

How to read the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is an immensely powerful drama, but even more breathtaking is the powerful affect it has had on readers down the centuries. A lot of people hear “Revelation” and they immediately think of the end of the world. However, there are at least three basic ways in this book has been read: By some it’s been read as a message about the *future*; by others it’s been read as a message rooted in the past; and by others it’s been seen as a book of simply timeless truths. I believe it is best to read this book with a combination of all three approaches. But let me take you through each of the three approaches in turn, with reference to some of their main proponents.

Futurist Readings

The futurist dimension of Revelation has suggested itself since the earliest times. How can a book which ends with the words, “Yes, I am coming soon” *not* be about the future? How can its readers *not* be drawn into an expectation of the coming of Christ? Justin Martyr, in the mid-2nd Century, was one of the early writers to focus on the futurist elements of the book, picking up on John’s vision of the “thousand-year kingdom” and seeing it as the future reign of the saints on earth. Looking back at Old Testament prophecies of paradise restored, he believed that this would take place during that great millennium. Rightly or wrongly, and there were certainly errors in Justin’s exegesis, he was nevertheless proclaiming a central truth of God’s character: God is one who keeps his promise.

Just after Justin came Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons. He looked at the image of the thousand-year reign, and saw it as the culmination of world history. genesis said that the heavens and earth were created in seven days, and Irenaeus equated each of these days with a thousand years. Thus he believed, history would last 6,000 years, followed by the seventh millennium, which, like the Sabbath, would be a period of rest, of truth and of justice. This chronological calculation is,

of course, based on a wholly unfounded assumption to do with the meaning of the seven days in Genesis, but rightly or wrongly, once again, it nevertheless proclaims divine truth: that God's justice *will* be fulfilled, and that a suffering world will be put right.

A more sophisticated approach was developed a century later by Victorinus, bishop of Pettau in modern day Slovenia. Martyred in 304 AD, Victorinus wrote the oldest extant commentary on Revelation. Amongst his key contributions were the connections he made between the imagery of the book and the Roman Empire of both John's and his own day. He also observed that Revelation does not depict the final events of history in a clear chronological sequence, but rather it repeats the same message several times through a series of different visions. This was a crucial insight because it shows that we cannot assume that the book makes step-by-step predictions about the future of the world.

The literalist and futurist understandings of Revelation did not go away however, and we'll return to them later. But now let's turn to *historicist* interpretations - in other words those which see the book as mainly rooted in the past.

Historicist Readings

Although Victorinus made clear connections between John's Revelation and its historical context, this way of looking at the text did not *fully* develop until the 19th and 20th centuries, with the rise of archaeology and the comparative study of ancient literature. This *comparative* study shows that Revelation, whilst having many distinguishing features of its own, belongs to a *genre* of writing known as Apocalyptic. An Apocalypse is a form of literature in which a revelation of "other" "spiritual" reality is given, within a narrative framework. The veil is drawn back on what lies behind, and what is seen there gives encouragement to the faithful to keep going.

When we realise this *purpose* behind the book of Revelation, it makes us question other supposed purposes we might have put it to. For example, is it *really* a road map of the future of

the world? Historicists say that is not actually the purpose of an Apocalypse.

Once we read Revelation as a book primarily designed to bring *courage* to the *original readers*, we begin to notice a whole *range* of references to the original historical *context* - supported increasingly by *more and more* archaeological finds. For example, even Irenaeus and Victorinus were able to see the seven heads of the beast as referring to the seven hills of Rome, but in 1904 William Ramsay published a classic work in which many *details* of Revelation Chapters 2 and 3 were shown to relate to specific geographical, economic, historical and social facts of the cities named in them. Ramsay's work was then thoroughly assessed and expanded in 1986 by Colin Hemer.

Reading a book firmly in its historical context, however, raises the question "If it was really written for *then*, what, if anything, can it have to say to us today?" That brings us to the third way of understanding Revelation - the search for timeless truths. According to this approach, the kind of question we ask is, "What is God saying to us through this text?" "What is it that was true for the first readers and *also* true for *us*?"

Timeless Readings

Some people find the book of Revelation to be quite a frightening book, but Allan Boesak from a black South African perspective in the late 1980s wrote, "It is the oppressed who rejoice, for their oppression will be no more. NO MORE!" He said that the drama of Revelation unfolds *whenever* a political regime - be it the Roman Empire or Apartheid - claims an allegiance that truly only belongs to God. Inevitably such a context brings conflict with the reign of God, and this is the conflict dramatised so powerfully in the words of John.

As early as the 3rd Century, just after the death of Irenaeus, the great theologian Origen insisted that the book must be understood *symbolically*: a vision of the great triumph of God over evil. Almost 200 years later, Augustine wrote the City of God in which he applied Revelation's

thousand year reign to a state of spiritual purity in the life of each Christian. But here we begin to come full circle. Because in this search for direct application of the text to our lives, we come back to the futurist interpretations - and the many people who, down the centuries, have believed that *their generation* was the final one: the future is now. Let's spend a few minutes considering this persistent but misplaced way of understanding the text.

The End is Nigh!

As early as AD156, Montanus declared the imminence of the Second Coming, and gathered together a movement of Christians fanatically devoted to prayer, fasting, and bitter repentance. Later, as the first millennium drew to a close, people began to expect the end of the world and the return of Christ with a new fervour: One thousand years had elapsed since his birth, surely now he would inaugurate his One Thousand year reign of glory! King Stephen of Hungary delayed his coronation in deference to the great coronation of Jesus he was surely about to witness.

The fact that this *didn't* occur without doubt contributed to the inauguration of the Crusades in 1095. Perhaps the Lord had not returned because the infidel retained control of the Holy City. Thus the *Crusades* became a playing out of the Book of Revelation, but unlike Allan Boesak and oppressed peoples of *our* time who see their situation *reflecting* that of Revelation, Christians of the 11th and 12th Centuries saw themselves actually *living out* the book of Revelation.

A leading figure among them was Joachim of Fiore, who specifically identified the sixth head of the great beast with the Muslim leader Saladin. In Joachim's wake, and as internal conflicts arose between the Pope and Emperor Frederick II, the latter was denounced as "the beast that ascends from the sea" whilst the former was shown to be "the great dragon who leads the world astray." This was no mere posturing: identifying the imagery of Revelation with actual contemporary figures was possible because people also believed they were about to be caught up

in the end of the world - a chronological fact that could be, and was, calculated from various "hints" in the Bible.

Such acting out of Revelation continued through subsequent centuries as people on opposite sides of social revolutions tended align themselves with the faithful and their opponents with the seductive antichrist. Increasingly importance was given to the painful tribulations and traumatic cataclysms that would occur before Christ returned for his thousand-year rule. Millenarian movements became particularly prevalent in North America. William Miller predicted the return of Christ between March 21st 1843 and March 21st 1844. In the wake of what became known as the Great Disappointment, Seventh Day Adventism was founded by Ellen White, who made Miller's views acceptable by spiritualising them.

Another great millenarian movement was the Jehovah's Witnesses whose founder believed that Christ actually returned spiritually in 1874 to inaugurate a millennial dawn to climax 40 years later. When war broke out in 1914 there was a frenzy of apocalyptic excitement among his followers. "Millions now living will never die," he exclaimed. They did - and so did he, in 1916. Inevitably the book of Revelation played a key part in aligning the times precisely with the end of the world - even after the dates had to be reinterpreted. Particularly characteristic of these movements is a very *literal* understanding of the text: When Revelation says that the saints numbered 144,000 it means that is *literally* how many there will be. Having an exact number like that kind of focuses the mind on whether you are in or out!

All this may seem pretty crazy but it's also quite serious. It matters when people relish the beginning of a world war because they think it is a sign of their salvation. It mattered when an obscure sect such as the Branch Davidians in Waco Texas misapplied the Bible to themselves and ended up dead. And that's why it matters that so many people today are taken in by the erroneous teachings enshrined in million-seller books such as the *Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series - readily available from UK Christian bookshops.

Writers like Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins believe that Biblical prophecy is actually history which has been written in advance: it is a script that will be, and is being, played out. They see world history as being divided into seven dispensations, basing this view on four verses of the Book of Daniel. The sixth dispensation ended with the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people. At point, they claim, God stopped the clock. But 1948, with the foundation of the state of Israel, was a sign that he was about to start it going again. The Israeli capture of East Jerusalem in 1967 was also seen as a sign that God was preparing for Armageddon. These things sound crazy but they matter because they directly affect the foreign policy of the most powerful superpower in the world - the USA. The enemies of God's people in biblical prophecies became identified with American enemies of the Cold War years: the nation of Gog with Russia, the kings of the south with an Arab confederacy, and the kings of the East with China. At any moment the rapture will occur, the faithful will be taken to heaven leaving their spectacles and false legs behind, the clock will start ticking again, and the world will be plunged into chaos.

Many expected it at the year 2000, when computer meltdown would yeild the world helpless before a single malevolent antichrist. Others are deeply suspicious of international product codes which may be based on a secret numerical foundation of the number 666. It sounds ridiculous but it matters when people begin to think like this - and the amazing thing is that people *do* think like this because it *makes them feel so significant*.

That is why millions of people have *always* been lured into these erroneous views: because the teachings make them feel *you* are are the centre of all things; *you* will be taken up into the heavens like no-one else before or since; *you* are standing at the very end of history. It's a reward for people who feel powerless, meaningless, or overlooked. It's a security for people who feel alienated by a huge world they hae no control over. It's a calling for people who long for a sense of purpose and destiny. But does the inner sense of significacne / gain from an interpretation mean that it's true? No it does not.

Yet these views matter because they help shape a culture: and you can see that over-

inflated sense of significance translated into US foreign policy today; and they help shape the culture of the church - because a wing of the church believes them. But when you examine the way they interpret the Bible it is full of inconsistencies, assumptions forced upon the text, teachings flimsily supported by the text, and theology in contradiction to the gospel. These approaches are tempting to believe because they offer such personal significance and give such a simple handle for interpreting the world in clear black and white terms. But in truth, this is *not* how to read the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation must be read, as every other book in the Bible, first of all in its own *historical* context - and we shall do that in this series; secondly with application *of the message* to our *present* situation - and we shall do that in this series; thirdly with a eye towards the *future* because it does speak of the *certainty* of God's reign, not only in the present, but which *will* eventually be manifest to all.