

INTRODUCTION:

Revelation is filled with symbolism and prophecies regarding the future. It is very difficult to understand and is subject to many interpretations. Everything in the book has been subject to controversy and continues to be debated by Biblical scholars. There has been disagreement regarding its authorship, its inclusion in the Biblical Canon, and of course, it's meaning.

There have been four primary views of interpreting Revelation. The first, or “**preterist**” view, places the events and visions described as belonging to the past, particularly to the Roman Empire of the first century A.D. The believers of this view explain the highly symbolic character of the book as an endeavor by John to hide the real meaning of what he was saying from the general populace but make it apparent to the believers who lived at that time. People holding to this view believe that the main purpose of this writing was to encourage the believers regarding God's ultimate intervention in the affairs of men. In my opinion it is very unlikely that this view is correct in light of the prophetic nature of the book. Some of the descriptions of future events cannot possibly be identified as historical.

The second view, or the “**historicist**” view, maintains that what we have in Revelation is a panoramic view of history from the first century to the Second Coming of Christ. This is the view of most of the Protestant Reformers. In my opinion, this could at best only be partially true because historians have been unable to identify precise events in history which would answer to the visions symbolized.

The third view is the “**symbolic**” view which holds that Revelation portrays the continuing conflict between the forces of good and evil throughout the entire span of human history. The book according to this view is designed to give encouragement since at the end the good will triumph. This view understates Revelation's truth and teaching.

The fourth view is the “**futuristic**” view which maintains that from chapter 4 on, Revelation deals with events at the end time. According to this view, Revelation is not concerning events of John's own day as much as later historical events, and particularly those happenings that will take place in connection with the Second Coming of the Lord. This view takes seriously the predictive element in the book (Rev. 1:19; 4:1). Very definitely the final chapters of Revelation deal with the last days and a definitive change in things as they are today.

My approach in the study of the Book of Revelation will be simple and straightforward. We will not view the book through the lens of history, attempting to make its content fit historic events. We will also not attempt to interpret its symbolism through human reasoning alone, which has proven to be limited and unreliable. We will instead attempt to allow the book to speak for itself, viewing and interpreting its meaning through the lens of Scripture. In other words, we will interpret Scripture using Scripture as our lens. To do this we will hold to two “truths” revealed in Scripture. The first truth is that all Scripture comes from God and can be trusted. Peter wrote: ***“But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”*** (2 Peter 1:20-21). Second, we will assume that God is consistent in the truth He has revealed through Scripture, as Hebrews 13:8 states: ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** When Scripture is interpreted out of context or without being compared to all that God has revealed, its interpretation becomes subject to the distortions of time, culture, personal experience and even our own selfish desires. While all of these may lend themselves to the process of interpretation, we must remember that God is consistent and does not contradict His Word. Therefore, Scripture will become our authority to understanding what God is revealing in the book of Revelation.

In our scientific culture today we believe there is an explanation for everything and that every question can be answered through investigation and reasoning. It is important that we remind ourselves that we are finite but God is infinite. We must concede that we can only understand what God is willing and ready to reveal through the presence of His Holy Spirit. It is OK if we do not fully understand all that is written in Revelation and that some things may remain a mystery. This does not mean we are ignorant, incapable or unworthy. What is important is that we learn all that we can learn from all God will reveal to us, and apply it to the living of our lives. Our intent must not be to gain special knowledge but to grow closer to God and prepare ourselves for the end of time and judgment we will all face, either at the point that our physical life ends or our Lord and Savior returns. May God grant us ears to hear, minds to comprehend and hearts to cherish the precious truth He will reveal to us in this study.

Why do pastors avoid preaching and/or teaching the Book of Revelation?

Pride is probably the highest reason on the list. Pastors fear teaching what they themselves don't completely understand and avoid the controversial. Pastors feel that they are supposed to be the authority on Scripture, but in reality we are on the same journey of learning and understanding as those we attempt to teach. None of us have arrived or know all the answers and that is sometimes hard to admit. Second, many fear the Book of Revelation itself because of the unique warning it contains: ***“I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book”*** (Revelation 22:18-19). Any pastor that believes in the authority of Scripture is given pause by this warning. You will note as I attempt to lead this study of Revelation that I will be very careful not to talk in absolutes—presenting my opinions and interpretations as the only or absolute truth. As has been said, there have been many interpretations of Revelation and everyone will be encouraged to share their own understandings and opinions.

Why do we risk preaching and teaching the Book of Revelation?

We must teach Revelation because Christ our Lord has instructed us to do so. Jesus instructed John, saying: ***“Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches...”*** (Revelation 1:11a). In Revelation 19:9 the Lord commands, ***“Write, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And He said to me, “These are true words of God.””*** John is repeatedly commanded to “write” what he sees and hears because God intends the message to be shared... to be taught. Revelation is the only book in the Bible literally dictated by the Lord. Revelation is also the only book in the Bible which states that those who read and hear its words will be blessed. Revelation 1:3 states: ***“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”*** The Book of Revelation must be preached and must be taught as God has instructed.

CHAPTER-1:

Chapter-1 has four distinct divisions: introduction (vv. 1-3); salutation (vv. 4-8); Christ in His glory (vv. 9-18); and the instruction to write (vv. 19-20). In the Gospels Christ is presented as the Lamb sacrificed for our sins. Here He is presented as the Roaring Lion. It is interesting that in John 1:29, 36, Jesus is presented as the *amnos*, the “Lamb of sacrifice,” while throughout Revelation He is never presented as the *amnos* but as *arnion*, the “Lamb which lives and is not marked for sacrifice.”

Verse-1: The first four words of the book are ***“The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”*** The word “Revelation” comes from the Greek word *Apokalupsis* which means “an unveiling or uncovering.” The word appears in the “singular” and not the “plural” therefore this is not the uncovering of many different things but of one. Revelation is not the unfolding of a story by John or a series of prophetic truths, but the message of the “appearing of Christ.”

Next, most English translations of the Greek use the words “shortly” or “soon” regarding the things that the book reveals will take place. It is wrong to interpret this to mean the events will take place in the “near future” because that is not the meaning of the Greek. A more accurate translation would be that the events will take place “with speed, swiftness, or quickness.” The original meaning of the Greek could best be translated as “rapidity of action once there is a beginning.” In other words, the future events depicted in Revelation will not necessarily take place soon, as in the near future, but when they do begin to take place they will occur rapidly in a relatively short time period. This is consistent all through Scripture. A good example might be found in Matthew 24:34 when Jesus is talking about the signs that will immediately precede His return, and says: ***“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”*** Jesus clearly seems to be saying that the same generation that sees the signs preceding His return will see His return, i.e., it will all take place within one generation. God allows man to have his day, but God is also going to have His day in which He will intervene suddenly and speedily.

Verse-2: John is a ***“witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.”*** Scripture makes clear that John is not the source of the message but a witness

testifying to the message revealed to him by Jesus Christ, who is the “true” source of the message.

Verse-3: This verse reveals both a blessing and a warning associated with what is about to be revealed. Regarding the blessing, we are told: ***“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it;”*** (v. 3a). It is important to note that one must both “hear” and “heed” the message in order to be blessed. Regarding the warning, we are told: ***“for the time is near”*** (v. 3b). As in verse-1 the word translated as “near” does not necessarily mean within a short time from the present. Many English translations use the phrase “at hand” or the word “imminent” rather than “near.” Both are better translations of the Greek. The intended meaning is that these events could happen at any time so we need to be ready. This interpretation is consistent with Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:42, where He states: ***“Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.”*** 1 Peter 4:7 states: ***“The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.”*** The warning is that the future events depicted in Revelation are ready to happen or “at hand” so we need to heed the message and be ready.

Verses 4-6: John now commends on behalf of the Father, Son and Spirit of God, a salutation of grace and peace to the “seven churches that are in Asia.” The seven churches to which John writes all existed in what today is western Turkey. We know that there were far more churches in existence at that time and it is widely believed that these churches are representative of the entire Christian Church. As I have stated, the message clearly seems to be from God the Father, Son and Spirit. God the Father is likely represented in verse-4 as ***“from Him who is and who was and who is to come.”*** The Holy Spirit may be seen in the portion which reads: ***“and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.”*** The number seven often depicts perfection and/or completeness. Jesus says in John 14:26: ***“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”*** Revelation 1:20 and 4:5 indicate that the “seven Spirits” dwell with the “seven lamp stands,” which are the “seven churches,” indicating that the seven-fold Spirit of God dwells in and shines through the Church. Revelation 5:6 also indicates an integral connection between the Spirit and the Christ, saying, ***“...a Lamb standing, as if slain,***

having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.” Scripture often depicts “horns” as a symbol of “power” and “eyes” for vision. Jesus says in Matthew 6:22: *“The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.”* And finally, the Son is clearly represented in verse-5, which begins with *“and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”*

Furthermore in verses 5 and 6, and of great importance, we hear three glorious statements concerning Christ’s work on our behalf. In verse-5, Christ is said to be *“Him who loves us”* and then as the One who has *“released us from our sins by His blood.”* Then in verse-6, we are told that Christ *“has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.”* We are being told that Christ loves us, saved us, and has made us into a kingdom of priests for the Father. This indeed is not a description limited to any one or group of churches but the Church Universal.

Verse-7: The author, Jesus Christ, has been established. The instrument to be used to communicate the message, John, has been made known. And the recipient of the message, the seven churches or the Church, has been made known. Now in verse-7 we hear the primary and central message of the Book of Revelation that the Lord Jesus Christ will return. *“Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen”* (v. 7). This message is consistent with Jesus’ words to His disciples when telling them about His return. In Matthew 24:30, Jesus said to them, *“and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.”* Everyone who has ever lived will see His coming, including those who crucified Him. The earth will mourn over Him because He comes to pass judgment on the whole world. Frequently, Jesus spoke to His disciples about the “day of judgment.” For example, in Matthew 12:36, Jesus said, *“And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment.”* The day of judgment is reserved for the end of time when God will punish the earth by fire, but punishment is reserved for the guilty and not those who have put on the righteousness of Christ. Peter states: *“But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved*

for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7).

The “day of judgment” is also frequently referenced throughout the Bible as the “day of the Lord.” Peter helps us see this by repeating shortly after verse-7 above, ***“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up”*** (2 Peter 3:10). Here Peter also reinforces the quickness in how it will come. This truth has been long known, as the prophet Isaiah declares: ***“Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation, and He will exterminate its sinners from it”*** (Isaiah 13:9). Joel 3:14 also associates the “day of the Lord” with the “judgment,” stating, ***“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision.”***

Revelation 1:7 ends with two Greek words translated as, ***“Even so. Amen.”*** In the (NASB), or ***“So shall it be! Amen.”*** in the (NIV). These Greek words can also be translated as “yes indeed, amen” or “certainly so, truly indeed.” What is interesting is that what we often translate as “Amen” has the same meaning in the Old Testament Hebrew and the New Testament Greek. Essentially, what we are hearing is a double amen, or “Amen and Amen!” This is a double affirmation of the truth just spoken, placing great emphasis on the revelation that Christ will return to pass judgment.

Verse-8: Now we hear the Lord speaking to us directly to add His emphasis and authority to what we have and are about to hear in His Revelation. ***“I am the Alpha, and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”*** The alpha and omega, are respectively, the first and last words in the Greek alphabet so the Lord is saying that He is the beginning and the end of everything. This is reinforced with the statement that the Lord is He ***“who is and who was and who is to come.”*** The Lord is Lord over all things for all time and we should listen to His words.

Verse-9: John now seeks to identify with the Christians to whom He writes, not speaking of his own authority but with humility calling himself their brother. He identifies with them as one who also suffers because of his testimony in proclaiming the Word of God and Jesus as Lord, and one who perseveres in Jesus and through His grace. One can almost hear the echo of Jesus’ words from the “Sermon on the Mount” when He said: ***“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for***

theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me”

(Matthew 5:10-11).

Verses 10-11: Now John introduces us to the vision he has received at Patmos and his instruction to write an account of it for the seven churches. We are told that at the time of the vision John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day. To be in the Spirit is to be in the Presence of the Spirit of God, perhaps in prayer or meditation. John’s reference to the “Lord’s day” is generally interpreted as meaning that the vision occurred on a Sunday, which had become known as the Lord’s day because it was the day of the Resurrection. Some believe John is speaking of being transported into the future to the “Day of the Lord” and the descriptions which follow are of the events of that final time. Either or both could be true, but the distinction does not affect the message itself.

John continues saying that he hears a loud voice behind him *“like the sound of a trumpet.”* Often in Scripture the “sound of a trumpet” is equated with the voice of God. For example, when God descended upon the mountain of God to meet with Moses, we are told: *“So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled... When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder”* (Exodus 19:16, 19). And in Psalm 47:5 it is written: *“God has ascended with a shout, the Lord, with the sound of a trumpet.”*

Finally, in verse-11, we hear the Lord’s instruction to John, saying, *“Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches...”* As previously stated, the message is from the Lord, John will be the instrument of transmission, and the Church will be the recipient.

Verses 12-20: Verses 12-16 describe the first scene that John is shown. The vision contains four things which include; (1) seven lamp stands; (2) a being who looks like a man wearing a robe that reaches to His feet; (3) seven stars being held in the being’s hand; and, (4) a two-edged sword coming from the being’s mouth. Verses 17 and 18, make it clear that the brilliantly illuminated being is the glorified Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ who is the one speaking to John and the source of Revelation. Verse

20 reveals that the seven lamp stands represent the seven churches, and that the seven stars represent the seven angels of the seven churches. An explanation of the meaning behind Christ's attire and the sword are not offered.

Regarding the seven churches being represented as seven lamp stands, this symbolism may tie back to Jesus' words in Matthew when He says to His disciples: ***"You are the light of the world"*** (Matthew 5:14a), and He instructs them saying, ***"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven"*** (Matthew 5:16). The churches (Church Universal) is called to be Christ's light, a lamp or lamps in a dark world.

Regarding the attire described to be worn by Christ in the vision, I could find no direct correlation or meaning in Scripture, but some scholars attribute it to being similar to that worn by priests. Hebrews 9:11-12 describes Christ as our "high priest" stating: ***"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."*** It is also similar to the being described in Daniel 4:9 and 10:5-6 (below).

Regarding the appearance of Christ described in verse-14, the image is very similar to that described of the "Ancient of Days" in Daniel 4:9, which reads: ***"I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool..."*** The image is even more similar to the being that appeared to Daniel in Daniel 10:5-6, which states: ***"I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. His body also was like beryl, his face had the appearance of lightning, his eyes were like flaming torches, his arms and feet like the gleam of polished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a tumult."*** The images found in the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament closely correspond to many of the images found in Revelation as we will see as we continue our study. The Book of Daniel will be but one source helping us interpret Revelation.

Regarding the churches each having an angel, Psalm 91:11 states, ***"For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways."*** Indeed, there is

evidence in Scripture that God has assigned angels to watch over individuals, churches and even nations. For example, in the Book of Daniel we learn that the angel Michael stands guard over Israel. Speaking of the end of time Daniel 12:1 reads: ***“Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.”*** We may also understand John’s vision to be saying that what is happening on earth is connected with events taking place in heaven. In Revelation 12:4, we hear of a red dragon (presumably Satan) whose ***“tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth.”*** Many believe this symbolism describes a rebellion in heaven when a third of the angels sided with Satan and were cast to the earth to become “fallen angels” or demons.

Finally, regarding the two-edged sword, it most likely represents the Word of God as illustrated in Hebrews 4:12, which reads: ***“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*** The two-edged sword cuts “both ways” separating good from evil, the righteous from the unrighteous. The sword may be another symbol of the judgment that corresponds with the return of Christ.

Many argue that John did not see the literal images that he described but that they are only representative of the message he is attempting to convey. There is no doubt that the images represent truth being revealed by the Lord, but there is no reason to believe that John is not describing literally what he saw. We do not need to covert the images into something more familiar to our finite and logical world in order to understand their meanings or believe the truth they represent. It has been my experience that God often uses unworldly symbols in communicating His divine message. In a way, perhaps the “symbols” are like the “parables” Jesus used for teaching. The symbols and parables relay a message of truth that only the faithful can understand guided by God’s Holy Spirit. To everyone else they are meaningless and foolishness. In Matthew 13:10-13 it is written: ***“And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?”*** Jesus answered them, ***“To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of***

the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” Using parables and symbols is an act of mercy from God. Only those who believe and seek with faith will find answers revealed by God’s Holy Spirit. Those who do not believe will not see because if they truly understood but continued to be disobedient due to their lack of faith, their condemnation would be much more severe.

(This Concludes Part-1)