



THE BOOK OF REVELATION

(APOCALYPSE)

(Study Notes)

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DIVISION

1. PROLOGUE (1:1-3)
2. LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES OF ASIA (1:4-3:22)
3. GOD AND THE LAMB IN HEAVEN (4:1-5:14)
4. THE SEVEN SEALS, TRUMPETS AND PLAGUES WITH INTERLUDES (6:1-16:21)
5. THE PUNISHMENT OF BABYLON AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAGAN NATIONS (17:1-20:15)
6. THE NEW CREATION (21:1-22:5)
7. EPILOGUE (22:6-21)

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REVELATION (APOCALYPSE)

Introduction

1. The book of Revelation can be understood only against the historical background that occasioned its writing. It is a genre which is called “apocalyptic” and it represents a literature of resistance in times of difficulty or crisis. In this case, it is a work of resistance to the cruel persecution unleashed by emperor Domitian (AD 81-96).
2. The resistance is expressed by visions of symbolic images which have to be interpreted and explained with reference to historical figures or ideal concepts. It is not helpful sometimes to visualize the symbols, since their meaning is mostly allegoric and their visualization may result repugnant even when concerned with positive or glorious figures. Most of the representations are inspired by similar allegoric messages in the books of the Old Testament, especially Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel.
3. Symbolic descriptions are not to be taken literally nor have to be visualized: they have to be interpreted and explained as much as possible. Especially the vindictive language of the book of Revelation have to be understood symbolically: the cry for vengeance of the Christian martyrs is a literary device to arouse a feeling of horror for apostasy and rebellion that will be severely punished by God.
4. The perspective is eschatological (ultimate salvation and victory is placed at the end of the present age, when Christ will come again at the *Parousia*), yet the victory is presented as already happened at the end of a decisive fight against Satan. The defeat of Satan is followed by the everlasting reign of God. The book ends with the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and the invocation to Christ to come.
5. Much of the book is difficult to understand and heavy on the side of punishment, but the many passages which are clear are gloriously beautiful and in line with the rest of the New Testament revelations. We can see the book of Revelation as a strong and beautiful conclusion of the book of God’s word which is the Bible.

6. The book of Revelation remains valid and meaningful for Christians of all time in the face of apparently insuperable evil, both from without and within, all Christians are called to trust in Jesus' promise: "Behold, I am with you until the end of the age" (*Matthew* 28:20). Those who remain faithful and steadfast in their faith and confidence in the Risen Lord need have no fear. Every kind of suffering, contradiction, persecution, even martyrdom: all will end with the victory of Christ. This is the enduring message of the book: it is a message of hope and consolation and a challenge for those who dare to believe.
7. The author is named John. He doesn't say that he is the apostle. Many of the ancient Fathers of the Church believed that he is, the same as the author of the Fourth Gospel and the letters. The time is the same. The geographical area is one traditionally attributed the John, the apostle. Modern biblical scholars think that the actual author is probably a disciple of John the apostle.

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12. THE PUNISHMENT OF BABYLON AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAGAN NATIONS (17:1-20:15)
13. THE NEW CREATION (21:1-22:5)
14. EPILOGUE (22:6-21)

I. PROLOGUE (1:1-3)

The Prologue spells the source of the prophecy, the content and the audience: all to be included in the Epilogue which has the same themes and

expressions. The Prologue and Epilogue give an extraordinary sense of unity and accomplishment to the book and an urgency which the reader cannot fail to be impressed with.

1:3 “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of this prophesy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near”. This is the first of seven beatitudes:

14:13 “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...”;

16:15 “Blessed is he who is awake and keeps his clothes ready...”;

19:9 “Blessed are they who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lord”;

20:6 “Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection”;

22:7 “Blessed is he who keeps the words of this prophecy...”;

22:14 “Blessed are those who wash their robes as to have the right to the tree of life and enter the city...”.

1:3 “The appointed time...” of the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

II. LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES OF ASIA (1:4-3:22)

1:4 “Asia” : Asia Minor, present day Turkey.

1:4 In Exodus 3, God is “The One Who Is” (probably stressing the dimension of eternity as a continuous present, a concept which befits God in Himself, in eternity). Here we look also at the past and the future: the Divine Name is enlarged to embrace the past and the future: it is God in the dimensions of salvation history which stretches in time.

1:17 Christ is the First and the Last: the beginning of all creation and the purpose, the end of all (Cf. Colossians 1:15 ff, Acts 22:13).

1:19 Here we have the 3 parts of the book of Revelation: 1. The Vision (1:10-20); 2. The situation of the Seven Churches (chapter 2 and 3); 3. The events in Chapter 6-22.

(Chapter 4 and 5 describe the heavenly worship and the vision of the Lamb and the book with the seven seals: it is like an anchorage in eternity).

2:7 The Tree of Life is blossoming in the Heavenly Jerusalem (22:2).

2:11 The “second death” is the eternal damnation (20:6, 14; 21:8).

2:13 The cult to the emperor to whom Satan has given the throne.

2:14 Cf. *Numbers* 25 and 31. It is a compromise with idolatry (adultery/fornication= idolatry).

2:17 “The hidden manna”= food of life and “The white stone” is a kind of ID with the new name which is given in baptism. It is secret like new name of the Messiah (19:12).

2:20 Jezebel is the symbol of syncretism with the pagan cults.

2:27-28 Echoes of *Psalms* 2 and the “Morning Star” is a share in the victory of the Risen Christ who is “The Morning Star” (22:16).

3:5 The elect whose names are in the Book of Life will be acknowledge by Christ in heaven (*Matthew* 10:32).

3:7 “Key of David”: to enter the city of David, Jerusalem. The key is the symbol of power (*Isaiah* 22:22).

3:8 “Open door” Cf. Acts 14:27 “God has opened the door of faith to the pagans”. It means opportunity of believing, being converted and living.

3:18

- –gold= God’s grace
- -white garments= symbol of upright life
- -eye ointment=healing grace to remove spiritual blindness

3:20 Christ invites all to the messianic banquet in heaven (*Isaiah* 25:6; *Luke* 14:15; 22:30).

III. GOD AND THE LAMB IN HEAVEN (4:1-5:14)

4:1-11 Description of heaven. God is on the throne but no name is given or image of God (mystery, transcendence).

4:4 The 24 Elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles (kingship and priesthood): Cf. 21:12-14.

4:6-8 The four faces represent creation: wild animals, domesticated animals, birds and human beings. Christian tradition sees the symbols of the 4 gospels: lion (Mark), ox (Luke), eagle (John) and human being (Matthew). The creatures are cherubim.

15:1 The Scroll: God's plan for humanity. The symbol of the numbers: 4 signifies the world; 6 imperfection; 7 perfection and totality; 12 the tribes of Israel, also the New Israel, meaning the whole of humanity called to salvation; or the 12 apostles; 1000 immensity.

15:6 Horns are the symbol of power; eyes the symbol of knowledge.

VI. THE SEVEN SEALS, TRUMPETS AND PLAGUES, WITH INTERLUDES (6:1-16:21)

A series of seven disasters begins as each seal is broken (6:1-8:1) followed by a similar series as seven trumpets sound (8:2-11:19) and as seven angels pour bowls on earth causing plagues (15:1-16:21). These gloomy sequences are interrupted by longer or shorter scenes suggesting the triumph of God and his witnesses (chapter 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14).

6:1-7 The first rider (on white horse) is a conquering power; the second rider (red horse) is a symbol of a bloody war; the third (black horse) is the symbol of famine; the fourth (pale green horse) is the symbol of death itself with hell. Verse 8 gives a summary.

6:12 The sixth seal is opened: the Judgment of God: symbolic description of the cosmic upheaval of the Lord's Day, in answer to the martyrs' prayers.

7:1-17 The interlude of two visions precedes the breaking of the seventh seal: the first vision contemplates the elect receiving the mark of belonging to God (seal) as protection; the second vision portrays the faithful Christians

before the throne of God, to encourage those on earth to persevere even unto death.

8:1-13 The breaking of the seventh seal produces seven symbolic disasters each announced by a trumpet blast.

8:2-5 Short liturgy: the prayers of the Saints obtain from God the punishment, represented by the censer thrown and the burning coals: the seven angels with the seven trumpets execute the punishment on earth, sea and sky.

8:11 “Wormwood” : an extremely bitter and malignant plant symbolizing God’s punishment.

8:13 The eagle, by crying three times “Woe” announces the next three plagues. The final “woe” announces the last plague, released by the seventh trumpet blast, which includes also the plagues of Chapter 16.

9:1 “A star” stays for an angel (1:20) and the abyss is locked by an angel (20:1), but here the avenging angel opens the abyss and the locusts come out to punish the inhabitants of the earth.

9:13-21 An allusion to the invasion of the Parthians living east of the river Euphrates.

9:20 “The works of their hands” stays for the idols.

Chapter 10:1-11:14: The interlude which precedes the sounding of the seventh trumpet, includes two scenes: the small scroll (10:1-11) and then the measuring of the temple and the two witnesses (11:1-14).

10:10 “Seven thunders”: God’s voice announcing judgment and doom (*Psalms* 29:3-9).

10:8-11 The scroll contains the announcement of the last judgment. It is sweet because it predicts the final victory of God’s people; it is sour because it also announces their suffering. The image is from *Ezekiel* (3:1-3).

Chapter 11:1-14 The Two Witnesses

11:1 The temple and the altar symbolize the New Israel and the Christians.

11:2 The court of the Gentiles represents that part which is victim of the persecution of Nero (AD 63-67) who is the “beast from the abyss. “Two” because in this way their witness is valid. Most probably (and most beautifully) Peter and Paul.

11:8 The Jerusalem that rejects God = Rome.

Chapter 12:1-14:20 The central section of Revelation portrays the power of Evil (the dragon) in opposition to God and his people. First, the dragon pursues the woman about to give birth, but the child is saved. Then Michael and his angels cast the dragon out of heaven (12:7-9). After this, the dragon tries to attack the boy by attacking member of the Church represented by the woman (12:13-17). A beast, symbolizing the Roman empire, then becomes the dragon’s agent (13:1-10). A second beast arises symbolizing the Anti-Christ (13:11-18). This is followed by a vision of the Lamb and the proclamation of the imminent judgment upon the world with the image of the wine of God’s wrath (14:1-20).

12:1-6 The Woman is symbol of God’s people of the Old and New Testament. The desert is the traditional refuge of the afflicted. The boy is the Messiah, Jesus.

12:15 “water from the dragon”: it changes like a sea-monster (*Psalms* 74:13-14).

13:1-10 This wild beast represents the Roman Empire: the 7 heads are the emperors.

13:3 A popular legend had that the emperor Nero would come back to life, after having died of self-inflicted wound (AD 68). Here is Domitian (AD 81-86) who continues the persecution like Nero.

13:6 “Blasphemies”: the emperors wanted to be called Gods.

13:11-18 The second beast represents the false prophets who accompany the false Messiah (First Beast). Christians had either to worship the emperor and his image or suffer martyrdom.

13:18 -666: each letter of the alphabet in Hebrew or Greek has a numerical value. The most likely candidate of the 666 number is CAESAR NERO, the Greek form of whose name in Hebrew letters gives the required sum.

14:1-5 The Lamb and companions. “Virgins”: free from idolatry which is described as adultery and fornication.

144 000: the number represent the whole Christian people called “The Israel of God” (*Galatians* 6:16). $12 \times 12 \times 1000 = 144\ 000$ (12 tribes, 12 Apostles, and infinity) (Also in the beginning of James’ letter : “The Twelve Tribes of the Dispersion” (*James* 1:1) represent all the Christian people).

14:6-13 The three angels proclaim imminent judgment on the pagan world and the fall of Babylon (pagan Rome).

14:10-11 “The wine of God’s anger”: the image is from the Prophets: *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*. Eternal punishment in the “pool of burning sulfur” is also reserved to the Devil, the Beast and the False Prophet (19:20; 20:10, 21:8).

14:14-20 Reaping the harvest and treading the grapes symbolizes the doom of the ungodly (*Isaiah* 63:1-6).

15:1-16:21 The Seven Seals: the final punishment, preceded by the Victors and their canticle (the canticle of Moses).

15:2 “The sea of glass with fire”: glory obtained by sacrifice.

16:12 “The kings of the East” : the Parthians. They gave trouble to the Romans, they were good archers and obtained a great victory in AD 62 against the Romans. Here they gather with the others for the final battle at Armageddon (Megiddo: the most ancient city, many times destroyed and rebuilt).

IV. THE PUNISHMENT OF BABYLON AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE PAGAN NATIONS (17:1-19:10)

The punishment of Babylon is now described as a past event and under the image of the great harlot who leads peoples astray into idolatry.

17:3 “Scarlet Beast”: the Roman empire.

17:11 “The beast”: Nero who was thought to have died and to have come back to life.

17:12-13 Perhaps, the kings of the Parthians who will accompany Nero to regain power. The Lamb and his companions will conquer them (19:11-21).

17:16 Inspired by *Ezekiel* in the 16 chapter about the corruption of Jerusalem (the allegory of idolatry (16:37)). The ten pagan kings unwittingly accomplish God’s will.

18:1-9:4 A lamentation (dirge) over the fall of Babylon(Rome) as if it had already happened. Old Testament vindictive language. The section concludes with a joyous canticle of the future glory of Heaven.

19:4 “Amen. Alleluja”: ‘Alleluja’ is found only here in the New Testament: an exclamation of joy and praise in the Hebrew Psalms, important in Jewish liturgy.

19:5-10 A victory song, sung by the entire Church, celebrating the marriage of the Lamb, the union of the Messiah with the community of the believers.

19:11-16 Symbolic description of the exalted Christ.

19:12, 13, 16 : the names of the victorious Horseman:

- 12 transcendent name because God,
- 13 Word of God: he reveals the Father,
- 16 King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

19:17-20 The invitation to the birds of prey to come to devour the flesh of the enemy is already in Ezekiel 39:4, 17-20.

20:1-6 “one thousand” means a very long period of time from his victory (his resurrection) and the Second Coming/the end of the world.

20:12 “Scrolls” =records of the actions of individual people; “Book of Life”: the roll in which the names of the redeemed are kept (21:27).

VI. THE NEW CREATION

21:1-22:5 A description of God's eternal kingdom in heaven under the symbol of New Heaven and a New Earth (*Isaiah* 65:17-25; 66:22; *Matthew* 19:28).

21:22 "No temple": Christ is present throughout the life of the Church: "Its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb." "When two or more are together, I am in their midst" (*Matthew* 18:20); "I will be with you to the end of the age" (*Matthew* 28:20); "Neither in Jerusalem nor on this mountain, but in Spirit and in truth" (*John* 4:21).

VII. EPILOGUE (22:6-21)

The book of Revelation ends with an epilogue consisting in a series of warnings and exhortations, forming an INCLUSION with the Prologue, by resuming its themes and expressions (1:1-3).

22:7 "I am coming soon": Christ is the speaker, the urgency exemplifies what was announced in the beginning.

22:17 "The Bride" is the Church.

22:20 "Come, Lord Jesus!" in Aramaic: "Marana Tha! An invocation probably echoing an early liturgy. Cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22. If the words are divided differently (Maran Atha: The Lord has come), it becomes a confession of faith in the incarnation. The first rendition is more likely, given the corresponding prayer in Greek.

The Epilogue is the passionate conclusion of the book: the reality of the persecution and the faith in God's justice, the vision of the falling of Babylon and the victory of the victims become an act of faith in the future.

The fervent prayer for the Second Coming of Jesus as Judge of the universe and the One who will usher the new dimension of eternity gives relevance to the beautiful heavenly liturgies contained in the book.

The punishment of the damned is the vindication of the prophetic message throughout the Bible. God is all in all, the ultimate destination of humanity

and the New Heaven and the New Earth and the Heavenly Jerusalem are the undeniable content of the Whole Book of God, the Bible, (The Word of God) and humanity's destiny and call to glory, to life eternal in the bosom of the Trinity.

In this sense, the Book of Revelation is a fitting conclusion of the whole Bible.

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