

REVELATION

Paul Gardner

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The Compassion and Protection of Christ

Paul Gardner

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Introduction

Undoubtedly it is strange that the one book in the Bible that claims to be an 'apocalypse' ('unveiling' or 'revelation') remains, for us in the twenty-first century, probably the most obscure of all the books in the Bible. Many Christians have hardly bothered to look beyond the first three chapters and others, who have spent much study in its intricacies, have occasionally ended up splitting churches over issues to do with the 'last things'! Hopefully this commentary will at least begin to open up a most wonderful book for any who, as yet, have found it too hard to fathom. For those who already love the book of Revelation, I hope this commentary will take you a little deeper and stimulate thinking about how the teaching should be applied to the modern church. While you may wish to go straight to the commentary, some introductory comments may prove useful.

Authorship and Dating

The Apocalypse (Revelation) was a revelation given to one called John (1:1), by God, through an angel. Traditionally from earliest times it has been assumed that this was the apostle John. In fact, John does not say that he was 'the apostle'. Some scholars have argued that the Greek used is very poor compared with other Johannine writings. Nevertheless, the use

the author makes of the Old Testament and even the Targums (Aramaic versions of the Old Testament) suggests strongly that he was a Palestinian Jew who knew well what went on in the synagogue. Such a description would fit the apostle well. Elsewhere he says that what he writes is a 'prophecy' (1:3; 22:6-7, 18-19) and throughout he assumes a level of authority that was typical of the apostles. Also, much of the way the author discusses theology is reminiscent of the way ideas are presented in the Gospel of John and John's epistles.

To some extent the dating of the book affects the authorship question. If it was written after the mid nineties AD, then it is most unlikely that the apostle John was still alive. Some have suggested that it was written shortly after Nero's time of persecution. Nero reigned from AD 54 to 68. In 64 Rome was burned and Nero, who was probably responsible for the fire himself, blamed the Christians for it. Many, including Peter and Paul, were tortured and killed in ways which horrified even the Romans. References to persecution in this book could fit such horror (see chs. 11, 13, 17:6). The reference to 'Babylon' (Rome) being burned (17:16) would further support this dating. It is also said that the idea of the 'beast' returning (13:3, 12; 17:8, 11-12) indicates a period shortly after Nero's suicide when the fable spread that Nero would return.

However, most people believe the book was written during Domitian's rule (81-96). Although there is little evidence of widespread persecution at this time, Domitian did assume to himself the title 'Lord and God', which might explain some of John's deep concerns. The early theologian, Irenaeus, talked of John seeing his vision 'not a long time ago ... at the end of Domitian's reign'. There is no need to assume a date *later* than the early to mid nineties, in which case John the apostle could still have been the author in his old age.

Prophecy and apocalypse

Even a cursory glance at the book from chapter 4 onwards reveals a different style or type of literature from much else to be found in the Bible. This means that we must be careful how we read the letter, and that we try to do justice to a form of literature which seems alien to us in the twenty-first century.

*Firstly, it should be noted how very indebted John is to the Old Testament, particularly in those sections where symbolism is important. In fact, much of the symbolism of Revelation is an extension of that already found in Old Testament prophetic writings like Daniel and Ezekiel. We should also keep in mind that this book was written as a letter to a particular group of churches. As a prophet, John is determined to proclaim God's word specifically to these people. He brings them encouragement at a time of difficulty, for Christians were either suffering at that time or needed to be warned that what had happened (under Nero) was likely to happen again. John assures his people of God's sovereign rule right now in the *present*, while bringing consolation with promises of the second coming of Jesus. In this sense we are dealing with a prophecy similar to those found in the Old Testament: proclamations of God's present and future workings with his people, comfort to those who are oppressed, and warnings to those turning back from the truth to the evil of the world. John, working under the Spirit's inspiration, like the prophets, brings a message that is always relevant. It is no doubt for all these reasons that John sees himself as writing prophecy.*

Secondly, this work is an 'apocalypse' ('revelation', 1:1), which is a word primarily applied to a type of Jewish writing which often had its roots in Old Testament prophecy, but which concentrated on two or three major themes. These would be, for instance, 'the day of the Lord', and the complete sovereignty of God even in the most severe times of distress for his people. History was seen as leading to a climax, when God would come and separate good from evil, 'this age' from the next, light from darkness. Normally these writings were written in the names of heroes of ancient Israelite history, e.g., the books of Enoch, or the Assumption of Moses. Another of the characteristics of this literature was that it was pessimistic and even deterministic about this world. The only hope was the future in another world.

Revelation shares some apocalyptic elements with these Jewish works especially, of course, its great use of symbolism and visions. John, for instance, also sees history in two ages

and looks for the coming day of judgment and a new life in a new heaven and earth where evil will be banished.

However, there are also substantial differences between John's Revelation and apocalyptic literature. For example, the work is not attributed to a great person of the past but a living person called 'John'. It is not just what happens in the future which is held out as comfort to suffering Christians, but the comfort and compassion and protection of Christ offered to his people in the *present* is also offered to the readers. The book is clearly not just some wonderful literary masterpiece but is designed as a letter to be read to the churches among which it was circulated. John is primarily a pastor for the present. The victory of Christ must be worked out in the present life of a church experiencing or starting to experience real persecution. Thus it is best to view the book as a pastoral letter full of the characteristics of Old Testament prophecy, and incorporating some of the style of apocalyptic literature – but not necessarily its theology.

Interpretation

Recognising the prophetic and apocalyptic traits of this letter is an important starting point as we seek to understand John's message for us today. Even so, we must recognise that there are different 'schools' of thought on how best to interpret Revelation.

1. Some say that the book simply describes in vivid symbolism *the ongoing struggle between good and evil* in which, eventually, Christianity triumphs. The tendency here is that everything is 'spiritualised'. Revelation is seen not as real prophecy or prediction of future events but simply as a description of the continuing battle. There is, of course, considerable truth in this position, for part of the appeal and relevance of the book lies in the fact that each successive generation of Christians can identify with so much that it relates. However, it underestimates the immediate relevance to those to whom John was writing and eliminates the possibility of the direct identification of some of the symbols with events either in the future or in the history of the church.

2. Others interpret Revelation exclusively as *a tract for John's own age*. This view stresses the contemporary nature of the events described. All the events referred to and disclosed in symbolic language would have been understood clearly by the recipients as pertaining to their situation. Some then go on to say that the prophecies related to Christ's second coming and the destruction of the Roman Empire turned out to be mistaken. The usefulness of this understanding is that it draws attention to the fact that John did write for a specific audience at a specific time. Many of his symbols probably were understood by his readers in a way which we can no longer comprehend. On occasion John seems to have Rome and the Roman Empire at least at the back of his mind. However, the book claims more than contemporary significance and this view does not do justice to the predictive element of the work.

3. Another method of interpretation, which was followed by the Reformers such as Calvin and Luther, sees the book as *a symbolic description of the history of the church*. Once the symbols are deciphered then church history can be understood. 'Babylon' is seen as Rome, but not the Rome of John's day. For Luther it became papal Rome as well. This position certainly takes prophecy seriously and tries to fit John's symbols and prophecies into the history of the church, or vice versa. The real problem faced by such a view is the lack of consensus as to what is actually being described in different sections of the book.

4. Fourthly, there is a method of interpretation that is sometimes called '*futurist*'. From chapter 4 onwards, it is said, Revelation deals with what will happen in the future, just before and at the time of Christ's second coming. The symbolism and descriptions largely concern themselves with a future time of troubles and sufferings for Christians, called 'the tribulation', after which Christ will return and judge the world, and eternal life with Christ will begin for the righteous.

People who adopt this position are usually *pre-millennialists* (see the discussion about the Millennium in comments on Revelation 20). Some in this camp believe that Christians will be taken from the earth before this time of tribulation occurs,

that is, before the events related from chapter 6 onwards ('pretribulationism'). If this particular form of pre-millennialism should seem to make much of the book irrelevant, some draw together their futurist views with that given in 1 above, that each generation continues to see the ongoing struggle between Christ and his followers and Satan.

Committed Christians take a variety of different views on how to interpret Revelation. This alone is perhaps an indication that while we should search the Scriptures under the Spirit's guidance and come to understand as much as possible, it may be wise to refrain from being over-dogmatic in our views on some points.

Here, as we work through the commentary, we take seriously the fact that this book was written for specific people in a specific historical situation in Asia Minor, but we also take the challenge that the Spirit speaks to all the churches throughout the ages. Certainly parts of the book look to the future and the return of Christ, but much of the rest helps answer questions that we ask ourselves today just as, no doubt, those Christians in the original seven churches were also asking. For example, it offers help to understand the context in which we live and why there is suffering and pain even for those who follow Christ. It helps us understand that God is just and he will one day deal with sinful people who put to death the people of God. It also reminds us that this world is not the end but that one day, for those who follow Christ, there will be the most glorious resurrection and we shall 'see God' and be in his presence for ever in a new heavens and a new earth.

If this introduction has simply made things sound even more complicated than you thought they were going to be, let me suggest you sit back, read the book of Revelation and, using the commentary, enjoy and be comforted and challenged by one of the most wonderful books in Scripture!