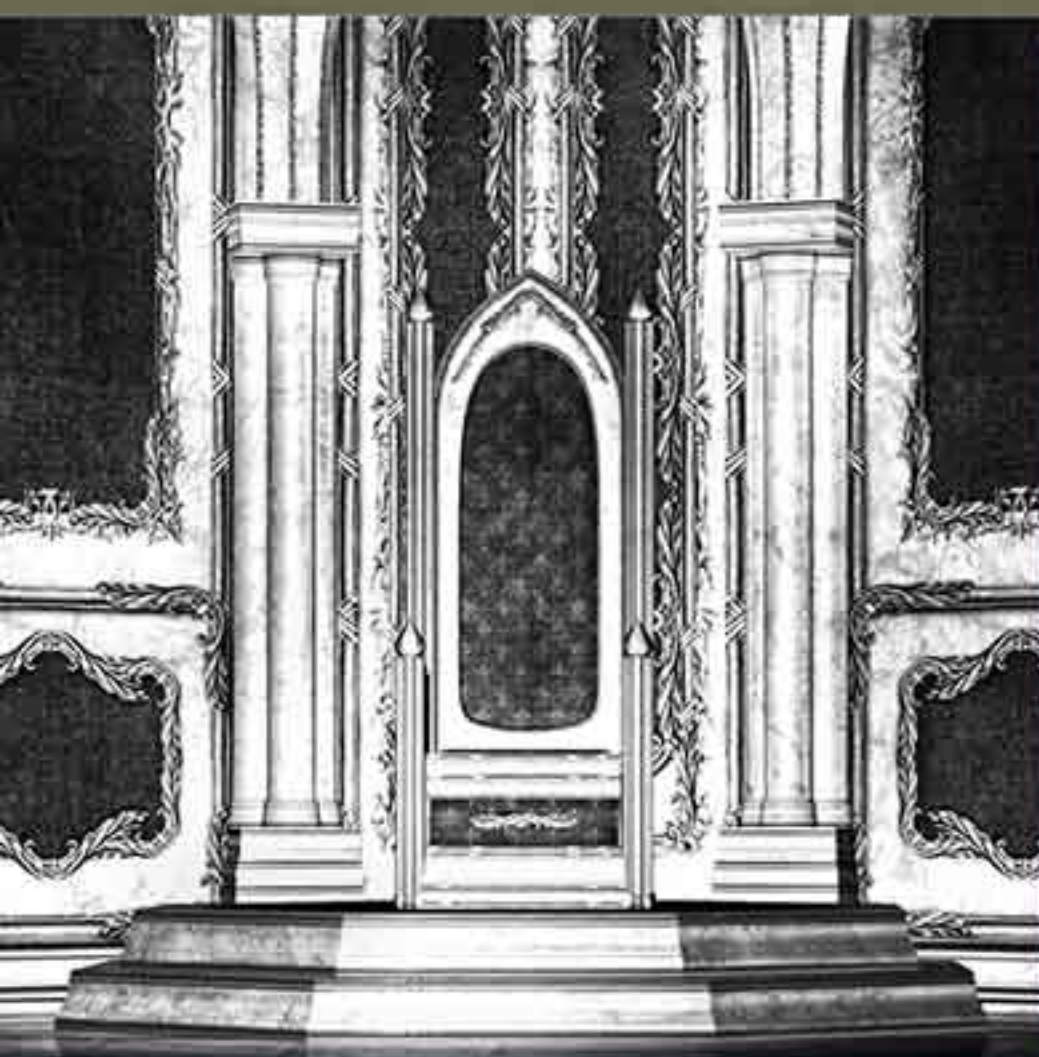




Revelation



R E F O R M E D

E X P O S I T O R Y

C O M M E N T A R Y

R I C H A R D D . P H I L L I P S

Revelation

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken

Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Revelation

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Rosemary Jensen and the valiant missionary staff
of the Rafiki Foundation
and
To the Lion-Lamb of Judah,
who loved us and has freed us from our sins by his blood
(Rev. 1:5)

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote,

Series Introduction

and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

Revelation needs to be preached! This conviction has motivated the writing of this commentary and its studies on John's Apocalypse. The church has been truly impoverished by its widespread ignorance of Revelation, born of confusion and fear regarding its message. But this book, perhaps above all other New Testament writings, promises hope and comfort to struggling Christians. Revelation is a book for our times! Particularly as the twenty-first century witnesses a spreading, virtually worldwide opposition to biblical Christianity, with violent oppression in the East and judicial suppression in the West, Revelation is the book especially designed by the Sovereign Christ to convey strength for perseverance unto spiritual victory.

The visions of Revelation were not intended as complex puzzles for a scholarly cadre of specialists. Instead, every Christian should know and often think about the vision of the dragon, the woman, and her child in chapter 12. Every preacher should have the vision of the angel presenting John with the scroll of God's Word emblazoned on his conscience. Believers entering into weekly worship should lift their spirits up to the vision of God's throne room in chapter 4—truly one of the great chapters of the Bible—conscious of entering into that very scene. And Christians suffering temptation or distress should turn anew to the vision of the glorified and exalted Jesus—Prophet, Priest, and King—who comes in chapter 1 as the Sovereign Lord with an urgent message for his church today, no less than in John's time.

Most Christians today neglect Revelation because they expect it to be confusing and contradictory. I hope and believe that these studies will prove exactly the opposite for readers. Many pastors shrink from preaching Revelation because they fear that it will be too obscure. I pray that they will see in this commentary the great relevance and practical value of Revelation to our times. While I am usually skeptical about purported advances in Bible

Preface

scholarship, the reality is that the past several generations have seen vast progress in the study of Revelation. Today, numerous accessible resources are available to exposit John's Apocalypse in doctrinally clear and practically compelling ways. On the trajectory that began with William Hendriksen's *More than Conquerors* in 1940 and that passes through G. K. Beale's 1999 magisterial commentary, lucid and exegetically persuasive arguments have demystified Revelation. Remembering that so great an exegete as John Calvin declined to preach Revelation and that Martin Luther once argued for its removal from the canon, Christians today can be grateful for a growth in understanding that makes Revelation as accessible to them as it was to its original hearers. I offer this volume as a point of access into this scholarship, seeking to present clear expositions that not only make Revelation come alive for readers but, more importantly, make readers come alive through Christ's living Word.

I wrote this commentary as one persuaded, along the lines of Hendriksen and Beale, of the redemptive-historical and amillennial interpretation of Revelation. I was delighted to find, however, that I yet derived great value from the writings of both premillennial and postmillennial scholars. This is in large part because of the nature of apocalyptic visionary writings: even when there is disagreement about the interpretation, the primary message tends to come through clearly enough. I hope that readers who hold differing millennial views from mine will likewise find in this volume that the truth of Revelation's message is set forth in a compelling and edifying way.

It has been impossible for me to preach and write on Revelation without often thinking of my dearly beloved pastoral mentor, James Montgomery Boice. Dr. Boice was preaching through Revelation when he died—his promotion into the very scenes about which he had been preaching! We frequently traveled together during this time and often, over a lunch or dinner, reveled in the visions of this book. Readers may note that Boice's still-unpublished manuscript is occasionally cited, and I am happy to give exposure to his valuable expositions. While his references end in chapter 7, Boice's homiletical spirit will, I hope, be felt throughout, especially in Revelation's final chapter, which he so deeply loved. I often teased Jim that given his redemptive-historical approach to the text, his premillennial convictions were not likely to have survived when he arrived in Revelation 20; alas, in God's providence my opinion will have to remain a mere speculation.

I wish to express my grateful thanks to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, to whom this material was originally preached. Their prayers, love, and support not only are invaluable to my ministry but are even more precious to my heart. My wife, Sharon, and our five children are instrumental in all the service that I offer to Christ, and this volume presents another occasion to give thanks to God for them. I am also grateful to Iain Duguid and Daniel Doriani, with whom I felt a true spirit of brotherly labor through their extensive editorial comments, together with the wonderful editorial staff at P&R Publishing. Special thanks to Mrs. Shirley Duncan for her invaluable aid in the copy edits of this volume.

This volume is dedicated to Rosemary Jensen, whose lifelong labors for the teaching of the Bible, in America and Africa especially, have done much to hasten the day of Christ's coming (2 Peter 3:12). Together with Rosemary, I wish to honor the valiant missionaries of the Rafiki Foundation, who have spread abroad the love and truth of Christ to so many needy souls on the African continent. My many years of association and friendship with them have provided some of the highest privileges of my Christian experience. Finally, I adoringly echo the apostle John's own dedication of the book of Revelation: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . . , to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 1:5–6).

Richard D. Phillips
Greenville, South Carolina



Revelation

THE LAMB UPON HIS THRONE

PART 1

*Christ amid
the Lampstands*

1

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

Revelation 1:1–3

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev. 1:1–3)



On November 27, 1989, the day when Communism fell in Czechoslovakia, a Methodist church in the capital city of Prague erected a sign. For decades, the church had been forbidden any publicity, but with the winds of freedom blowing, the Christians posted three words, which summarized not only the New Testament in general but the book of Revelation in particular: “The Lamb Wins.” Their point was not that Christ had unexpectedly gained victory, but that he had been reigning in triumph all along. Richard Bewes explains: “Christ is *always* the winner. He was winning, even when the church seemed to lie crushed under the apparatus of totalitarian rule. Now at least it could be proclaimed!”¹

1. Richard Bewes, *The Lamb Wins! A Guided Tour through the Book of Revelation* (Tain, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 9.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Given its message, Revelation may best be understood by those who are lowly in the world. A group of seminary students were playing basketball when they noticed the janitor reading a book in the corner. Seeing that it was the Bible, they asked what part he was reading. “Revelation,” he answered. Hearing this, the young scholars thought they would try to help the poor soul make sense of so complicated a book. “Do you understand what you are reading?” they asked. “Yes!” he said. When they smugly inquired about his interpretation, the lesser-educated but better-informed man answered: “Jesus is gonna win!”²

Not everyone in church history has shared this positive view about Revelation. Martin Luther was so dismayed by the book that in the preface to his German translation, he argued for its removal from the Bible.³ Karl Barth, the famed twentieth-century theologian, exclaimed, “If I only knew what to do with Revelation!”⁴ Barth’s confusion over this book is shared by many Christians today, especially in light of the bewildering interpretations made popular in Christian literature. Ambrose Bierce spoke for many when he defined Revelation as a “famous book in which St. John the divine concealed all that he knew.”⁵

Yet the opening words of the book should lead us in the opposite direction. Revelation 1:1 begins: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” This means that this book’s purpose is to reveal something. God gave it “to show to his servants the things that must soon take place,” and “made it known” to his servant John. It does not sound like Revelation is intended to conceal or confuse, since it reveals, shows, and makes things known.

We begin by finding that Revelation is a message from the triune God through John to seven churches in Asia. Before the salutation that begins in Revelation 1:4, John penned a prologue that provides four vital pieces of information to help us understand the book. According to the opening verses, Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy, a historical letter, a gospel testimony, and a means of blessing for God’s needy people.

2. Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 14.

3. Martin Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John,” in *Word and Sacrament*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, vol. 35 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 398–99.

4. Quoted in Bewes, *The Lamb Wins*, 9.

5. Quoted in J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary 20 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 13.

In light of this blessing, John Stott comments: “This last book of the Bible has been valued by the people of God in every generation and has brought its challenge and its comfort to thousands. We would therefore be foolish to neglect it.”⁶

AN APOCALYPTIC PROPHECY

The word translated as “revelation” is *apocalypse* (Greek, *apokalupsis*), which is why this book is sometimes known as the *Apocalypse of John*. The word means “the unveiling of something hidden.” It might be used of a sculpture that had been covered with a cloth, which is now pulled away. Or it might be used of a grand building whose facade had been covered by scaffolding, but now with the scaffolding removed the glory of the architecture is seen. The apostle Paul used this word to describe Jesus’ second coming (2 Thess. 1:7). The book of Revelation will also say much about Christ’s return, yet its panorama is broader than merely the final days of history. Revelation is, more accurately, an “unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially of the Church.”⁷

The word *apocalyptic* describes a kind of ancient literature, the name of which derives from this first verse of Revelation. Early forms of this genre began developing before Israel’s exile in Babylon, continuing through the intertestamental period and into the first century. The Bible books of Daniel and Ezekiel are examples, and Revelation draws heavily from both. Apocalyptic books usually feature an angel who presents dramatic visions to portray the clash between good and evil. These books employ vivid symbols, including symbolic numbers, to depict the spiritual reality unfolding behind the scenes of history. An apocalypse usually contains the message that “God is going to burst into history in a dramatic and unexpected way, despite all appearances that God’s people are facing oppression and defeat.”⁸ While there are differences between Revelation and other apocalyptic books, it fits the basic description of this literary genre.

6. John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1–3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 10.

7. William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (1940; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 51.

8. Steve Wilmsheurst, *The Final Word: The Book of Revelation Simply Explained* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2008), 12.

Realizing the kind of book that Revelation is will greatly influence our approach to studying it. Some Christians seek to uphold a high view of Scripture by insisting that it always be interpreted literally. When applied to Revelation, this rule breeds only confusion. It is true that John literally received the visions recorded in Revelation, but the visions consisted of symbols that must be interpreted not literally but rather symbolically. This is true of the fantastic imagery in Revelation, such as the dragon and his beasts, and of symbolic numbers such as 7, 1,000, and 666. When we are reading the Bible's historical books, such as Samuel and Acts, we will normally take the plain, literal meaning unless there is compelling reason to interpret a passage otherwise. In studying Revelation, we should reverse this approach and interpret visions symbolically unless there is a good reason to take a passage literally. This is not to say that the visions do not depict real events, whether in John's time or in the future, but that the events are presented symbolically rather than literally in Revelation.

Not only is Revelation an apocalypse, but it should also be understood as a book of biblical prophecy. This is how John mainly describes his book: after using the term *apocalypse* in the first verse, five times he identifies the book as a *prophecy*, starting with 1:3: "the words of this prophecy." We usually think of prophecy as foretelling distant events, but the main job of a prophet was to give a message from the Lord that demanded an obedient response. James Boice comments: "Prophets speak to the present, in light of what is soon to come, and they call for repentance, faith and changes in lifestyle."⁹ It is in this respect that Revelation differs from most other apocalyptic writings, since it speaks not only of far-off events but also of those that were soon to break upon the readers. John wrote about "things that must soon take place," urging that "the time is near" (Rev. 1:1, 3). This was not just a way of saying that things, though really distant, should seem near, but rather that God was revealing challenges that were immediately before his readers. For this reason, Revelation is considered an *apocalyptic prophecy*. While taking an apocalyptic form, it delivers a prophetic message that is directly relevant to its original readers, as well as to Christians of all times.

As a prophecy, Revelation is best understood in connection with the vision of Daniel 2, which foretold a series of four earthly kingdoms—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome—that would rise up in succession, only to

9. James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, n.d., chap. 1, p. 4.

be destroyed in the days when “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Dan. 2:44). Daniel points out that he is revealing “what will be in the latter days” (2:28). The Greek translation of that verse used *apocalypse* for the idea of God’s revealing. In using the same language, John mimics Daniel 2:28, except that he writes that the reign of Christ that Daniel foretold “in the latter days” now “must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1). This is all the more poignant when we realize that Daniel prophesied that Christ’s kingdom would arise during the fourth worldly kingdom, the very Roman Empire under which John lived (Dan. 2:44). The divine kingdom that Daniel prophesied from afar, John prophesied as now happening. This shows that the book of Revelation is focused not merely on the final years before Jesus returns but on the entire church age—the reign of Christ, which began during Daniel’s fourth kingdom with his resurrection and ascension into heaven—which continues until Christ’s return.

In developing and expanding Daniel’s vision of how the kingdom of Christ overcomes the kingdoms of this world, Revelation is organized into seven parallel sections, seven being the number of completion. Each section highlights a portion of the story as the drama advances to the final climax. This drama involves a sequence that was going to happen in John’s time, that recurs through the church age, and that will take concentrated form in the final days before Christ’s return.

Fairy tales begin their story of a fantasy world with the phrase “Once upon a time.” In this book, John gives a visionary prophecy of the true story of the world in which we live, beginning, “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1). His visionary prophecy tells us the most important truths about our world. First, he tells us that Jesus Christ, who reigns above, has his church on earth. Did you know that Jesus is in the midst of his church, a Bridegroom seeking the love of his bride, as the vision shows him standing amid the seven lampstands (Rev. 1:12-13)? Second, did you also know the truth that the world is a dangerous place with enemies opposed to Christ and his beloved? Christ’s bride, the church, is beset by a dragon, which depicts Satan, who is served by horrible, ravenous beasts, a harlot Babylon, and followers who bear his mark (Rev. 12-13). Third, what will happen to Christ’s bride, the church, with such deadly foes intent on her harm? Revelation’s answer is that God will defend his people, judging his enemies and sending Jesus with a double-edged sword to slay those who persecute his bride.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

In succession, Christ defeats his enemies, starting with the two beasts and then the harlot Babylon, and finally casting Satan and his followers into the lake of fire (Rev. 18-20). Fourth, after Christ has come to rescue his bride, Revelation's true story of our world ends with the church living happily ever after in the glory of the royal heavenly city, awakening to life forever in the embrace of her beautiful, loving, and conquering Prince (Rev. 21-22). (You see, by the way, why fairy tales are popular, since they often tell the story of salvation that our hearts long to be true!)

The prophetic unveiling of this history is the message of Revelation. Revelation does not primarily intend to present mysterious clues about the second coming. To be sure, as Revelation advances, it narrows its focus on the return of Christ, which brings final victory. But *the message of Revelation is God's government of history to redeem his purified and persecuted church through the victory of Christ his Son*. For this reason, Revelation does not speak merely to the generation in which it was written or to a future generation when Christ returns. Rather, as William Hendriksen explains, "the book reveals the principles of divine moral government which are constantly operating, so that, whatever age we happen to live in, we can see God's hand in history, and His mighty arm protecting us and giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . [so that we are] edified and comforted."¹⁰

A HISTORICAL LETTER

A second feature for us to realize is that Revelation is a historical letter that is firmly grounded in the times in which it was given. It begins with the customary letter format in 1:4-5, giving the name of the writer and the recipients, together with a greeting, and also ends as a letter (Rev. 22:8-21). This is why it is appropriate for Revelation to appear at the end of the New Testament Epistles. Michael Wilcock writes: "It is in fact the last and grandest of those letters. As comprehensive as Romans, as lofty as Ephesians, as practical as James or Philemon, this 'Letter to the Asians' is as relevant to the modern world as any of them."¹¹

10. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 42-43.

11. Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 28.

Revelation is traditionally understood as having been written by the apostle John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, during the time of his exile on the island of Patmos. Some scholars have argued that another John may have written this book, but the testimony in favor of the apostle is impressive. Most noteworthy are the statements of the early church fathers in support of the apostle's authorship. These witnesses include second-century writers such as Justin Martyr (100–165), Melito of Sardis (c. 165), who was bishop of one of the churches to which John wrote, and Irenaeus (c. 180), who also hailed from Sardis and knew Polycarp of Smyrna, who had been a personal disciple of the apostle John. It has therefore been claimed that no other New Testament book “has a stronger or earlier tradition about its authorship than Revelation.”¹²

Equally important is the date of Revelation's writing. The strong consensus among evangelical scholars holds that John wrote Revelation during the last years of the emperor Domitian's reign, probably around A.D. 95. This dating agrees with the early church tradition through Irenaeus, who said that it was given “not a very long time since, but almost in our own day, toward the end of Domitian's reign.”¹³

Some scholars argue instead that Revelation was written much earlier, before the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. Most who hold this view argue that Revelation does not look forward to the return of Christ but only prophesies Jerusalem's destruction. Important to this argument is the assignment of the symbolic number 666 to the mad emperor Nero, who first persecuted Christians in Rome.

There are important reasons, along with Irenaeus's testimony, for giving Revelation the later date of A.D. 95. First, the persecution described in Revelation involves the beast's demand for worship, which corresponds not to Nero's but to Domitian's reign. Second, while there was no empirewide persecution in Domitian's reign, there is evidence that severe persecution took place in the province of Asia, where the churches of Revelation were located, whereas there was no persecution in Asia during Nero's reign. Finally, the description of the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 fits the circumstances

12. D. A. Carson et al., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), giving a full exploration of Revelation's authorship on pages 468–73.

13. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 1:416.

of the later date; indeed, at least one of the churches, Smyrna, may not have existed during the earlier period of Nero's persecution.¹⁴

When we realize that Revelation was a historical letter, we see the error of those interpreters in the so-called futurist school, who view most of Revelation as speaking only about events yet to take place. Because Revelation was a real letter to real ancient people, its meaning had to be relevant and accessible to the original audience. Hendriksen writes: "The Apocalypse has as its immediate purpose the strengthening of the wavering hearts of the persecuted believers of the first century A.D. . . . True, this book has a message for today, but we shall never be able to understand 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' of today unless we first of all study the specific needs and circumstances of the seven churches of 'Asia' as they existed in the first century."¹⁵

A GOSPEL TESTIMONY

A third feature of Revelation is that this book is the Word of God bearing a gospel testimony to Christ: "[God] made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw" (Rev. 1:1–2). Although John the apostle was the writer of Revelation, the message came not from him but from God, through Jesus Christ.

The description of how Revelation was transmitted gives us insight into the process known as *inspiration*, that is, the way in which God used human writers to give a divine message. Many Bible books contain a message that God gave immediately to the prophetic writer, who passed it on to other believers. Here, God the Father gave a revelation to Jesus Christ, who in turn sent an angel to show it to his servant John, so that John could write down the message for the servants of Christ in the seven churches. The obvious import of this progression is that Revelation does not consist of a message that originated in the imagination or experience of John himself. Moreover, the idea of Jesus as the Mediator of divine grace is reinforced from the book's beginning.

14. For a full discussion of the dating of Revelation, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4–27.

15. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 44.

The implications of the divine origin of Revelation are significant. First, since God is perfect in all things, his revealed Word is inerrant and true in all that it teaches. As God’s Word, Revelation in its claims is to be reverently believed, all its promises are to be joyfully trusted, and all its commands are to be urgently obeyed. Moreover, since God is the ultimate Author not only of Revelation but also of the entire Bible, there is a unity and harmony between this book and the rest of Scripture. This means that we can interpret difficult portions of Revelation by comparison with clearer teachings elsewhere. Indeed, since the images of Revelation are derived from earlier prophetic writings, the principle of Scripture interpreting Scripture is especially important when it comes to this book.

Not only is Revelation God’s Word, but John specifies it as “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:2). Most commentators limit this statement to mean that Revelation is Jesus’ testimony to his church (see also 19:10). But it is also true that Revelation is a testimony about Jesus as the Lord and Savior who is sufficient to meet the needs of his people. In this sense, Revelation is a gospel testimony. Martin Luther complained about Revelation that “Christ is neither taught nor known in it.”¹⁶ How wrong this is! Indeed, it is Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, who in Revelation woos the church as his bride (1:9–3:22). Revelation proceeds to present Christ as the Sovereign over the councils of God for history, the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the seals of God’s scroll, thus receiving the worship of heaven (4:1–5:14). Revelation concludes with the conquering Christ, whose sword cuts down his enemies (19:11–21), who sits on the throne of God’s judgment in the last day (20:11–15), and in whose blessing the church, Christ’s radiant bride, now delivered from all the trials of this world, dwells in the light of God’s presence forever (21:1–22:21). This is why, over and over in Revelation, the angels and worshipers above break out in praise to Jesus. We, too, should respond to Revelation, in the words of Fanny Crosby:

Praise him! praise him! Jesus, our blessed Redeemer!
 Sing, O earth, his wonderful love proclaim!
 Hail him! hail him! highest archangels in glory;
 Strength and honor give to his holy name!¹⁷

16. Luther, *Word and Sacrament*, 399.

17. Fanny J. Crosby, “Praise Him! Praise Him!” (1869).

This history presented in Revelation is nothing less than *gospel*: the good news of Christ's reigning over history to save his church. Seeing this belies the idea that the gospel is only for those who are yet to be saved. Revelation is not primarily an evangelistic book; its intended audience is not the unbelieving world facing divine judgment, but the beleaguered church looking to Christ for relief. To be sure, Revelation is evangelistic—the book even concludes with an invitation to receive the free gift of salvation (Rev. 22:17)—but its gospel message is primarily given to needy believers, whom Christ calls to courageous faithfulness in light of his gospel reign.

A MEANS OF BLESSING

Finally, like the Bible in general, Revelation is a means of divine blessing for those who read, hear, and keep its message. John concludes his prologue with this invitation: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). Since the God who originated this book is still the God who reigns over all with wisdom and power, those who read and believe Revelation will be supernaturally blessed even today.

John specifies blessing, first, on “the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy” (Rev. 1:3). The order of the churches listed in Revelation 2–3 follows the path that a messenger would take from city to city. This suggests that John intended the letter to go from one to the next so that it could be read aloud in each congregation. In a time of persecution, this action required courage and a strong devotion to Jesus, for which the reader was sure to be blessed by God. Moreover, just as many of Revelation's visions take place largely amid the worship of heaven, so was its reading an act of worship on earth. David Chilton writes: “By showing us how God's will is done in heavenly worship, St. John reveals how the Church is to perform His will on earth.”¹⁸

God's blessing was furthermore given to “those who hear,” and specifically to those “who keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3). To keep the book of Revelation is to treasure its message and obey the commands of Christ given in it. This connects with John's description of his readers as God's

18. David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 54.

“servants” (1:1). Literally, the word *doulos* means “slave.” The point is that true believers are those who accept the obligation of obeying God’s commands, and who not only give outward agreement to the Bible but also confirm it in the faithfulness of their lives. These servants, and these alone, are blessed by God through the grace that comes through his Word.

The urgency of receiving Revelation is made clear by the final words of John’s prologue: “for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). One of the lamentable tendencies in the study of Revelation is to believe that it focuses only on the return of Christ to end history. Under this reasoning, many if not most sermons on Revelation conclude with the question, “Are you ready for Jesus’ coming?” It is true that Revelation foretells a great event that Christians must face. But that great event is not the second coming, at least not first of all. Rather, the event that in Revelation’s view is soon to arrive is the persecution of the Christian church by the bloodthirsty world. To be sure, Christ’s coming is near—either through the help he gives us now or in his final coming to end all history—but John’s appeal to the urgency of his writing pertains to his church’s obedience to the commands and promises of Christ in the face of violent worldly persecution.

Every Christian can be blessed now, John promises, though facing persecution and beset with weakness and sin, by hearing and keeping the saving testimony of the Bible. We are blessed in our trials by God’s Word. I earlier compared Revelation to fairy tales, such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, which lift up the hearts of crying children. For this same reason, God gave the revelation of Jesus Christ to his servant John for the churches of Asia. In this respect, Revelation presents the same message as given by Paul at the end of Romans 8. It is true, Paul notes, that Christians in this life are “as sheep to be slaughtered.” Yet when through faith we enter the glorious kingdom of Christ’s resurrection power, “we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Receiving in Revelation the good news that “The Lamb Wins,” we are blessed above all other blessings to be persuaded that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:36–39).

“This book matches, or even supersedes, Richard Phillips’s other fine volumes in this reputable series. The author opens up Revelation in a manner that informs the Bible student, equips the preacher, comforts the suffering believer, and ignites the worshiper for the praise of Christ. Highly recommended!”

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