churches have to choose whose side we’re on: Rome’s or God’s. For Revelation, being culturally relevant isn’t okay. We’re not supposed to mix and mingle with the world at all, because the world is devilish--and there’s no room for the devil in the life of a Christian. Revelation makes stark demands of allegiance. In fact, Revelation's main call is in 18:4, when Jesus declares we must “Come out of her, my people.” We must disavow and disassociate

ourselves from Rome entirely because it's not the greatest empire on earth, it's satan embodied.

And for those of us among these seven churches who persist in faithfulness, who exit Rome no matter what it costs us, we're in for good things we can't even imagine. We're the blessed ones who hear what John is saying and hold to what he's written. It will cost us, John lets us know, but our status as privileged people will be clear to everyone, because we'll be citizens of God's Kingdom, the New Jerusalem. All our needs will be met, we won't know what it is to fear anymore, and all the troubles that loyalty to Jesus brought us in this world will be nothing compared to the rewards we receive for our faithfulness.

Revelation presents us with an alternative view of the world that motivates its first audience—and even us—to live differently, by faith.

Conclusion:

You cannot read Revelation, if you read it well, and be unchanged. This is a book that confronts us. We are repulsed by parts of it, some of its imagery. We are challenged by it, some of its calls to faithfulness. But if we read this as people who want to be pleasing to the Lord, want to be faithful, it will change us; it really will.

I'm almost, the tiniest bit afraid of this series, because

it seems to me that if I were to take seriously the call of Revelation, everything about my life would be different. And I just don't know if I'm up for it, most days.

As we look over this book in the coming days, I hope that we'll be able to understand what it meant for John's readers. And I also really pray that we'll be able to discern how we can bridge the gap between them and us, their situations and our own, so that we can be changed by this book.

I'll do what I can to position us to walk that third way through obsession and total disregard. I'm excited. This book is crazy. But it is good, and I hope that by the time Fall comes we'll be able to agree.

Porridge is over, for now. Let's sing together.