

The Book of Revelation: What's it About? – Rev 1:1-9

The Gospel Age of Hope - #13

Introduction – The first word of this book is where we get the word “apocalypse”. The word means an unveiling or revealing of that which was or is hidden. What this means is that a sober study of this book should not leave us thinking of it as one of the most obscure books of the Bible. Once again, the interpretive key will be to let Scripture interpret Scripture and to always consider the context. John’s first century readers would do just this, knowing their Old Testament, and knowing the current events in which they lived.

Oftentimes there is the question of whether we take Revelation “literally” or not. The fact is that we take the straightforward parts literally and the symbolic portions symbolically (and everyone takes some parts symbolically). One of the straightforward parts is here, in the beginning, where we are told that this message Jesus *sent and signified* (that is, foretold with symbols, see John 12:33, 18:32, 21:19) *by His angel* (Rev 1:2).

Guidelines Given to Us – Let’s first consider what the book says explicitly with regard to the message.

When? – “*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants – things which must shortly take place*” (also 1:3, 19, 22:6-7, 12, 20). This is what the book directly says. But there are other clues as to the time frame that God was communicating. For instance, in Dan 8:26, the prophet is told to seal up the prophecy “...for it refers to many days in the future.” It turns out that was about four hundred years. In contrast, John is told “*do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand*” (Rev 22:10). We have to consider what this means for us, two thousand years later.

The Tribulation – “*I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ...*” (Rev 1:9). This was the tribulation which Jesus said would come in that generation (Matt 24) and during which time mockers would scorn the believers because Jesus hadn’t yet come (2 Pet 3). John was writing “*to the seven churches which are in Asia*” (v4) about events which were going on in their day and would take place soon, “*for the time is near*” (v3).

History – John was exiled to Patmos because of the Roman persecution, which openly began with Nero’s decree in late 64AD. The historical events in Rome, the Jewish revolt and war, and the destruction of Jerusalem are set and established facts which help us to date the book and understand its details. But we don’t know history. On the other hand, we are guilty of innumerable attempts at trying to fit Revelation into infinitely creative futures, almost always futures which are just around the corner.

Behold (Rev 1:7, 22:7) – Jesus was declaring to John what His intentions were: “*Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth (land) will mourn because of Him...Behold, I am coming quickly!*” It would make sense to the initial audience, especially as the events unfolded, and so Jesus said to that audience, “*Let him who has understanding...*” (Rev 13:18). These and other arguments lead us to conclude that John was writing before 68AD to a contemporary audience experiencing the tribulation Jesus had promised. The book of Revelation, with the exception of the last three chapters (which are visions presenting the establishment of New Jerusalem and its fulfillment) were fulfilled some two thousand years ago.

Nero Caesar and the Roman Empire – Just as we did with Matthew 24, answering the issue of when these events take place still leaves us with questions of how these things took place. We won’t handle all of Revelation, but we can apply what we did with Matthew 24 to one central figure in the book of Revelation: the beast.

The seven churches in Asia minor were located in the hotbed of emperor worship. For instance, Pergamos, one those cities, was a place where a Roman proconsul was, “*where Satan’s throne is*” (Rev 2:13).

Nero was an animalistic pervert. He murdered his mother, he murdered one of his wives while she was pregnant, kicking her to death. When he began the persecution of the Christians he was known for lighting them on fire to serve as lamps for his dinner parties. He would dress up as a beast and assault both male and female prisoners while they were bound. And he was the covenant head of Rome – that great Satan.

The Seven Hills and The Sixth King (Rev 17:9-10) – Rome was known as the city on seven hills. But there are seven heads or kings as well. The first five Caesars were Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. The sixth Caesar was Nero, who “is” when John writes, and this also dates the book. The beast is both generically Rome and her heads, and specifically Nero.

Forty Two Months (13:5-7) – Up until Nero, persecution of the church was not something Rome did. Then there was a great fire in Rome and through some shifty circumstances, Nero blamed the Christians. Nero was the first Roman emperor to persecute the saints and he did so from November 64 until his death in June 68. Forty-two months.

The Number of a Man (13:18) – Unlike our English language, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew all used their letters for numerals. If you added up the letters of Neron Kesar from the Hebrew, the number of that man was 666. John, however, wrote this is in Greek; and so he adds, “*Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast*” (Rev 13:18).

Conclusion – John stated that his book was intended for the seven churches in Asia and he clearly expected that even the most difficult symbols in the prophecy could be understood by his first-century reader. And so the book of Revelation is not about the Second Coming. It is about the divorce and destruction of Israel the Harlot and Christ’s victory through and over Rome. But we need this message as well. The church today is still subjected to threats and seductions of Christ’s enemies. We are asked by modern beasts and harlots to compromise our faith in order to save ourselves, or our jobs, or reputations. What we learn from the book is that there is not an inch of neutral ground; it all belongs to Christ and He demands universal submission to His rule at every human level. He has predestined His people to victorious conquest and dominion where the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honor to Him and to His church (Rev 21:24).