

Introduction, Part I

What Are the Views of Revelation?

The Futurist View

Although the first three chapters of the book deal with the 1st century Church, in the main the visions of John are exclusively concerned with the events at the end of history and are therefore yet to be fulfilled. (Justin Martyr, George Eldon Ladd / Hal Lindsey, Charles Ryrie, Tim LaHaye)

The Historicist View

The visions of John forecast the whole of human history, and more particularly of Western Europe, up to the second coming of Christ. (Martin Luther, John Calvin, Thomas Cranmer)

The Idealist (Spiritual/Allegorical) View

The visions of John do not have reference to actual events, but sets out the principles upon which God works throughout history. (Origen, Augustine)

The Partial Preterist View

The visions of John are, for the most part, directed toward the contemporary situation of the Church and the world (i.e., contemporary to John's time). These visions concern things that would imminently come to pass (1:1, 3) and thus, from our perspective, have already been fulfilled. (Luis del Alcazar, John Owen, Philip Schaff, R.C. Sproul, N.T. Wright)

The Situation Contemporary to the Writing of the Book

The mighty empire of Rome dominates the world. The cult of the emperor has become the religion of the state. Worship of the emperor as a god is required of all citizens as a sign of allegiance to the empire. Christians, particularly in the province of Asia, are struggling under Roman persecution for *not* calling Caesar "Lord." The apostles are dead, except for John, and he is in Roman imposed exile. Christ had ascended into heaven with the promise that He would return and consummate His rule over all, and yet He still tarries. Israel is in open rebellion against Rome, and Roman armies under Vespasian and Titus have landed and are laying waste to the whole land. The people are fleeing to Jerusalem to seek their safety behind its massive walls, but the Roman armies are maneuvering to encircle the holy city. What's going on in the world?

The Message of the Book:

To answer the question: *Who has the power?* or, *Who is in control?*—the Roman Emperor and his governors, or Christ? Who really is Lord?

John takes the readers behind the scenes, behind what is apparent to what is real: the power and authority of Christ over all. He shows the struggling Christians that earthly rulers, even the mighty emperor himself, are subject to the power of Christ and can do nothing but that which accords with God's plan for history. All authority in heaven and earth have been given to Christ, and His kingdom will triumph over apostate nations and even the mightiest of empires.

The principles of Christ's present reign are seen in a historic contest— His judgments of the nation of Israel and the empire of Rome—but apply beyond it to all phases of history and are seen as coming to their perfect consummation in the new heavens and new earth. The message of the book is ultimately *optimistic* from the Christian point of view.

The Genre of Revelation

What kind of book is the Book of Revelation? What genre of literature: "Apocalyptic," or "Prophecy"?

Apocalyptic literature –200 BC-100 AD (*The Apocalypse of Esdras, ...of Peter, ...of Moses; II, III Enoch, II Baruch*, etc.)

vs.

Prophetic literature, following after the tradition of the Old Testament writing prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc.

*1. Apocalyptic*¹

The title of the book is "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ."

"Apocalypse" means an unveiling, a revelation.

- a. Apocalyptic lit. is almost entirely concerned about the age to come (Eschatology).

This age is dominated by evil. Salvation comes only when God acts at the end of history to destroy this evil world. There is no concept of God working in history to bring history to a particular goal.

¹. For more on this subject see Leon Morris, *Revelation*, rev. ed., "The Revelation of St John and Apocalyptic," Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, pp. 24-27.

Pessimistic out-look on history. Concerned with the end of history, rather than the course of history. “All we know is that the world is getting worse and worse, and all we can do is hope for the end – soon!” (David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance*, Dominion Press, 1987, p. 25).

For example: *The Word and Revelation of Esdras*:

“It is good for a man not to be born rather than to come into the world... It is good not to be in life.”

“Then the heaven, and the earth, and the sea shall be destroyed....And the prophet said: And how has the heaven sinned? And God said: Since there is evil. And the prophet said: Lord, and the earth, how has it sinned? And God said: Since the adversary, having heard the dreadful threatening, shall be hidden, even on account of this will I melt the earth, and with it the opponent of the race of men.”

- b. Apocalyptic lacks ethical urgency. Eschatology over Ethics.

2. *Prophecy*

Revelation is called a book of prophecy (1:3*; 10:11; 22:7, 10 18, 19*)

- a. History (“Realized Eschatology”)

Prophecy is eminently concerned with history. In the prophets, history is the sphere in which God works redemption. History and Eschatology are not pulled apart but are held together in tension. History is where Christ has already won the ultimate eschatological victory. Death, Hell, and the Devil have been vanquished by His death and resurrection. The people of God share in His triumph over Satan *now* “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” The victory of the cross stands central to the message of the book.

In the prophets, history was also the sphere in which God enacted His judgments.

What was the role of the prophets?

“A prophet in the biblical sense is not simply one who predicts the future, but one who sees into the realities that lie behind the

appearances of this world and sets them out, with the consequences he sees, so that people may act accordingly...” (J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries, The Westminster Press, 1979, p. 2).

Prophets were not simple prognosticators on the level of a Nostradamus or an Edgar Cayce. Prophets were God’s covenant attorneys who prosecuted His covenant lawsuit against His covenant-breaking people and against the nations.

The prophets first delivered God’s indictment of the nation for its unfaithfulness and called for its repentance. This was the first stage of the lawsuit. When the nation did not repent and return to the Lord, the prophet prosecuted the second stage of the lawsuit: the sentence, the declaration of the imminent enactment of the covenant sanctions.

The history of the Covenant Lawsuit

Sanctions: Deut. 28:45-55

Babylon brought against Jerusalem

There was no doubt the element of prediction in biblical prophecy, but it was not simply a reading of what the future held. The prophets fore-declared the consequences within history of the ethical behavior of the nation in terms of God’s promised sanctions.

The prophets saw these judgments as the realization within history of the ultimate eschatological judgment. Realized Eschatology. In other words, the prophets saw the realities of the age to come—the great, last-day judgment—realized even in this age.

E.g. Is. 13 – the judgment of Babylon. The prophet describes the immanent judgment of Babylon in terms of the last judgment at the end of the age.

The Kingdom of God is not something entirely future, but is a reality even in the present age.

- b. Ethics - the call for action within history. (Ethics over Eschatology)

Prophecy is fundamentally concerned more with ethics than eschatology. The prophets continually warned Israel of God's judgment and called for repentance and change in ethical behavior.

The Oracles of Weal and Woe (Blessing and Cursing for obedience or disobedience)

In Revelation:

"Blessed" 7X (Seven Oracles of Weal)

1:3 "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and *keep* those things which are written in it; for the time near. (Calling for ethical action in face of *the time*).

14:13 "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."
(Motivation for faith and ethics)

16:15 "Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame." (Calling for ethical action in face of coming judgment).

19:9 "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of Lamb." (Motivation for perseverance in faith).

20:6 "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such death has no power, but they shall be priests...

22:7 "Blessed is he who keeps the words of this prophecy of this book." (Call to ethical behavior in response to the revelation)

22:14 "Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gate into the city."

Three Oracles of Woe (8:13)

9:1-12 "One woe is past" (9:12)

9:13-11:14 "The second woe is past" (11:14)

11:15-17 "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and sea! (12:12)

Conclusion: Revelation is a book of prophecy, the *last* book of prophecy. The core of the prophetic message is: Christ reigns in the kingdoms of men and gives them to whomsoever he will (cf. Dan. 4:17).

Revelation is the final covenant lawsuit against the nation of Israel—the sentence: destruction by the armies of Rome, the new Babylon.

It is also an oracle of woe against Rome itself, announcing its destruction for persecuting Christ, i.e., for persecuting the Church. “Babylon the Great is fallen, is fallen...” (Rev. 18:2).

“Revelation uncovered the missing dimension, so that Christians should act according to the will of God they could not see, rather than of the Caesar they could—so that at whatever cost, they should put eternal destiny before apparent security and prosperity in the present (Sweet, p. 2).

Note: The Greek of Revelation

“Scholars of Classical Greek tend to turn up their noses at the prose of the New Testament—it’s a low-brow dialect, removed from the diction and rhythm of Golden Age Athens—but when they come to the Greek of Revelation, they throw up their hands in horror. The Greek of John’s Gospel, simple as the vocabulary might be, at least conforms to the basic rules of grammar and can contribute an interesting turn of phrase—but this? This is down right barbaric... It reads like a rude translation by someone for whom Greek was a second language. It reads like a work written by someone not steeped in the proper *exempla* of fine Greek prose. Or, perhaps, it reads like a work written by someone steeped in a rude translation...and so it is. For the language of Revelation, the terms, the turns of phrase, the images are not new—just newly recombined. The language echoes, nay, inhabits the tongue of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced in the last few centuries before Christ, the translation that was the first Bible of the early church. This is not Classical Greek, nor is it trying to be; rather it is Bible Language, a dialect we recognize deep in our bones when a preacher suddenly lapses from words of cell phones and cell structures to thees, thous, forthwiths, and forsooths. The language of the book is our chief lead. Its meaning is indistinguishable, inextricable from, incomprehensible without the Old Testament” (Dr. Derek Olsen “The New Jerusalem,” posted May 2, 2007, on episcopalcafe.com).