

## Revelation Bible Study

November 1, 2006

Some of the information in this session is review from our April 26, 2006, last session of Through the Bible.

- I. General Comments on Revelation
  - a. Revelation evokes a wide range of reactions and emotions (comfort to the grieving, encouragement to the oppressed, hope to the downtrodden, and warning to the complacent).<sup>1</sup>
  - b. Revelation has inspired painters like Michelangelo, musicians like George Handel, and writers like John Milton.<sup>2</sup>
  - c. Some of our great church hymns (Holy, Holy, Holy; Lo, He comes with Clouds Descending) were inspired by Revelation texts.<sup>3</sup>
- II. The Problem with studying Revelation
  - a. Preachers and Teachers of the Bible tend to avoid it.
  - b. We feel the book conceals more than it reveals.
  - c. There's violent imagery (see 6:10; 14:20; 17:6) and this turns people off.
  - d. In Church history, theologians and scholars have bashed it.
    - i. Jerome, a 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian, said, "Revelation has as many mysteries as it does words."<sup>4</sup>
    - ii. D.H. Lawrence described Revelation as "...the most detestable of all the books of the Bible."<sup>5</sup>
  - e. It's very easy for us to get caught up in a game of "Match the Prediction" where we seek to connect current events with descriptions in the book.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Epist. 53.8*. Cited by Bernard McGinn, *Revelation: A Literary Companion to the Bible* edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987), p. 523.

<sup>5</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, in *Apocalypse and the Writings of Revelation*, The Cambridge Edition of D.H. Lawrence, edited by Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 61.

- III. Why should we be concerned about Revelation?
- a. Revelation contains a powerful presentation of faith.<sup>7</sup>
  - b. We have diverse images of God: as almighty God (Revelation 1:8) and also God who wipes away all tears (Revelation 7:17).
  - c. We have an image of how God intended the world to be...and ultimately will be...and Revelation invites us to be part of this transformation.<sup>8</sup>
  - d. Simply stated, Revelation is in our Bible and God has something to say to us through this work.
- IV. Revelation as literature
- a. One quickly discovers you can't read Revelation like other biblical documents.
  - b. Revelation is known as "apocalyptic" writing which is unfamiliar to most of us. This word, "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek word, ἀποκάλυψις (see Revelation 1:1). Transliterated it is: *apokalypsis*.
  - c. What is apocalyptic writing? A definition: a genre of revelatory literature mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>9</sup> Put more simply: the writing reveals cosmic secrets to human beings about other worlds.<sup>10</sup>
  - d. No other New Testament writing belongs to this genre. Old Testament passages considered apocalyptic are: Zechariah 9-14, Ezekiel 38-39, and Isaiah 24-27.
  - e. Most often, the human recipient of the message is someone important from the past (i.e., Daniel, Ezekiel, John, etc.).

---

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, edited by John J. Collins, *Semeia* 14 (1979), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 4.

- f. The occasion for writing is usually in response to some crisis (social, political, or theological). Because of this feature, apocalyptic literature is often called “crisis literature.”<sup>11</sup>
- g. The purpose of the literature: give hope and comfort to those in dire straits. For example, in Daniel, the intended readers were Jews living under persecution of the Syrian ruler, Antiochus IV. Jews at this time believed God was dominant but what they saw was that Antiochus was dominant. The book of Daniel gave the Jews an alternative way of looking at things.<sup>12</sup>
- h. Apocalyptic literature also known as “protest literature.” Writers encouraged people not to accept things the way they seemed to be. If human rulers or institutions seemed dominant, the apocalyptic writers encouraged people to remain faithful to God. Surprisingly, a call to action was often absent. God was the one who would act.<sup>13</sup>
- i. This type of writing flourished within Judaism between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Two disastrous revolts of the Jews in Palestine against the Romans (AD 66-74 and AD 132-135) are believed to have been fueled by people’s apocalyptic expectations.<sup>14</sup>
- j. Christian writers produced more than 20 apocalypses in the early centuries of the Christian Church. Remember that John’s apocalypse (Revelation) is the only one canonized.

V. How do we read an apocalypse like Revelation?

- a. We have to be careful about studying Revelation. It’s not an encrypted chart for the future that can be decoded like a secret message on the back of a cereal box.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis is on the present. Really, what we’re doing when we read Revelation is experiencing in an artistically poetic way the vision that John was having.
- b. The language of Revelation is symbolic and the images are often exaggerated for emphasis. It’s kind of like looking at political cartoons. “In political cartoons, the situations depicted are

---

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> David M. May, *Revelation: Weaving A Tapestry of Hope* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 3.

deliberately exaggerated, and often made grotesque, in order that the message may be made plain.”<sup>16</sup>

- c. “The interpreter who starts out to understand Revelation...to be literal, starts out in the wrong direction, and the further he [or she] proceeds in this direction, the less he [or she] will understand the book.”<sup>17</sup>
- d. We should encounter Revelation like we do poetry. Poets use everyday language but combine it in a way that is new, shocking, and startling for the reader.<sup>18</sup>
- e. We must also be careful about taking our contemporary ideas and values and imposing them on John’s world. Revelation was written to a 1<sup>st</sup> century audience that had 1<sup>st</sup> century problems.

VI. Passages we’ll study as we focus on the book.

- a. Revelation 1:1-19
- b. Revelation 6:1-8:5
- c. Revelation 12:1-17
- d. Revelation 21-22

---

<sup>16</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Ray Summers, *Worthy Is The Lamb: An Interpretation of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> David M. May, *Revelation: Weaving A Tapestry of Hope* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 5.