Introduction to Revelation

What is your experience and impression of Revelation?

Many do not read it. It is often neglected in our Bible classes and from our pulpits. Why?

Book specifically promises a blessing to those who read it (I believe it is the only book of the Bible that has this specific promise.)

Rev. 1:3, 22:7

Introduction to the Book:

A. Title: The Revelation of Jesus Christ.
   1. Rev.1:1, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” – The phrase in the Greek language is (apokalupsis Iesou Christou). “Apocalypse” is an attempt to transliterate the original Greek name through Indo-European languages (especially Anglo-French) into English, and “Revelation” is the English translation of the Greek. That is the reason we see both words (“Apocalypse” and “Revelation”) in English. The basic idea of the original Greek word is an “uncovering” or “revealing.” Some scholars prefer an “unveiling” as the meaning. However, many students of the book have pointed out that it is ironic that the one book which is titled “Revelation” remains the most hidden and mysterious book in the New Testament, if not in the whole Bible. Yet, as is stated in Rev. 1:3, God intended for it to be understood and for the ones who heed the message (contained in the book)—whether they read or hear it— are to be blessed. So that was, and is, the purpose of the book. Hardly meant to be a “closed book” to believers. (Dr. Cloud - p. 1)

B. Authorship
   1. John the Apostle is the traditional and accepted view.
   2. Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8
   3. He writes as a prophet. It is in the tradition of the OT prophet and NT prophet that he writes. I believe he sees himself through the Spirit and these visions he has received giving a final message to the church.
   4. External and internal evidence point to it being John the Apostle the son of Zebedee.
   5. The book has strong attestation for being in the canon of Scripture (Donald Guthrie).
6. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian all attribute the work to John the Apostle.

C. Date and John’s Location
1. The date is disputed but does little to affect interpretation with the exception of those who see it as dealing with the destruction of Jerusalem.
2. The popular and traditional date is 90-95 AD. Irenaus who was born about 35 years after the death of John, a student of Polycarp who knew John placed the book at this time period. This date has support because it is truly during the time of Domitian as Emperor that emperor wide persecution of Christians truly begins.
3. Some argue for a date during the time of Nero in the early 60s.
4. Some argue for a date during Vespatian’s Reign 69 - 79 AD because of Revelation 17:9-11 (see Hartshorn).
5. I will assume a date during Domitian’s reign, likely in the 90s AD. It seems to fit well with the internal evidence of significant persecution, the life of John, and has the most support.

D. Audience
1. Primarily Gentile Christians in Asia minor who were experiencing social, economic, and physical persecution.
   1. See Pliny’s Letter to Trajan (At the end of these notes, please read this week and we will discuss next week.)
2. What questions is Revelation answering for its readers?
   1) Does God/Jesus know, care, and love us?
   2) A second important sense in which Revelation stands in the tradition of the Jewish apocalypses is that it shares the question which concerned so many of the latter: **who is Lord over the world?** Bauckham - location 147
   3) What should we do in the midst of this turmoil?
   4) Who is able to stand? (6:17)
   5) What is God’s ultimate purpose for this world and His people?
   6) Will evil be punished? “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (6:10).
3. Maybe the reason we often do not understand nor read Revelation is because we are not a victimized people! We do not cry for justice. Revelation has found great appeal through Christian history when the church was undergoing persecution and suffering.

E. Genre

1. Prophecy
   1) 1:3, 22:7, 10, 18, 19
   2) Like the OT prophets it is a message primarily to the original recipients calling them to holiness.

2. Apocalyptic literature
   1) He uses the apocalyptic genre as a vehicle of prophecy, as not all Jewish apocalyptists did consistently. So it would be best to call John's work a prophetic apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy. (Bauckham)
   2) Some quotes from The Apocalyptic Literature, by Stephen L. Cook

3) Michael Whitworth's Article - Hope and Expectation -
   www.TheJenkinsInstitute.com

A very small but important genre in Scripture is apocalyptic literature, one that was very familiar to Jews and Christians for 200 years before and after Christ. But it's not so familiar to God's people in the 21st century. These parts of Scripture are captivating and mysterious; they remind us of something from Narnia or Middle Earth. But they are often difficult to understand in our own time.

What exactly is this literary genre? Apocalyptic comes from the Greek apokalypto, meaning “to reveal.” This literature appears prominently in Daniel and Revelation, but also in parts of Ezekiel and Zechariah, not to mention Jewish literature from the intertestamental period (e.g. 1 Enoch). Generally speaking, apocalyptic literature gives us earth-bound creatures a peak behind the curtain at the spiritual realm, a back-stage pass to events in the heavens. But the dark side of this literature is that it has been the breeding ground for some wild and crazy ideas. This does not excuse our ignoring these passages in our preaching, but remind us that extra caution should be exercised.

A few important rules for reading and interpreting apocalyptic literature:
Don’t force literalness. Tremper Longman advises in *Reading the Bible with Heart and Mind*, “God both reveals and conceals as He speaks to us in the apocalyptic poetic images. He informs us accurately but not with precision. We get the basic point but not necessarily all the details.” The grossest abuses of apocalyptic literature have occurred when well-meaning Bible students with a high regard for God’s Word forced a literal interpretation on the text. Very seldom does apocalyptic literature plainly mean what it says since it is presented with cryptic symbols (cf. Num 12:6–8), especially numeric ones. If you think all Scripture must be interpreted literally, you’ll be left scratching your head over major portions of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation.

Don’t be dogmatic. For anyone who compulsively wants all Scripture to make perfect sense (that would be me), books like Daniel and Revelation will resemble a wild stallion that cannot possibly be broken, a puzzle with missing pieces, or a Rubik’s cube whose sides were never color-matched in the first place. We should therefore practice a little humility as we interpret these passages. Whenever I study apocalyptic passages, I have to force myself to differentiate between what I can prove and what I only suspect. I have to remind myself that not even Daniel and John could make sense of their visions without heaven’s help. As Grant Osborne suggests in *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, some of the ambiguous language and vague symbolism may be meant “to keep the reader from giving the future fulfillment too great a place in the message of the book. The writer wanted to turn the reader toward God, not just toward future events.” False teachers such as Edgar Whisenant or Harold Camping dogmatically imposed a literal interpretation on the text, but they shipwrecked people’s faith when their predictions failed to materialize. Let us be bold with what we can absolutely prove via a responsible handling of the text, but let us also be humble and admit “I don’t know” when a sure interpretation eludes us.

Don’t miss the forest for the trees. Don’t get so bogged down in trying to decipher every symbol in these passages that you miss the main message, which usually isn’t as difficult to discern. One does not have to have complete and perfect understanding of Daniel or Revelation order to be comforted by its message: God wins, Jesus reigns, and the saints will be vindicated. That God chose to communicate certain things through visions rather than plain speech may indicate his desire to arouse our emotions more than instruct the mind. Just as it has done for God’s people throughout time, allow apocalyptic passages to inspire your faith in the eventual triumph of God’s purposes.

There lies a great challenge in preaching books the apocalyptic portions of the Bible to a modern audience, but this does not excuse us from shirking that challenge. For all of their difficulty, the books of Daniel and Revelation are nonetheless packed with relevant messages for God’s people today. Let me encourage you to search these books and mine their riches since they are just as much a part of the “whole counsel of God” as Genesis, Psalms, Acts, and Ephesians!
3. A letter.

1) But many misreadings of Revelation, especially those which assume that much of the book was not addressed to its first-century readers and could only be understood by later generations, have resulted from neglecting the fact that it is a letter. Bauckham 198

2) It was also an epistle like the other NT books written to churches. It has a pastoral purpose as John writes to them giving them counsel.

D. Symbols - See Roper, Hailey, and Woodruff (p. 4-8).

1. Three types of Symbols (Roper p. 33-51)
   1) Numbers - Chart by Roper (p. 37).
2. Old Testament (plagues, Gog and Magog, Moses, Elijah, etc.)

1) Roper (p. 39-41)

2) They were very familiar with the Old Testament (many Hebrew and Christian children learned to read using the books of the Old Testament). The Westcott and Hort Greek New Testament lists over 500 references or allusions from the Old Testament in the
book of Revelation. There are 348 clear Old Testament references in Revelation (57 from the Pentateuch, 235 from the Prophets and 56 from the Historical and Poetical books according to Merrill Tenney— a number which means there are nearly 16 references per chapter). Students must deal with connections between Revelation and the prophetic books of Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and others. These connections are numerous. (Dr. Cloud, p. 6)

3. Historical background (geography, eagle, pagan stories, Emperors, Babylon)

Interpretive Approach:

A. Humility! We must approach such a study with prayer and humility. We must be careful about being dogmatic about a given interpretation. We must always allow easier, straightforward passages and doctrines inform our reading or Revelation. We must be respectful of other students and teachers perspective. We must admit that our context and our influences shame our own understanding of Revelation.
   1. Illustration - Campbell and the early 1800s
   2. The prevailing view today amongst those who are not premillenial is going to see it as a letter written to encourage persecuted Christians with these great spiritual visions that apply directly to imperial Rome. This is the view this class will take, but it is shaped by my context, my readings, and my culture.
   3. The Bible is its own best commentary.

B. It is a whole book. Sadly it is often studied in a fashion like this: 7 churches and then skip to the last two chapters. It is all connected and giving an important message.

C. It was meant to be heard and viewed. Like an ancient movie theater. It is meant to give impressions and visions. The book requires imagination! Maybe why we struggle with it in the church, because we are not very good with imagination. It goes against our typical hermeneutic.
D. One of the big purposes of the book it seems was to help the Christians gain a perspective of how God sees their trials and persecutions.
   1. “It is not that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.”
      Bauckham - location 141

E. W.B. West focused on interpreting using “first-century glasses.” What did the book mean to the original readers?

F. Consider the following illustrations:
   1. A masterpiece painting -- You lose the meaning if you look at it with a magnifying glass.
   2. Mounce pointed out, “the fundamental truths of Revelation . . . are available to anyone who will read the book for its overall message and resists the temptation to become overly enamored with the details.” (Turner p. 62).

G. Ones interpretative framework and bias influences and determines their interpretation. We all go to the text with certain preconceived beliefs and biases, these shame and form our interpretation.

H. Read Dr. Cloud on your own. p.6-9, 47-50

**Four Primary Interpretations of Revelation**

See PowerPoint Slide Copies with diagrams of these views. (p. 15-17)

1. **Preterist.** They see material as speaking almost solely to the first century. Fulfillment of text is past. They look at letters to seven churches like look at other letters. John is writing prophetic material so look at it like Biblical prophecy-applies to authors lifetime or immediate future. This is the general approach, but allows for some exceptions.

2. **Historicist (or continuous historical)** Doesn’t get a lot of attention now. Took chapters 4-20 and interpreted it from time line and began with when book was written and ended in whatever period the scholar was writing. It
more likely looked for events in future that was fulfillment of this or that particular text. Certain event, certain pope. Etc.

3. **Futurist.** Takes chapter 4-20 and interprets all of it as being what is immediately happen before the return of Christ. It is a popular approach. Tim Lahae, Hal Lindsey. Looking for things now happening to apply to book of Revelation and signify the return of Christ. It has almost no meaning for the original readers.

4. **Philosophical/Idealism.** Just talk about it in broad principle. It is a story, a narrative, good versus evil, God is victorious, keep things very broad and not look at specifics. This view focuses on the symbols and the message of the meaning.

People from all four of these have some eclecticism. They may sneak over to some of the others from time to time. (Rick Oster class notes)

See Turner (p. 13-27) or Hailey (p. 49-51) for more information.

Turner adds one final approach which seems to me to be the most popular today and is the one I take -- “select wisely.” This class will primarily stay in the Preterist and Philosophical/idealism category. I like to call my perspective more the “spiritual approach.” In that you see the spiritual message in the meaning of the text that applies to all Christians in every age.

**Some Key Words and Themes of Revelation**

A. The Message of the book
   1. “Choose Sides! Don’t be stupid.”
   2. We win!
   3. “The message of the book is an assurance of victory and triumph--the triumph of truth and righteousness for the saints who hold the truth, and the defeat and ultimate destruction of Satan along with his followers and helpers. (Hailey p. 51)”
   4. “The message of victory in the Book of Revelation has three parts: 1) the conflict between good and evil, 2) the apparent defeat of good, and 3) the ultimate victory of good.
5. The primary purpose then is to encourage, strengthen, educate, and warn Christians.
6. Key verse - Rev. 17:14
7. Faith triumphs over might!
8. It is a message from Jesus and about Jesus. We must get a vision of Jesus.

B. Some key terms in the book. We will study these throughout, but I want you to be looking for them.
   1. Nikao - Victory / Overcome, Conquer - Found 17 times in 22 chapters.
   2. Lamb - occurs 28 times (7 x 4)
   3. Throne - Used 37 times
   4. Crown - Used 8 times
   5. (martus - gk) Witness, Martyr, Testify - Used 19 times

**Outline of the Book**
Dr. Cloud’s outline on pg. 10
Pliny the Younger was governor of Pontus/Bithynia from 111-113 AD. We have a whole set of exchanges of his letters with the emperor Trajan on a variety of administrative political matters. These two letters are the most famous, in which P. encounters Christianity for the first time.

PLINY, LETTERS 10.96-97

Pliny to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was
published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for
which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

**Trajan to Pliny**

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

[I was unsure of the origin of this file. Bob Edsall (redsall@voicenet.com) informs me that is originates with James O'Donnell's (jod@ccat.sas.upenn.edu) file at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html]

First Period of Persecution: 60 – 218

Here are some key events and individuals.

- 64  Nero Burns Rome
- 70  The Destruction of Jerusalem
- 81  Domitian Persecution Begins
- 98  Trajan Persecution Begins
- 108  Martyrdom of Ignatius
- 117  Hadrian Persecution Begins
- 130  Conversion of Justin Martyr
- 138  Antoninus Pius Persecution Begins
- 150  Clement of Alexandria Is Born
- 153  Justin Martyr Writes *First Apology*
Martyrdom of Polycarp
Justin Writes *Dialogue with Trypho*
Marcus Aurelius Persecution Begins
Martyrdom of Justin
Irenaeus Is Bishop of Lyon
Celsus Writes *True Reason*
Iraneaus Writes *Against Heresies*
Origen Is Born
Clement of Alexandria Begins to Write
Septimius Severus Persecution Begins
Tertullian Begins to Write
Caracalla Persecution Begins

First Era of Peace – 218 – 249

Origen begins to write.

Second Period of Persecution: 249 – 260

Decius begins empire-wide persecution
Valerian persecution begins

Second Era of Peace – 260 – 302

Eusebius is born
Councils at Antioch

Great Persecution – 302 – 311

The Great Persecution begins
Edict of Toleration
Battle of Milvian Bridge
Edict of Milan
Arian controversy begins

What you need to remember:

Several factors in persecution:
- Christianity’s growth amongst the slaves and poor.
- The mysterious elements of Christianity.
  Accused of:
    Incest (because called brother and sister)
Sexual orgies (because met in secret, at night, and private)
Cannibals (Lord’s Supper)
Rebellion (because they called Jesus King)
- Connected with fire of Rome b/c they said the world would be
  burned with fire.
- As Rome declined there was a belief that it was doing so
  because the ancient gods were not being reverenced, thus the
  emperors sought to punish all those who did not worship the
  gods. Christians called “atheists.”

Nero’s and Domitian’s (60-96) persecutions were more local and not
empire wide.

Pliny’s and Trajan’s exchange of letters - see copy above.

Marcus Aurelius does more persecution for example:

Polycarp’s Martydom by Fire in 155 – Amphitheater at Smyrna
  “86 years I have served Him, He has done me nothing
  but good; and how could I curse Him, My Lord and
  Savior.”

The Great Persecution – 302 – 311 (fully stopped by 323)
  This involved the destruction of church buildings, burning
  Bibles, and hunting out Christians. It was empire wide. The
  governors in the areas effected the proceedings.

We do not know the number of Christians that were persecuted. We
do know that many denied the faith, Christians met in secret, and many
died.

Tertullian – who lived during them said thus, “The blood of the
  martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Revelation 2:10