

GOD'S PATHWAY THROUGH PROPHECY

INTRODUCING REVELATION

Revelation 1:1, 19; 19:10

INTRODUCTION: John's book of the Revelation is in content and context the Revelation of JESUS CHRIST! Christ is the commencement, continuation, and culmination of the book. It opens with the personal revelation of His glorious Person (Rev. 1), and it closes with the prayerful request for His glorious Parousia (Rev. 22). He is the central Subject and the chief Spirit of the book because His testimony is the true Spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10). The Revelation not only concludes the Canon of Divine Revelation, it communicates the closing act of the continuing Drama of Divine Redemption. Just as the book of Genesis provides the beginning of God's Story in relation to time, matter, and space, so Revelation provides the conclusion of God's Story in relation to time, matter, and space. Genesis tells us how space-time history began, and Revelation tells us how space-time history shall end. The Revelation ushers us out of time and into eternity. It transitions the reader from this present world full of sin, death, and woe; into that prospective world free from sin, death, and woe.

Some key points of the Revelation warrant introductory emphasis before moving forward. The key verses of the book include 1:1; 1:19; and 19:10. These are vitally important because they identify the Subject of the book, the Structure of the book, and the true Spirit of the book. These provide a natural interpretive control for the book. The theology of the book is overwhelmingly Christo-centric. It presents Christ as the Risen Lord, the Reigning Lord, and the Returning Lord whose Kingdom shall prevail over the kingdom of darkness and persist triumphant through the ages of eternity. As the full and final Revelation of Jesus Christ the book is open rather than closed (Rev. 22:20). In this sense the book is different from Daniel which at the time of writing remained sealed until the latter times (Dan. 12:4). While it is different from Daniel, it is utterly dependent upon Daniel. The book is not meant to conceal but to reveal all that was once concealed. It is the full and final reality of the shadows that point to it. For this reason, the book of Revelation contains no less than 400 allusions to the Old Testament. More than any other New Testament writing. It is a true revelation that reveals all that was once concealed. As the Divinely inspired and infallible complement and conclusion of Old Testament books such as Daniel and Ezekiel, it must be investigated and interpreted in the light of what comes before it. Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture. The Old Testament foreshadows must be allowed to inform and illuminate the New Testament fulfillments to which the Spirit of God points them. To fully understand the framework, force, and flow of the book it is necessary to gain an introductory insight into the Revelation of Jesus Christ by considering ten basic interpretive principles.

I. The APPELATION of the Book

The book itself opens with its own inspired title, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ!" (1:1). Thus, while the book contains many revelations, it is predominantly concerned with one single and supreme revelation, the revelation of the person, the presence, the power, the providence, the plan, the purposes, and the *parousia* and final potency of the Lord Jesus Christ. The phrase,

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ” bears the force of an objective genitive, implying that the Revelation is not merely a revelation that comes from Jesus Christ, but that it is first and foremost a revelation of and about WHO Jesus Christ is and WHAT Jesus Christ is providentially performing through His prophetic program as He rules and reigns from heaven in resurrection authority until His final return to earth. All other revelations are subordinate to and supportive of this single revelation. The book is about Jesus Christ, because the whole spirit of prophetic truth focuses upon Jesus (Rev. 19:10). It is no wonder then that the book of Revelation provides more personal titles of Jesus Christ than any other book in the Bible. If a person studies Revelation without seeing JESUS, then he misses the central motif, motive, and message of the book. The study of prophecy is the study of Jesus. Any prophetic study that focuses on sensationalism rather than the Son; on mere symbolism rather than the Savior; or on speculative conjectures rather than the Sovereign Christ is not a true study of prophecy at all.

The title of the book denotes both the literary material and motivation of the Revelation. The word “Revelation” comes from the Greek word (*apocalypsis*) and literally implies “an unveiling, a disclosure of what had been hidden in the mind of the Triune God, an opening up so as to make known what otherwise is unknown, and even unknowable by mere human reason.” The majority of what the book reveals pertains to futuristic things yet to come. It is not only therefore, revelation, it is eschatological or apocalyptic revelation. For this reason, the book of Revelation falls into a specific literary genre known as Apocalyptic Literature. As apocalyptic disclosure, Revelation treats the end of this present age in lieu of the yet future age to come in the latter days when God shall make all things new. The book therefore speaks of new things such as, a new Heaven, a new Earth, a new Jerusalem, and a new Worship marked by a new Song sung by saints who have been given a new Name! In doing so it utilizes inspired sacred symbols, images, visions, and numbers that contain literal meanings and messages which are to be deduced through careful and prayerful observation and investigation devoted to historical and comparative analogical interpretation drawing upon other apocalyptic material such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah. These Old Testament apocalyptic books serve as inspired counterparts and complements to the book of Revelation so as to shed literal light upon the symbolism of Revelation and reveal what the book otherwise conceals. It should not therefore be a surprise that the book of Revelation contains more quotations and allusions from the Old Testament than does any other New Testament book! The serious student of Bible prophecy must ever keep in mind that the Old Testament prophecies point forward to the Revelation, and the Revelation points backward to the Old Testament prophecies. Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture so as to safeguard against carnal and crafty sensationalism and speculation.

II. The AGE of the Book

The early church father and historian, Irenaeus, witnessed that the Apostle John wrote the Revelation around the conclusion of the tyrannical reign of Emperor Domitian after being exiled on Patmos. This claim is confirmed by additional testimony from Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, and Eusebius. Domitian ruled from (A.D. 81-96). Revelation is one of the last books, if not the last book of the New Testament. A late date for its writing is supported by both the style and subject of its material and motivation. A late date is also evidenced by the

compromised condition of the local churches to which John writes in chapters 2-3. The doctrinal and moral corruption of most of these congregations seems to indicate that some time had passed in the life of the Church since its primitive conception in Jerusalem. As A.T. Robertson points out, “The severity of the persecutions” which were occurring in John’s day provides additional support for a late date (275). John’s use of the past tense in 1:9 – “I, John...was on the Isle called Patmos” intimates that he wrote some time upon his release and return back to the area of Ephesus (Modern day Turkey). This suggest a date sometime around 95-96 A.D since Domitian died in 96 A.D.

III. The **AUTHOR** of the Book

The inspired and infallible internal witness of the book declares its human author to be John no less than five times (1:1, 4, 9; 21:2; 22:8). But which John is this? He is obviously a pre-eminently known John among the churches of Asia Minor, evidenced by the fact that he feels no need to provide any additional biographical information beyond the fact that he is, “John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation” (1:9). This John was a leader among the churches of Asia Minor during the latter part of the first century (Rev. 2-3). He was himself a prophet of God (22:9). He was that John who had been exiled to the isle of Patmos under the persecution of Emperor Domitian because of his faithful devotion to the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ (1:9). He was a deeply spiritual man who kept in step with the Spirit even during dark and difficult days (1:8). He was one of the earliest followers of Jesus and held the apostolic privilege of personally beholding the risen and glorified Christ (1:10-18). In addition to being well known, having no need for extended identification, he was also very influential among the churches of Ephesus (Rev. 2-3). While there are other John’s within the sacred canon, none meet these internal criteria other than the Apostle John, the bother of James, the son of Zebedee, and the divinely inspired author of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. It was John who held a very sacred and very special intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ, and it was John who had a very sacred and a very special perspective of the person and purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ. Concerning John one writer astutely notes: “The author had previously reached father back into eternity than any other Bible writer (Jn. 1:1-3). In Revelation he reaches farther on into eternity than any other writer (Rev. 21-22)” (Wilmington: 536). Early Christian history reports that John would have penned the Revelation either while on the isle of Patmos, a tiny land mass in the Aegean Sea; or shortly after returning to Ephesus from Patmos.

IV. The **AUDIENCE** of the Book

The recipients of the Revelation must be understood in its immediate or original historical context, as well as its remote distant referent of prospective saints yet future from the time John wrote. With regard to the former the Spirit speaks expressly when He says, “John, to the seven churches which are in Asia” (1:4). The book was addressed to real believers who belonged to real local Christian congregations with real strengths and weaknesses tested and tried by real Imperial persecutions at the very time of writing. The seven local assemblies of Asia Minor were the recipients of the letters and make up the specific focus of chapters two and three. In addition, the Revelation holds practical and prophetic significance for all saints of all ages as they await the ultimate fulfillment of its message in the latter days of eschatological

confirmation. Thus, the book addresses the general or universal Church of Jesus Christ who places firm faith and hope in the prophetic Scriptures by patiently waiting for the coming of their Savior and Lord. This means that the recipients of the Revelation include both the past members of the local assemblies in Ephesus, as well as the present and prospective members of the universal assembly in the world today.

V. The **ATTESTATION** of the Book

The general validity and authenticity of the book's authorship is strongly supported by both internal and external witness. Internally, it has already been noted that the book claims John the Apostle as its inspired human writer no less than five (5) times (1:1, 4, 9; 21:2; 22:8). This biblical testimony is supported by the background testimony of the early church. Early Christian fathers who assigned the book to the apostle John include: Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. It is also included in the Muratorian Canon where it is assigned to the apostle John. Regarding the authorship of the Revelation it has been rightly observed that "ancient tradition uniformly credits John the apostle" as the human pen behind the book (Thiessen: 318-19).

VI. The **AIM** of the Book

The Spirit of God inspired John to receive and infallibly record the Revelation for a number of reasons. Some of these historically related to the immediate audience of John's own hour. Others prophetically pertained to the more remote audience of the Christian era extending from the first century to that final day of end time saints who will live to see the full, future, and final fulfillment of the books eschatological message. The books ultimate purpose was and is to provide inspired counsel, comfort, correction, and challenge to God's people that the child of God might be thoroughly furnished and equipped for victorious Christian living in the face of dark and difficult days destined to come upon planet earth. During the dark and difficult days of local and global persecution, as the saints await their Savior with persevering hope based upon a clear communication of God's progressive prophetic plan leading His people from here to eternity victoriously, the book focuses upon blessing all the believing churches of all ages who read its message (1:3). In communicating God's progressive prophetic program, the Revelation addresses the following objectives:

- A. The book expounds and exalts Jesus Christ as the glorified resurrected, ruling, and returning Lord and Savior of the Church.
- B. The book confronts and corrects the moral and doctrinal problems which local churches faced in the past, and continue to face today; while challenging each congregation to maintain purity in lieu of God's prophetic program.
- C. The book provides a comprehensive and climatic panorama of God's pathway through prophecy, specifically focusing on the fulfillment of Daniel's Seventieth Week, the Parousia of Christ and the Rapture of the saints, the Battle of Armageddon, the Millennial Kingdom, the Final Judgment, and the Eternal Estate.

- D. The book reveals the practical prophetic plan whereby God’s final Victory over sin, sinners, and Satan will be forever fulfilled by a final judgment of death and hell, followed by a New Heaven and New Earth which replaces this present age with the glorious New Age to come in and through the Second Coming of the Conquering Christ, who is King of kings, and Lord of lords!
- E. The book provides and produces a divinely inspired benediction upon the people of God for all ages as they read and respond to its inspired and infallible message of full and final victory through the risen, reigning, and returning Christ (1:3). It is this very Christ who constitutes the true “spirit of prophecy” (19:10) and stands from the commencement to the conclusion of the Revelation as the supreme Subject of the sacred prophetic text! Thus, the supreme purpose of the book is to show God’s people the person, the power, and the presence of Jesus Christ among His Church from this day to that day when every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11)!

VII. The **ARRANGMENT** of the Book

In a rich and rare fashion, the Revelation provides its own inspired structural form and flow. The key text of the book with regards to its objective and outline is verse 19 – *“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.”* John was given the Revelation in which he saw the glorified Christ, and those past, present, and prophetic matters as they pertain to Christ in His present and proleptic glory. He was then charged to write down the revelatory record of those things which from the temporal vantage point of the apostle included some things now past, other things now present, and still many things yet prophetic. These things constitute the structural form and flow of the book, and dictate how the book is to be investigated and interpreted. Some elements of the book must be understood through the lens where history has gone in the past. Other aspects of the book must be understood through the lens of where history is going in the future. The Revelation, therefore, has three literary sections in relation to the time in which John received and recorded the visions – past things, present things, and prophetic things. Those who take the sacred record seriously by allowing the text to speak for itself so that the plain sense is permitted to make plain sense without seeking some other sense, will carefully and consistently follow this structural scheme for the book. Using this simple structural guideline, the book of Revelation divides into three interpretive sections as follows:

- A. The **PAST** things of John’s Day – 1:9-20
- B. The **PRESENT** things of John’s Day – 2:1-3:22
- C. The **PROPHETIC** things of John’s Day – 4:1-22:5

Once the internal and inspired structure of the book is recognized and respected, the humble reader of the book is better equipped to understand how the book should be evaluated and exegeted in the face of various interpretive approaches to the book throughout its history. This

structure enables us to review the various approaches and reject those that stand in opposition to the outline of the book itself.

VIII. The **APPROACH** to the Book

Throughout Church History at least four major exegetical systems have produced four interpretive approaches to the book of Revelation. Each of these methods is driven by evident systems of pre-thought which influences how students seek to interpret the prophetic Scriptures. The four (4) major interpretive systems are:

- A. The **FICTIONAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – This is the view of the Naturalistic skeptic and agnostic. It denies any notion or concept of supernaturalism and predictive prophecy. It limits all truth claims to the realms of scientific naturalism and rationalism. It rejects the Revelation out of hand because it has no place for divine revelation. This approach reconstructs the book into natural conceptions of religious perception and persecutions. Those who hold this system do so not because of the text itself, but despite the text itself. They come to the Bible already believing that the book of Revelation cannot actually be revelation, because revelation does not and cannot exist. Their preconceptions of God, the world, and the Bible itself force them to view the book as they do, and to interpret it as they do. The result is eisegesis rather than exegesis.
- B. The **ALLEGORICAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – This school of thought views and interprets Bible prophecy in a non-literal, purely symbolic sense. The book of Revelation is a symbolic account of the age-long progressive struggle between the forces of good and evil in society. Generally speaking, this is the position of Liberalism. This view follows in the train of the ancient allegorical school of Alexandria. It places more weight upon thoughts and theories than upon actual terms. It seeks to correlate these thoughts and theories to contemporary issues within society. Today it is prevalent within the systems of Ethnic and Social Dominion Theology, as well as in Feminist Theology. Each of these groups treat the book of revelation as a cultural, ethnic, and social manual describing the oppression wrought by evil and the ultimate liberation of specific groups within society through the triumph of good. Its message is not found in the literal context of its words, but in the symbolic conceptions it conveys in an attempt to provide hope and inspiration for all minorities and oppressed classes in this world.
- C. The **HISTORICAL** Approach to Bible Prophecy – (Two types of Prophetic History)
 1. **Past** History – Known as the “Preterist Theory” from a Latin word meaning “past”. Preterism sees prophecy as having already been fulfilled during the early centuries of the Church. Regarding the book of Revelation Preterists commonly interpret chapters 5-11 as referring to the Church’s victory over Judaism; chapters 12-19 denote the Church’s triumph over Romanism; while chapters 20-22 speak of the Church’s glory resulting from these victories. Adherents of this camp typically

view the punishments of the book as bespeaking those experienced by the early Church during the times of Nero and Domitian. The entire book of Revelation is understood as having been fulfilled by the time of Constantine (A.D. 312). It was during this time that the Triumphant Church finally emerged and prevailed in ushering in the kingdom age.

2. **Progressive** History – A view popularized by Joachin, a Roman Catholic scholar. Progressivists understand the book of Revelation from a “Panoramic Perspective” of Church History extending from John’s day to the end of the age. Prophecy is seen as being in the process of being fulfilled throughout the whole of the Christian era. The symbolism of the Revelation speaks of the rise of the Papacy, the corruption of the visible Church, and the various conflicts throughout the Church age. This was the common view of the Reformers.

D. The **PROPHETICAL/FUTURISTIC** Approach to Bible Prophecy –

Futurists hold that the book of Revelation speaks of things yet future from chapters 5-22. This view might also be called the “Literalist” or “Plain Sense” approach in as much as it attempts to consistently interpret the prophetic Scriptures in a normal or plain sense unless otherwise dictated by clear textual markers. The actual terms of the text reign paramount, even when couched in symbolic imagery. These symbols are not interpreted by casting them in the light of contemporary culture, but by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Thus, the Bible is interpreted through the text itself, rather than interpreting the Bible through the lens of society or culture. It treats prophecy in a futuristic reference and seeks to always permit Scripture to interpret Scripture so as to avoid unnecessary speculation and sensationalism. Its basic operating tenet is when the plain sense of the text makes plain sense there is no sense in seeking any other sense.

IX. The **APPLICATION** of the Book

How should Christians apply the book of Revelation in their personal life and in the life of their local church? This is an important question that often falls by the wayside. Prophecy is practical and should have a personal and practical effect on every believer with regards to what we believe and how we behave. True biblical application must extend far beyond the shallow speculative curiosity of prophecy hunters and the sensational conjectures of self-acclaimed prognosticators and conspiracy fanatics. The proper way to reverently and effectively apply the book of Revelation requires us to go back to the original purpose of the book itself. This means that we should make applications in the following manner:

- A. We should see Jesus as the resurrected, reigning, and returning Lord of lords and King of kings in such a way as to be motivated to live faithfully and fruitfully as those who shall one day give an account in the confident hope of hearing the Master say, “WELL DONE”!

- B. We should ever repentantly heed the Lord's corrections delivered to His individual churches by striving to live holy lives in our own personal walk with Christ, and by doing our utmost to contribute to the sanctification and service of the local church to which we belong by making sure that it maintains doctrinal and devotional purity in word, work, and worship in lieu of Christ return and future judgment of the believer.
- C. We should live as confident and consecrated Christians who know God's Pathway through Prophecy with such clarity that we soberly work and worship while patiently waiting for our Bridegroom from heaven.
- D. We should live today in victory over sin, sinners, and Satan; because we know our full and final victory over these three enemies on that day. Knowing of THAT DAY should influence the way we live THIS DAY!
- E. We should avail ourselves of the blessing that comes through the study of the prophetic Scriptures and join with the heavenly host in bowing our knee daily to the LAMB who was slain but now lives, by proclaiming Him and praising Him alone as LORD! The Revelation proclaims that the Lamb is Lord and we should live every day under His Lordship until He comes and calls us unto Himself on that day!

X. The **APPRECIATION** of the Book

While every book, yea, every word of Sacred Scripture, demands and deserves the highest and holiest appreciation and adoration, the book of Revelation warrants special attention all its own. It is the only purely prophetic book in the entire New Testament. It is both eschatological and ecclesiastical. While it is prophetic, it is also practical. It is the clarification, the communication, the celebration, and the consummation of God's entire Providential program for cosmological and even celestial history. Like all revelation, the book of Revelation makes known certain transforming truths which we would otherwise never know, and in no otherwise could ever know. It is a book that no man would have written if he could; or could have written if he would. While it contains great mysteries, it is not meant to mystify. Its truths are knowable, and deserve to be known. For this reason, Revelation promises a special blessing for those who read its revelatory message (Rev. 1:3). Those who walk in the Spirit, and keep in step with the Spirit so as to be illuminated by the Holy Spirit through the Holy Scriptures, can know the truths of Revelation because they are both propositional and perspicuous. As C. C. Ryrie states, "It is an apocalypse, literally a revelation, designed not to mystify, but to clarify" (7). As we appreciate Revelation, we can more clearly and confidently travel along God's pathway through prophecy in such a manner as to apprehend and appropriate God's providential plan in the progress of Redemption from here to eternity.