

The Book of Revelation

Dead Theologian's Society
Catholic Student Union at Florida State University

Session 1: Introduction and Chapter One

“The Apostle John’s objective in writing the Book of Revelation is to unveil from the death and resurrection of Christ the meaning of human history.” Pope Benedict XVI, 2006

Apocalyptic Literature – form of Jewish literature originating about 200 BC and spanning until about 100 AD

- see also Daniel 7-12
- “Apocalypse” often makes us think of end-times and destruction.
 - The word originally referred to weddings wherein after a weeklong celebration the groom would carry the bride home and “lift her veil,” thus revealing the bride.
- Jesus is going to unveil himself for his bride
- He will also unveil his bride (the Church)
- This is an invitation to intimacy with God

Chapters 1-11 – Revealing of the Groom

Chapters 12-22 – Revealing of the Bride

Two main events that are really important

- 1) In 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple on the Ninth of Av
- 2) In 70 AD the Romans destroyed the second (Herod) Temple on the Ninth of Av

Similarities between the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation

- The only two books to use the term “living water”
- Only John calls Jesus “the lamb”
- Jesus is the “Word of God” and the Bride is “the Church”
- Jesus is the center of history
- John makes over 500 references to the OT in these two writings

Keys to Understanding

- 1) Chapter 19 – “a city will be destroyed by fire”
 - a. Many non-Catholics claim this city to be Rome, but Rome is never mentioned
 - b. Jerusalem, though, is described as a harlot in the OT
- 2) Understanding Revelation as a “covenant lawsuit”
 - a. This book is written with a particular structure that reflects judgment
 - b. Five Sections
 - i. Preamble – identifies the power of the king or the dominant leader
 - ii. Historical Prologue – recount the king’s past relationship to the vassal or counterpart
 - iii. Ethical Stipulations – recounts the obligations the vassal has towards the king
 - iv. Sanctions – lists the blessings and curses that accompany the covenant if it is fulfilled or broken

- v. Succession – if the covenant is broken this is the plan to continue to the covenant with future generations
- c. Every time a covenant lawsuit is used in Scripture it is against *the current generation*
- 3) Revelation is a book of liturgy
 - a. The Eucharist is the Marriage Supper of the Lamb

Establishing the Context

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction the entire book. It introduces us to many of the themes and images that we will encounter in the following chapters. First, we are given titles and characteristics of Jesus that appear again in later chapters, like the title Alpha and Omega, and the image of a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. Second, the seven churches that form the first audience are introduced to the reader, anticipating a deeper look in chapters 2-3. Third, we are presented with the language of liturgy (“grace to you and peace”) which prepares us for scenes of praise and worship that begin in chapters 4-5.

Chapter 1 not only anticipates what is to come; it also assumes knowledge of what came centuries before. For example, the title “Son of Man” in 1:13 is a term first used in Daniel 7:13. Most of us aren’t as familiar with Old Testament prophets as we are with the gospels, so this study will help us discover the connection with, and the ancient context of, the prophetic tradition that would have been familiar to the first century churches to which the book is addressed.

Finally, some scholars believe that Revelation 1:19 is a microcosm of the whole book. They would identify the three-part command in 1:19 with three divisions of Revelation as follows: “Write therefore [1] the things that you have seen [the vision described immediately before this], [2] those that are [the then-present condition of the seven churches, 2:1-3:22], and [3] those that are to take place after this” [the visions that follow, 4:1-22:21].

This initial vision in chapter 1, which is sometimes called the “Inaugural Vision” because it begins the series of visions recorded in the book, provides a special word of hope to a suffering Church. It is a reminder to her that she is not alone; Jesus is in her midst. In that sense it isn’t recounting a past reality, but a present one: God is with us in every circumstance of life.

The Text

The Greeting (1:1-8)

- “The revelation of Jesus Christ”
- “Blessed is he who reads aloud” (verse 3)
 - This book is to be read aloud (liturgy)
 - First of seven beatitudes in Revelation
- “The time is near”
 - 2 Peter 3:8-10 writes about the final days: “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years ... the Lord is not slow ... not wishing that any should perish ... the day of the Lord will come like a thief.”
 - John’s vision is a fulfillment – particularly of Daniel 2:1-25
 - There will be four kingdoms followed by a fifth kingdom that will destroy them
 - Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of his vision

- Babylon
 - Persia
 - Greece
 - Rome
- John is telling us of the Coming of the Lord
- There were more than seven church is Asia, but seven represents “the whole church”
- This revelation is to be an encouragement to the suffering church
 - Our encouragement is in God’s presence with us (the Eucharist – the liturgy)
- Trinitarian reference of verses 4-5
 - Father – who is and who was ...
 - Spirit – seven spirits
 - Jesus – the faithful witness
 - Witness = *martyres* “the one who lays down his life”
- Verse 6 recalls Exodus 19 when God called his people to be a kingdom of priests
 - John regards the church as a royal and priestly community, mediators between God and humanity
 - CCC 1546
- “behold he is coming with the clouds” (verse 7)
 - *Remez* was a rabbinical teaching method of “hinting” at texts from the Scriptures
 - cf. Daniel 7:13 “the son of man comes in the clouds to receive the kingdom”
 - Judgment is associated with the clouds
 - Jesus used this reference in Matthew 26 when speaking to Caiaphas: “you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”
 - This is a quote claiming divinity
 - The Son of Man is the highest title given to the Messiah
- “all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (cf. Zechariah 12:10)
 - “I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of mercy and supplication, so that when they look on him whom they have thrust through, they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and they will grieve for him as one grieves over a firstborn.”
- “the alpha and omega” (verse 8)
 - In Exodus 3:13-14 Moses asks God a question: “what is your name?”
 - To know the real name of a god was a secret and this name gave you special access to the god
 - Moses receives this “secret name” of God: “I AM WHO I AM” (*YHWH*)
 - According to Jewish tradition this name should not be uttered and is substituted with “*Adonai*”
 - Can also be translated “I am who was and will be”
 - The name of God communicates that God is the first and the last
 - *Aleph – mem – tav* in Hebrew (first and last) combines to form the word “truth”
 - *GOD IS TRUTH*
 - The truth in all circumstances is that God is with us

The First Vision (1:9-20)

- Reminder to the suffering the Church that it is not alone

- John himself had suffered persecution and was exiled on the island of Patmos for preaching the Gospel
 - Patmos is part of Greece, just off the coast of Turkey. The Romans would often exile people here who haven't been convicted
 - John wishes to share tribulation with the Church. But he also wants to share patient endurance
- "The Lord's Day" (verse 10)
 - The day of the Resurrection
 - The day of meeting
 - The day of the Eucharist
- This liturgy is not only celebrated on earth but also in heaven
- "trumpet" (verse 10)
 - Used as a liturgical instrument
 - Used in judgment
 - Used in warfare
 - Used in all three ways in Revelation
- "write what you see" (verse 11)
 - The seven churches are not listed haphazardly but in an order
 - They are part of a circular road – a mail route
- "Son of Man" (verse 12)
- "white hair" (verse 14)
 - Daniel 7:9, 10:5-6
 - Sign of wisdom
- "sharp, two-edged sword" (verse 16)
 - Isaiah 11:4
- In difficult situations, liturgy is warfare. We change things on earth through liturgy. God is the wisdom, God is comfort, God is the one who will fight for us.
- John falls to his feet as though dead (verse 17)
 - "fear not"
 - It should be a great comfort have the Son of Man lay his right hand upon us and say "fear not"
 - A scared and disappointed Church is now receiving comfort and strength from the Alpha and Omega, the Truth
- John wants the suffering to know that the Lamb of God will triumph

Reflection Questions

1. None of us approaches the Book of Revelation with a clean slate. We all enter this text with preconceptions, expectations, and maybe even some fear. As we begin to study Revelation, list one or more adjectives you would use to describe this book.
2. What are some of the social, cultural, or religious moorings [foundations] that have formed your perception of Revelation?
3. Before John is shown the series of sobering if not terrifying visions that make up the bulk of Revelation, he is given the assurance of Jesus' power over death and his everlasting authority and dominion. The ultimate outcome of the battles John is about to see is not in question. How can what you have learned of Jesus in Revelation 1 help you to face challenges that loom in the future?