

Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

The Revelation to John

Readings: *Introduction to Revelation*

Reflections:

- The Revelation to John: This book has caused more controversy and confusion than any other book in the Bible. This is understandable as it uses primarily prophetic imagery from the books of Ezekiel and Daniel that in Jesus' day were the most talked about and controversial books in the Hebrew Scriptures. Virtually all generations who have lived believed they were living in the last days and that the return of Christ was near. People have been predicting this incorrectly for almost 2000 years. For this reason, this opening section will provide expanded notes to set the stage for the later commentary. For those wanting a more in depth study, *Revelation: Four Views*, edited by Steve Gregg is an excellent resource.
- Authorship: The early church uniformly agreed that John the apostle wrote the book of John, John's letters and Revelation. The one piece of early evidence that suggests there may have been another John, called the Elder, is probably not strong enough to overturn the other strong evidence in favor of John the apostle as the author. There is textual evidence to suggest that if indeed the Apostle John is the author that he used two different scribes for Revelations and for his other works. The Greek of Revelation has grammatical errors where the Gospel of John as well as his letters is virtually flawless Greek. Some of the common Greek words are different between Revelations and John (e.g. a different Greek word is used for Lamb). These differences have led some to believe that this is a different John, even some speculating these revelations find their source in John the Baptizer since he consistently referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God. With this all said, once we allow John to use a scribe, it seems that the difference in Greek and the different words used for "lamb" can be easily explained. Also, John the apostle captured John the Baptist's teaching on the Lamb of God in his biography of Jesus and so it makes more sense that the apostle John included the Baptizer's understanding of Jesus as the Lamb of God into this apocalyptic work. We should also note that some scholars believe Revelations was originally written in Aramaic, John's native tongue before he rewrote it into Greek. This is based on some of the words used and grammatical structures of the sentences.

- **Date of writing:** Most conservative scholars date this writing around 90 CE at the end of the Apostle John's life. Some date it as early as 60 CE or earlier for very compelling reasons. The Beast is given the number 666. There are some early variant manuscripts that have the number 616. There was a practice among the Jews called Gematria where they would take a name, convert it to Hebrew symbols and then associate numbers with it. Nero's name in Hebrew (Neron Caesar) totaled 666. Nero's name in Greek or Latin (Nero Caesar) totaled 616. Some scholars follow the record of Irenaeus (dated 185 CE) that said he spoke to people who had talked to John face to face and that the vision "was not seen long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of the Domitian's reign." Now there are two other pieces of evidence to consider about Irenaeus' statement. In other places in his writings he references the ancient copies of Revelation. This would seem odd as he refers to the connection with John as being almost in his day. Another factor is that the quality of the text of Irenaeus' writing is very poor. Some have suggested that his statement should read that it was not the revelation that was seen "not long time since but almost in our day" but rather that it should read, "He (referring to John) was not seen long time since but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign." This would fit better with the other statements about ancient copies of Revelation. Now, some scholars believe the revelation was received earlier for the Jews in Jerusalem but then later published around 90 CE and distributed to the Christians in Asia Minor. Whether we take this final approach or simply suggest this was all written prior to 70 CE, some connection to an earlier date seems to account for the internal and external evidence. The earlier date also makes sense in light of the scale of persecution described. Although there was some persecution against the church around 90 CE under Domitian, it was nothing compared to what was suffered under Nero. As well there are references about the Jews persecuting the churches in Asia Minor which would have more likely been the case prior to 70 CE. Also, Jesus' viewed his return to judge Jerusalem as a primary apocalyptic event for the early church. It would make sense that this book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, would give further details about the events he spoke of during his life. Lastly, in light of the bulk of the content of this book being focused on encouragement to a suffering church, it makes sense that the book would continue to be distributed among Christians who were facing suffering.
- **Approach to interpretation:** A final question must also be asked. Does this prophetic book have two or three layers of meaning? Did it have a historic context and application but also another application? Does it still refer to the final return of Christ? This is called the Futurist view of Revelation. Could it also have meaning to explain the unfolding of history over the last 2000 years? This is called the Historicist view of Revelation. This could be the case. The challenge with symbolic imagery is that it is easy to find parallels regardless of the context. It is similar to palm reading or fortune cookies. If you are general enough, anything can apply to anyone. (E.g. fortune cookie: "Something unexpected is about to happen.") In light of this, it seems wise to try to understand the historical context first (especially since John writes at the beginning that this was given

to reveal what “must soon take place.” And then we can remain open to other applications as it may seem relevant or helpful. We should note that like dreams people have in the night, visions often combine actual events and people with symbols and images. So when interpreting a vision or a dream we must allow that there can be real people and events intersecting with imagery and symbol in the same vision. We do not need to push an entire vision or dream to complete symbol or complete literalism but rather allow that both real people and events can interact with and be woven together with imagery. Finally, we must also allow that these are a series of visions or dreams. This is not just one continuous, chronological vision. Similar to Ezekiel, Revelation has visions that appear to be parallel visions that take similar events and replay them through different imagery. The question is how do we identify those parallel visions and then understand the different nuanced meaning.

- Symbolism and Biblical Imagery in Revelation: The book of Revelation draws heavily on imagery of the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity, Ezekiel and Daniel particularly, as well as from Zechariah and the life of Christ:
 - Exodus:
 - The evil power is called Egypt (Revelation 11:8)
 - The plagues parallel the plagues against Egypt
 - Christians are freed by the blood (Revelation 1:5)
 - The dragon recalls Egypt (Revelation 12:3ff) and Egypt is called a dragon in Ezekiel 29:3 and Psalm 74:13
 - The woman (who parallels Israel) is nourished in the wilderness (Revelation 12:6, 14)
 - The redeemed sing the song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3) just as Israel sang the song of Moses when they crossed the sea
 - Ezekiel:
 - Throne vision and the four living creatures Ezekiel 1; Revelation 4
 - Book being opened (Ezekiel 2-3; Revelation 5)
 - Elders (Ezekiel 14:1; 20:3; Revelation 4:4, 10-11, 5:8, 14:4)
 - Four plagues (Ezekiel 5; Revelation 6:1-8)
 - Those slain under the altar (Ezekiel 6; Revelation 6:9-11)
 - Wrath of God (Ezekiel 7; Revelation 6:12-17)
 - Seal on the Saint’s foreheads (Ezekiel 9; Revelation 7)
 - Coals from the altar (Ezekiel 10; Revelation 8)
 - One third destruction (Ezekiel 5:1-4, Ezekiel 12; Revelation 8:6-12)

- No more delay (Ezekiel 12; Revelation 10:1-7)
 - Eating of the scroll (Ezekiel 2; Revelation 10:8-11)
 - Prophecy against the nations (Ezekiel 25-32; Revelation 10:11)
 - Measuring of the Temple (Ezekiel 40-43; Revelation 11:1-2)
 - Comparing Jerusalem to Sodom (Ezekiel 16; Revelation 11:8)
 - Cup of wrath (Ezekiel 23; Revelation 14)
 - Vine of the land (Ezekiel 15; Revelation 14:18-20)
 - The great harlot (Ezekiel 16, 23; Revelation 17-18)
 - Lament sung over the city (Ezekiel 27; Revelation 18)
 - Scavenger's feast (Ezekiel 39; Revelation 19)
 - First resurrection (Ezekiel 37; Revelation 20:4-6)
 - Battle of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38-39; Revelation 20:7-9)
 - New Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40-48; Revelation 21)
 - River of Life (Ezekiel 47; Revelation 22)
- Daniel:
 - Vision of the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9; Revelation 1:14)
 - Son of Man coming with the clouds (Daniel 7:13; Revelation 1:7; 14:14)
 - Declaration of the kingdom of God (Daniel 7:14; Revelation 1:6)
 - Three and a half time period (a time, two times and a half time (Daniel 12:7; Revelation 11:9,11)
 - Ten horns (Daniel 7:8; Revelation 12:3; 13:1; 17:3,8)
 - The leopard, bear and lion (Daniel 7:4-6; Revelation 13:2)
 - The Beast boasting and blaspheming (Daniel 7:8,11; Revelation 13:5)
 - The war against the saints (Daniel 7:21; Revelation 13:7)
 - Worship of the Beast's statue (Daniel 3:5-7; 15; Revelation 13:15)
 - The book of life and final judgment (Daniel 12:1-2; Revelation 20:12)
 - One key difference: "But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end." (Daniel 12:4). "And he said to me, "Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand." (Revelation 22:10)

- Zechariah
 - Four horsemen (Zech. 1; Revelation 6)
 - Man with a measuring line (Zech. 2; Rev 11:1-2)
 - Angel of the Lord and Satan as the accuser (Zech. 3; Revelation 12)
 - Seven eyes (Zech 3; Revelation 5)
 - Two olive trees (Zech. 4; Rev 11:3)
 - Golden lamp stand (Zech. 4; Rev 1)
 - Scroll capturing a revelation (Zech. 5; Rev 10)
 - Wickedness represented as a woman (Zech. 5; Rev 17)
 - King riding on a colt/white horse (Zech. 9; Rev 19)
 - The nations gather to fight Jerusalem (Zech. 12,14; Rev 11:2)
 - Fountain of life giving water (Zech. 13, 14; Revelation 22)
- Jesus' life:
 - Christ's death, resurrection and victory over Satan is referred to throughout (Revelation 1:18, 2:8, 5:6-9, 12:10, etc.)
 - The "two witnesses" in Revelation 11 closely parallel the career of Christ
- Three key conclusions:
 - First, we see that these visions tie together much of the symbolism familiar to Israel. Revelation is a composite of many other themes and images used throughout the narrative of Israel's story.
 - Second, as Daniel and Ezekiel looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the final judgment against Jerusalem, Revelations sees itself as the final concluding revelation that brings these other prophecies to conclusion (note key difference between Daniel and Revelations – "Do not seal...for the time is at hand.")
 - Third, both Ezekiel and Daniel focused on Jerusalem and Israel as the focus of their prophecies. This underscores that probably the best starting point would be to view Revelation as being directed toward Israel, Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE.

- Identifying Images: There are a number of key images throughout the book of Revelation and it is helpful to identify those early when reading the prophecies.
 - Numbers:
 - twelve – number for covenant people (12 tribes, 12 disciples – 24 is therefore the number of the Israel and the church combined as the total of God’s covenant people, 144 is likely a reference to Jewish Christians, participants in both covenants, old and new)
 - seven – number of completion, perfection
 - three and a half – number of incompleteness, “it isn’t over yet”
 - thousand – many, a multitude
 - Characters
 - Dragon – Satan
 - Beast – Nero (most likely)
 - Four living creatures – the gods of the nations in submission to God (see notes on Ezekiel 1:1-28 - Day 227/August 15)
 - The harlot or prostitute – Rebellious Israel
 - Mystery Babylon – Jerusalem
 - The woman – the true people of God, the church
 - Two witnesses – the consistent presence of God declaring the truth through his key leaders, may be two specific leaders at that time (like James the brother of Jesus) or it may refer to two leadership roles that God has used over and over throughout history (see notes on Zechariah 4:1-4 – Day 270/September 27)