

The Book of Revelation

LESSON
ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF
REVELATION
Discussion Forum



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The Book of Revelation

Lesson One: The Background of Revelation

Discussion Forum

With

Rev. Valery Babynin	Dr. James M. Hamilton	Dr. Greg Perry
Dr. David W. Chapman	Mr. Bradley T. Johnson	Dr. Scott Redd
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.	Dr. Dennis E. Johnson	Dr. Thomas Schreiner
Dr. Brandon Crowe	Dr. Craig S. Keener	Dr. Glen Scorgie
Dr. William Edgar	Dr. Simon Kistemaker	Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Mark Gignilliat	Dr. Robert G. Lister	Dr. Miles Van Pelt
Dr. Benjamin Gladd	Dr. R. Todd Mangum	Dr. Peter Walker
Rev. Michael J. Glodo	Dr. John E. McKinley	Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

What is the historical setting of the book of Revelation?

Whenever we interpret any book, it's useful to know something about its historical setting. And the book of Revelation is no exception. But scholars aren't entirely agreed on the date when John wrote this book. Still, even though we can't be absolutely confident about its date, there are many things about its historical setting that we *do* know. So, what is the historical setting of the book of Revelation?

Dr. Mark Strauss

When we talk about the historical setting of the book of Revelation, the simple answer is, it's the first century. The first century is the historical context. That's very important because oftentimes people try to make the twenty-first century the historical context, and they try to read things from today's news into the book of Revelation. And we have to be cautious about that. This book would have been understandable to the people of the first century because that is its historical context. So, its context is the first century struggle between Christianity and Judaism, on the one hand, and Christianity and the Roman Empire, and particularly the context of Caesar worship in the first century. So that's critically important to understand, that first century context. Now when in the first century is another question. And there's two main dates that have been proposed for the book of Revelation. The traditional date, and probably the one held by the majority of scholars, is that it's very late in the first century, in the 90s, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian and the persecutions that the church was undergoing under the Roman Emperor Domitian. The other possibility is a significantly earlier date in the mid-60s and the persecutions under the Emperor Nero. Some have even suggested that the "666," the number of the beast in Revelation, is code language for the name Nero, and that's one of the reasons some would place the book in the context, or shortly after the reign of, the Emperor Nero. So those are the two main dates that most scholars hold to with reference to the book of Revelation.

Dr. Peter Walker

It's hard to be dogmatic about the precise date of the book of Revelation. Obviously, because it's the last book in the Bible, it's tempting to think it's probably the last thing that was written, but that's not necessarily the case. I guess we have to ask the question: Is it before or after A.D. 70, the great Fall of Jerusalem? And the death of the Emperor Nero in A.D. 68 is also a key event in that first century... Also, there are some allusions to the Fall of Jerusalem. It's a bit difficult to know how to interpret some passages — for example, in Revelation 11 — which talk about the city under judgment. But my hunch is that these probably are making a reference to the Fall of Jerusalem which Jesus had predicted, and that Revelation in some ways is a kind of recasting... of Jesus' prophecy about the apocalyptic discourse, and is saying, "Now, that which I have predicted? Well, now it still has application into the future, because even though Jerusalem has been destroyed, the big end of the world is still to come." And I think it's a reworking of Jesus' prophecy concerning the Fall of Jerusalem. So my hunch is that it's after 70... What's unclear, we'll say, is whether or not the people that received this are already experiencing a very strong persecution, or whether it's more a warning that they're about to. And so that affects the dating. It may be a little bit earlier, and some of the Domitianic persecution in the 90s was still to come, and therefore, is not being described after the event, it's being described before the event. So, if you ask me exactly, I go for the early 80s A.D.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The historical setting of the book of Revelation is that it is addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, which is on the west coast of what is now Turkey. Probably the dating is in the, certainly it's in the latter half of the first century. Some believe it's as early as the reign of Nero in the 60s. I think most scholars believe it's closer to the reign of Domitian, the Emperor Domitian, in the 90s, and we have early church tradition that dates it at that period. It's a period where there is some violent persecution of the church by Roman governmental officials in some places in the empire — not consistent yet. There is also other types of violence, lawless violence, against Christians as well. And we find reference to churches that are undergoing great persecution of a violent nature, especially in Christ's letters to Smyrna and to Philadelphia. But the church is also under pressure to conform to the society in a variety of ways. There are false doctrines that are being taught by the Nicolaitans, for example, in Ephesus and elsewhere. There is the appeal of wanting to fit in with the culture, to conform. And the references to meat offered to idols is a reference probably to participation in Roman trade guilds that would involve feasting in honor of various gods that were the patron gods of the guilds. There's just the temptation that the church of Laodicea faces to be comfortable in affluence, as well. So it's a variety of churches facing a variety of challenges to their faith — some obvious, overt violence, some far more subtle. And Christ gives his revelation to John who tells us in the first chapter that he's on the island of Patmos. We know that that was used by the Romans as kind of a prison island, especially for political prisoners. John is sharing in their suffering, then, in order to encourage the church, as well as to warn the church against the more subtle dangers of conformity with the culture.

Question 2:

Why is it important to understand the historical setting of the book of Revelation

A book's historical setting includes many things, like the date when it was written, and the circumstances of its writer and original audience. In the case of Revelation, we know the apostle John wrote it to seven churches in Asia Minor during the first century. But how should details like these influence our interpretation? Why is it important to understand the historical setting of the book of Revelation?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

It's important to understand the historical setting in which each book of the Bible was written as far as we can determine that setting for several reasons. One is that it helps us really see the Bible as a real document written to real people in real circumstances, not simply written and tucked away and sealed for another day, but actually written to living, breathing people who struggled with the same kinds of issues we do. And when we can understand their circumstances, we can see a more direct line of application sometimes to our own lives. That's part of it. Another reason is we're able to discern the applications for those original readers. For example, the book of Revelation was written to people struggling under sometimes what was perceived as a chaotic world where maybe God wasn't in control, or a world in which the authorities or people in general were hostile to their faith. So they had real questions about, could they persevere in this kind of world? Was God in charge? And if he was, was he working for their good? And so, as an example, in the book of Revelation, we see what those early Christians received from it if we look at the historical situation instead of simply looking past it to our time... And finally, an important reason why we want to look at the historical setting is because the human authors of Scripture, as they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they used the language, they used the literary forms, and they also, at times, used historical reference so that if we understand those things, we tend to read them in their original context rather than try to force them into our context, so we can understand how biblical writers used poetry or used imagery on their terms rather than forcing them to do it on our terms.

Dr. David W. Chapman

One of the things I like to emphasize with my students when I teach through the book of Revelation is that the historical setting is absolutely vital to understanding the book because John the apostle is writing certainly to the church for all ages, but he's especially writing to people that he knows, who he has in mind. So when we read through Revelation 2 and 3, we get a sense of the historical setting that he has specifically in mind. And so every time you read through each of the churches in Revelation 2 or 3, you're getting a sense of who it is that he's writing to and, therefore, how we should interpret the book. We should put ourselves back in the place of people who were in that original audience, if you would. And that audience

would have been in the churches, the major urban centers of Asia Minor in the first century — urban centers that were full of pagan worship that had imagery of the worship of the pantheon of deities that were worshiped in the Roman Empire — but also the worship of the Roman emperor himself, urban centers that also had Jewish places of worship in it as well. And so, many in these early churches probably came out of Jewish worship centers and were attracted to early Christianity and, therefore, when they encountered persecution, they might have even been attracted back into early Judaism. But these were also urban centers that had a great deal of wealth, and that would attract people and perhaps lure them away from the worship of Christ. And you see all of that represented in those two chapters. It's very important to, as it were, kind of picture yourself back in those churches in the day, in those small, little house churches hearing the word of Revelation read for the first time.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

The majority of scholars think that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian who claimed to be a god, and that would have just exacerbated the problems in Asia Minor where, in many of the cities that are addressed in the book of Revelation, there were temples for the worship of the emperor. And of course, people worshiped many other gods. It was a setting of paganism. It was also a setting where persecution could easily arise and had arisen in some of the cities. Some of the other cities, however, were not experiencing persecution. Some of the other cities actually were compromising with the same world system that was killing their brothers and sisters elsewhere. And I think that gives a lesson to us today because today, in different parts of the world, the church is experiencing different things. Some places the church is suffering; some places the church is compromising with the values of a world... that are inimical with values of the kingdom of God. And I think we who are not suffering so much have a lot that we can learn from our brothers and sisters who are.

Question 3:

What is the main message of the book of Revelation?

Everyone admits that the book of Revelation can be difficult to understand. And it's easy for modern readers to get lost in its imagery. But we can still benefit from reading it. After all, even though Revelation's details can be hard to understand, its central ideas are rather clear. What is the main message of the book of Revelation?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

I think the main message of the book of Revelation could be summed up in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians where he talks about the importance of our walking by faith and not by sight. The whole point of the book of Revelation is to help the church to see, in a sense, behind the surface of everyday occurrences, of everyday events, to recognize that though there are very obviously visibly strong and formidable enemies of the church, that Christ has already defeated them. In fact, paradox is a key element

in the book of Revelation. Things are not what they seem. In Revelation 5 we read about Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered, and then what John sees when he looks to see this Lion, this conquering Lion, is a Lamb standing as though slain. It is by his death that Christ has redeemed people from all the peoples of the world. By the same token, in Revelation 12, John is told in the vision that Satan, the Dragon, the Accuser, has been cast out of heaven, and the accuser of the brothers has been defeated by the brothers because they have not loved their lives even to the point of death. In other words, the martyrs have conquered the Dragon. Their death looked like defeat, but it was really victory. And so the point of the book of Revelation is that we are to live by what Christ has shown us through the eyes of John by the Word of God — Christ is called the Word of God there, as he is in John's gospel — what Christ has shown us of the realities, and in that light, then, we should endure persecution with courage, with hope. And we need to remain pure from the defilements that the surrounding pagan culture would try to insert into our lives.

Dr. Peter Walker

The book of Revelation is a very complicated book, 22 chapters that people find very difficult to understand. But the main message of it could be summarized firstly, that God is in control. So, it's written to be a real encouragement to people who are struggling, perhaps suffering for their faith, and need to lift up their eyes and believe that God really is in control, that behind human history is not total chaos, but God, the sovereign Lord, is there. That's probably the first and overriding message. But second is the whole theme of Jesus Christ, who shares in the sovereignty of God and who himself is the one who is to be worshiped and adored. So, it's very strong on its doctrine of how we are to worship Christ, the Lamb who is seated on the throne. And so there's not just a vision of God being in control, but that Jesus is the Lord and that Jesus is in control. Jesus is Lord. Beyond that, I think there's the understanding that then just Jesus is going to take human history somewhere beautiful, somewhere strong, and it's going to work out okay for those who believe in him. So I think the baseline of Revelation is one of encouragement: God's in control, Jesus is Lord, and this same Jesus is taking human history to a place where it's going to be worth getting to.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

One of the most recognizable characteristics of the entire book of Revelation is this amazing imagery, but the central image of the book of Revelation appears to be the Lamb upon the throne, and not just any lamb, but a lamb with a great wound... And it's a marvelous symbol of Christ in his redemptive sufferings: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But now we see the Lamb upon the throne, a symbol of victory, authority, triumph, vindication. And so we have in John's vision in the Revelation, a revelation of the way things really are, where the one who has been weak is now strong, the one who has been humiliated is now exalted. And this great reversal of fortunes is a — not only the narrative of the life of Christ in his descent and ascent — but it is a paradigm of the experience of believers as well. They too will experience a measure of suffering, as the first century readers well knew, but the message was that in Christ, this will lead to victory for you, as well. The hideousness

of the images of evil in the book of Revelation are an acknowledgment that the opposition to the work of God and to the security of the believers is serious and considerable. But that notwithstanding, the Lamb triumphs in the end. So that the Christians can know that through Christ, greater is he that is in them than he that is in the world. And there's an image of the saints having their robes dipped in blood. Now, this is a symbol of, in a sense, their appropriation of the substitutionary forgiveness achieved through Christ. But maybe, just maybe, it is also a symbol of their willingness to participate in the paradigm of costly suffering in order to one day wear the robes of heavenly senators, the vindicated triumphant ones who share in the glory of the wounded Lamb upon the throne.

Dr. Michael J. Glodo

I would say that the main message of the book of Revelation is that Christ has overcome, he has overcome death and he has overcome the power of the world, the Devil, and that he now reigns with the Father, and, as it relates to us, that we will share in his victory if we trust in him, if we adhere to him by faith, if we persevere to the end by believing in his victory.

Mr. Bradley T. Johnson

Well I suppose that scholars would differ on what they consider the main message of the book of Revelation to be, but I think it's fair to say that at the book's center is the idea that God is in charge and he represents ultimate authority. It's not Rome; it's not religious authorities; it's nothing in this world. And I think that the message that seems to be coming to John is really twofold, and it comes in the form of a warning, and the warning is to be righteous. Those who are righteous will find eternal reward, and the troubles of this day will not be lasting. The other side of that equation is those who are unjust and who fail to repent by acknowledging God's sovereignty will be eternally condemned. So the work of the Lord is both terrifying and exciting depending on one's response to that warning.

Question 4:
What is Eschatology?

Every biblical book addresses many different areas of theology. But some books contribute more to our understanding of certain theological topics than they do to others. When it comes to the book of Revelation, theologians tend to focus on something called “eschatology.” What is eschatology?

Dr. Benjamin Gladd

Simply, “the study of last things.” Now it gets tricky when one starts to apply that to the Bible. In the Old Testament we have a number of texts that talk about what will happen in the latter days, or in the end of days — we have synonymous expressions — and typically that involves the conquering, the Messiah coming and conquering the pagan nations, the conversion of the nations joining Israel, peace going out.

Preceding that, immediately preceding that restoration in the latter days there will be an antagonist. Daniel talks about this man of lawlessness who will come. He will spread false teaching. He will deceive Israel and deceive the nations. And so all of that will happen in the latter days. Now the New Testament makes this remarkable insight that the latter days have begun. It's the last hour. There has been resurrection. And when we move to the book of Revelation we see this all over the place. In fact, in chapter 1, John claims to be a partaker of the tribulation in the kingdom. So both at the end-time tribulation and the end-time kingdom, he is participating in. And so we see that throughout the book of Revelation, not only does it concern about the very last things before the new heavens and new earth, it also concerns things that have begun from the first century to today. It has all been set in motion.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Eschatology, in the simplest definition of the word, is the study of the end times or the study of the last things. And so, when we use the term in its simple sense, that's, all that it involves is the study of the end times. We can apply eschatology in a couple of other particular senses. We can think of it in an individual or a personal way, and when we do that, we're asking questions like: What happens to individuals, be they a believer or an unbeliever, following their death in this life, provided that that death takes place prior to the return of Christ? What about the intermediate state? Is there a separation of body and soul? What does the resurrection to judgment look like for individuals? On what basis does that judgment take place? And then, an individual's reward in heaven or judgment in hell, what might that look like? Individual eschatology is what we're talking about there. We might also think of cosmic or global eschatology, and there we're thinking on a broader level, not just what do the end times look like for individuals and what are the implications for them, but what are God's global purposes in the culmination of his plan of redemption for this earth? And there we would include broader discussions of things like the millennium in Revelation 20 — some competing interpretations on that. What is God's plan for the new heavens and the new earth? Is it primarily spiritual? Is it primarily physical? Is it a combination of the two? What does the eternal state look like when God has assigned final judgment to believers and unbelievers, the resurrection of the just and the unjust? So we can kind of talk about it in those three components: the broad definition on the one hand, the application to individuals on the other hand, and then finally the cosmic implications of eschatology as well.

Question 5:

What genres does the book of Revelation employ?

One thing that can complicate our reading of Revelation is the fact that it contains different literary genres. Put simply, a genre is a type or category, like narrative, poetry, wisdom, law, and so on. And each genre has its own conventions — its own way of communicating. So, in order to interpret the book of Revelation responsibly,

we need to recognize the genres it uses, and to read each one according to its own conventions. What genres does the book of Revelation employ?

Dr. James M. Hamilton

Revelation employs at least three genres. The very first word of the book in Greek is apocalypse or “*apokalupsis*,” so this book, John is identifying it as a “revelation” or perhaps an “unveiling.” So number one, it’s an apocalypse which is, it’s as though the veil is being pulled back and people are being allowed to see things as they really are. Number two, it’s a prophecy. Revelation 1:3: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.” So I think we can say that Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy. And some have distinguished between an apocalypse — being concerned with the events of the very end of history, the consummation of all things, and perhaps heavenly realities — and then a prophecy dealing with the actual outworking of history. And then thirdly, Revelation employs features of an epistle. So around verse 4, John begins to say, “John, to the seven churches,” and then he addresses those seven churches. There’s a blessing much like the format of Paul’s letters. So if you compare Revelation 1:4-8 or so, the opening there is very similar to the opening of some of Paul’s letters. And then it concludes, the whole book concludes with a grace that is very similar to the way that Paul concludes his letters. So I think we can say that Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter. And there was probably a letter carrier who would have delivered this writing to these churches and then read it aloud in Christian worship.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

One of the most obvious genres in the book of Revelation is the genre of letters. You have letters to the seven churches which some have compared to imperial edicts and so on, but official kinds of letters. But the rest of the book of Revelation is a genre that’s much less familiar to us — to many of us in the twenty-first century — and it’s a mixture of what we could call prophecy and apocalyptic. It has features that very much resemble the language of the Old Testament prophets. Pretty much everything could be accounted for on that basis alone. But some of the features that are most distinctive and repeated in the book of Revelation are also those features that often appear in Jewish apocalypses, a certain kind of Jewish literature that emphasizes heavenly revelations and so on. With regard to even those elements, those elements appear in some of the earlier biblical prophets, Ezekiel, Daniel, and so forth. But because they’re so unfamiliar to us — to many of us at least in most of our cultures in the twenty-first century — it’s valuable to immerse ourselves in the language of the Old Testament prophets to get a better understanding of the book of Revelation.

Dr. Brandon Crowe

The book of Revelation is unique in a number of ways, and one of those ways is how it takes three different genres and combines them into a single book. Revelation employs prophecy, apocalyptic, and the form of a letter for John to make his point. As an apocalyptic book, Revelation concerns visions that are given to John that deal with the divine transcendent reality and how that reality is relevant for our world today. It gives a divine perspective on the world and shows us something of where history is

going. As a prophetic book, John writes with the very authority of God himself, meaning the words that John writes are true. They are absolutely true in the way that God is himself truth. And the categories of apocalyptic and prophetic are very closely united in Revelation as they are, for example, in a book like Daniel in the Old Testament. But thirdly, Revelation is communicated in the form of a circular letter. This is a letter that was sent around to more than one church, and as a letter, Revelation was relevant for churches even in the first century. And it's important to remember that it was a letter, that Revelation is not only about what might happen thousands of years in the future, but Revelation, as it was originally, was given, was written to specific churches in the first century. And whatever else John might be doing, his message of Revelation is relevant for those first century churches. And so in some senses, Revelation is unique in being a prophetic apocalypse that was sent around to churches in the form of a circular letter. It combines all three of those genres.

Question 6:

How similar is the book of Revelation to Old Testament prophetic literature?

When John wrote the book of Revelation, he drew heavily from the Old Testament prophets, and quoted them frequently. And of course, the same God inspired both Old Testament prophecy and the book of Revelation. Because of these types of connections, we should expect to see similarities between Revelation and Old Testament prophecy. But do we? How similar is the book of Revelation to Old Testament prophetic literature?

Dr. Brandon Crowe

To understand the book of Revelation, we need to understand that it is a book of prophecy, and the book of Revelation 1:3 identifies it as a book of prophecy. And as a book of prophecy, it has a number of similarities to Old Testament prophets. It mirrors, for example, some of what... happens in Ezekiel. Some think that the sequence of the visions in Ezekiel had a very formative influence on the way that John had organized Revelation. We also see John having something like a prophetic commission like what happens to Ezekiel. We see further that Ezekiel is called to write by the Spirit, and John is said to write at the leading of the Spirit, and that there's a divine authority that lies behind what he writes in Revelation. And so we see, just as the true prophets from the Old Testament are actually speaking the very words of God, we see the same thing in Revelation where, as John writes, he's writing the very words of God. Revelation is also much like the book of Daniel, which is also an apocalyptic prophecy type of book, which we find in Revelation. Revelation 1 begins with John saying, these are the things that must soon take place and these had been shown to him, and we find something very similar in Daniel 2 where the things that will happen in the latter days are going to be shown to them. So we see those similarities as well. Beyond this, the book of Isaiah is quoted a number

of times in Revelation. And in fact, we can point to the way that John often takes Old Testament books, Old Testament wording, Old Testament images, and weaves them into his prophecy to demonstrate his continuity with the prophets that have come before. Some even say that John is writing the climax of biblical prophecy. If you look, for example, in Revelation 18 and 19 and the downfall of Babylon, it's been argued that he's actually taking all of the Old Testament statements about the downfall of Babylon from the prophets and weaving those into that account to demonstrate how his prophecy of the downfall of Babylon stands in continuity with what has come before.

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

The book of Revelation is not unique in the entire biblical canon in terms of the type of literature that we find there. There are actually several books in the Old Testament that correspond to the same literary type of genre. One of the ones I'm thinking of right now is apocalyptic literature... Now, apocalyptic literature we often think of in the book of Revelation as that literature where you get wild and outrageous animals and things being described, for example, dragons and beasts with multiple heads, horns and eyes. Well, that type of language is not unique to the book of Revelation. We find that in the book of Daniel. We find apocalyptic literature in Ezekiel, in Zechariah, even a little bit in Isaiah. So the book of Revelation has many, kind of, literary antecedents in Old Testament prophetic literature. And what is the purpose of Old Testament prophetic literature at the apocalyptic level, or even the book of Revelation? One thing that's helpful to think about is that the coming of apocalyptic literature appears to focus around a particular community at a particular time, and that's usually God's people in exile. And so if you think of Ezekiel who was cast into exile in Babylon and received apocalyptic visions, Daniel who went into exile to Babylon: apocalyptic visions, John in exile on Patmos: apocalyptic visions. And the purpose of these apocalyptic visions, they were not to confuse people, which we normally think today, but actually to comfort and encourage God's people in this way: number one, that God is in control, and number two, that God wins. And those two really big themes kind of frame how apocalyptic literature, or what it embodies in terms of its content and when it is coming to God's people in terms of their timing. So there are antecedents in the Old Testament for the apocalyptic literature that we normally think of describes the vast majority of the book of Revelation.

Dr. Greg Perry

The emphasis in the book of Revelation is on its role or identity as a prophetic word, a book of prophecy. And so what we see is a great deal of similarities with the ways in which the prophets would represent God's covenant in terms of the things they would see — their visions — to call people back to covenant faithfulness and repentance. And so the emphasis in the opening part of the book of Revelation is on a call to repent and to overcome. And that's consistent with what we see in the prophets where the warnings are, "unless you repent, you'll suffer this discipline." And we also see in the book of Revelation the recurrence of seven words of blessing, and that's also very common to prophetic literature, where you have the promise of blessing in terms of coming back to the covenant. And so we see this through John. Jesus brings

this word of blessing that he promises to those who will repent and those who will overcome, this great invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb. We also see common imagery. So, whether it's imagery from the plagues and the Exodus and the experience of the deliverance of God's people from the Exodus, and of course, the identification of Jesus as the Passover Lamb that is consistent with that imagery, and Moses as a prophet. Or where we see the heavenly council and one like the Son of Man like we see in relation to Daniel 7 in chapters 4 and 5, and the gathering of the heavenly council there, or whether it's the New Jerusalem that's consistent with what we see in the book of Ezekiel, or whether it's these figures like the two witnesses or what we see with the lampstands — imagery that really comes from the book of Zechariah — where again these things represent God's leaders like the king and the priest, and God's people in relation to the nations, and God's call for them to be faithful in the midst of the nations and his dealings with the nations. So these things are very consistent with what we see in the imagery and in the function of the books of prophecy in the Old Testament.

Question 7:

How is apocalyptic literature similar to and different from typical biblical prophecy?

The author of the book of Revelation wrote in both the prophetic and apocalyptic genres. These two genres have many similarities, but they also have significant differences. How is apocalyptic literature similar to and different from typical biblical prophecy?

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

In apocalyptic literature, we have more of a vision of the distant future with a succession of kingdoms and what God is going to be doing in the future; whereas, classical prophecy tends to be a little more immediate. Or if it talks about the distant future, it's maybe a little more vague. The book of Revelation talks about the future and uses a lot of symbolism — there are angelic visitations — those are characteristics of apocalyptic literature. So it's really kind of a big picture, long range sort of thing. And because of the large amount of symbolism, it really does differ from classical prophecy.

Dr. Scott Redd

Well, apocalyptic literature is similar to biblical prophecy in the sense that it does tell something about the future. It anticipates God's work in the world and the surety, or the confidence that God's people can have, that he will continue to be involved in the goings-ons of their life and the life of the world around them. But when you compare apocalyptic literature to, for instance, to typical biblical prophecy, you find that there are also some very significant differences. Biblical prophecy is typically involved in the genre of prayers or speeches, for instance. Biblical prophecy is often prayers to God, lamenting for sin, repenting for sin, or prayers of praise, or prayers of

thanksgiving to the Lord. So they often show up in a sort of poetic style and involve the vivid and metaphorical imagery that we find in poetry. Sometimes biblical prophecy is also taken up in speeches, speeches to God's people, either declaring the threat of judgment or declaring a hope in blessing and salvation in the future. Again, like all biblical prophecies, the most significant aspect of the prophecy is that it's calling God's people to faithfulness and repentance. However, when we turn to apocalyptic literature, we find a very different mode of communication. We see the prophet, instead, taken up in the Spirit often, into sort of a spiritual realm where they watch a drama played out before them. Now, like biblical prophecy, the drama involves concerns about the future, sometimes the near future and sometimes the very distant future. But as the prophet watches this drama played out, he reports to us on what he sees... In apocalyptic visions, the prophet will often have an angelic tour guide who is explaining to him the events that he sees around him. The prophet can ask questions to the angel, and the angel will often respond or give other kinds of clarification to what the prophet is seeing in front of him. Now, the drama that is played out in a visionary apocalypse is one which is very figurative, it's very vivid in its imagery, but it tends to draw large lines and broad strokes about future events. They're always involving cosmic conflict, battle between light and darkness, battle between God and his enemies. And we see these great broad strokes being drawn out throughout the apocalyptic vision, often using very vivid and very exciting imagery... So you see the apocalyptic genre is really a vision report, reporting on a drama that's played out in the future of great cosmic conflict between God and his enemies. Biblical prophecy, on the other hand, typically involves poetry, things like prayers and speeches. And yet both call God's people to be both comforted and consoled by the promise of God's deliverance and his reign in the future, but also to be called back to faithfulness by the opportunity of participating in God's kingdom and the desire to be on the side of the divine King who has the victory.

Question 8:

What are some distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic literature?

Apocalyptic literature was well known during the time that John wrote Revelation. And the book of Revelation contains many of the characteristics common to this genre. What are some distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic literature?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The book of Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic prophecy, not just any kind of prophecy, but apocalyptic prophecy, which is to say, visionary prophecy. If you don't get the genre signals right then you don't understand the sort of universe of discourse out of which this book is operating. Apocalyptic prophecy is visionary prophecy, and the thing that characterizes that is that the prophet is not just going to say what he heard from God, a late word from God, he's going to relate what he saw in a vision. That's why he's called a seer. A seer is someone who sees something. Well, here's the problem for the prophet who's a visionary; he's got to describe what he sees, and

the problem when you see the *mysterium tremendum* is there's not enough words in anybody's vocabulary to describe God or heaven or all of those kinds of things. So what happens in visionary prophecy is that he must say, "It's like... It's like... It's like... It's like..." "And I saw a throne and it was like..." "And he was shaped like a human being..." "... and it had a color like x and y." This is the language of metaphor and analogy. If you don't understand that this is metaphorical language, it's poetic language, it's visionary language, you're right off the bat going to make a horrible mistake about the way you interpret this material. I mean, you may actually go around looking for beasts with seven heads and twenty-three horns and then be terribly disappointed that they're not at the San Diego zoo. Our author is not describing literally something, he's describing something analogically and saying, "It's like this," and that's the way an analogy works. It's a comparison of two unlike things that in some particular way are alike. The genre of apocalyptic prophecy is such that it can even be distinguished from ordinary prophecy as well and if you don't understand what kind of literature you are dealing with, you're already heading down the road to misinterpreting the book of Revelation.

Dr. Mark Strauss

Apocalyptic literature is not like any kind of literature we have today, and so sometimes when modern readers approach the book of Revelation, for example, they're surprised and they're trying to figure out what's going on. So it's important to talk about some of the characteristics of apocalyptic... ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature. Fundamentally, apocalyptic literature is really crisis literature. And by that we mean it arose in the context when God's people were under severe pressure, even pressure of potential extermination. And the message then that comes through in apocalyptic literature is that no matter what crises you're facing, no matter what enemies you're facing, God is the sovereign Lord of the universe. He is in charge of human history, and he will intervene to accomplish his salvation and to bring you through this impossible or difficult time. So that's fundamental to apocalyptic literature. Then, of course, we see characteristics like symbolic images, and sometimes, you know, we see beasts and dragons and locusts and these coming out of the pit, and these kinds of things, so lots of symbolic literature. Revelation through angelic creatures, angelic mediators, these kinds of things are characteristic of apocalyptic literature. But fundamentally, apocalyptic literature is meant to send a message to God's people that the crises that they're facing, the challenges they're facing, they can persevere through it because God is ultimately going to save and deliver them.

Dr. William Edgar

Apocalyptic literature shows up in many places in the ancient world, and of course it is in the Bible as well. You can always recognize it because it's not linear; it's not straight history; it's laden with images. Not that these images are unrelated to history. They often are used to predict what the future is going to be: a statue with different parts in the book of Daniel, which predicts succeeding empires. Or the book of the Revelation is replete with such apocalyptic imagery, the four horsemen, for example, or the bowls pouring out judgment. And in addition to these darker things, the bright

things such as the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven. So apocalyptic literature is characterized by a sort of mosaic way of appearing. And... you're glad the whole Bible isn't apocalyptic, because we'd have trouble understanding it probably. We'd spend most of our time interpreting it. So we have other parts of the Bible which are more linear, and they work together in a perfect harmony. I think one of the reasons for that is that God is not just teaching us either points of doctrine or elements of history in an isolated fashion, but he's presenting his self, his person, his covenant presence, and we relate to that as entire people. Images are important parts of who we are as we respond, as are words, and as is linear history. So apocalyptic literature in the context of the whole is quite wonderful.

Dr. David W. Chapman

Well, apocalyptic literature is unveiling the realities of heaven for those of us on earth. So one of the things that you'll see is very often that the individual who is seeing the vision of heaven is taken up into heaven. You can think of Isaiah and his vision of God and the "Holy, Holy, Holy." The same, of course, happens with John in the book of Revelation. He's taken up into heaven and he begins to see visions, and the visions often include symbols and metaphorical imagery that then later has to be interpreted. So that's one of the key elements of apocalyptic imagery. They often speak to the situation of God's people on earth at that time, but there can also be a future element or something that's unveiling some heavenly reality that we need to know in order to live our lives now in the hope of the future. In addition, I would say that apocalyptic imagery, the genre, has sometimes been defined, I think too broadly by scholars. And by that I don't mean just evangelical scholars but across the spectrum, so that you have an attempt to define the book of Revelation as an apocalyptic genre alongside not just books such as parts of Ezekiel or Daniel that are clearly apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament, but also across intertestamental Jewish works such as 1 Enoch, and in doing so it becomes a bit circular because they know they want to include all of this literature in the genre of apocalyptic, and especially fit Revelation in, and so then you come up with a definition that fits all of that, even if 1 Enoch sounds very different from Revelation, while Revelation sounds, frankly, very much like parts of Isaiah or Ezekiel or Daniel, which I think John the apostle is intentionally wanting to echo as he's writing through the book of Revelation.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd

Yes. Apocalyptic literature has a number of characteristics. In recent years, that's been sharpened by scholars. The first characteristic is that it takes place typically in a narrative framework. There is a story that is told. Within that story, within that narrative, we have an angel or some type of heavenly being communicating content. So you have a narrative framework, you have a heavenly being, and part of this content that is being delivered to a human — for example Daniel — is a transcendent reality. So there's a spatial dimension — heavenlies, throne room visions, that sort of thing, angels. There's also a temporal dimension as well — latter days, eschatology, end of days, cataclysmic events. So it all takes place in a narrative, communicated by

a celestial being such as an angel to a human that's delivered. The content is vertical and horizontal, to put it like that.

Mr. Bradley T. Johnson

In terms of the attributes or the qualities of apocalyptic literature, I think that there's probably a fair amount of diversity of views within scholarship today. But I think there's also a center to that that probably is helpfully conveyed by the work of Dr. John J. Collins in his book *The Apocalyptic Imagination* and what he identifies as something of a center or a thread to the commonalities among various pieces of apocalyptic literature... he defines this genre in this way:

Revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is 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.

Well, there's some technical jargon in that, but what we observe is that, number one, apocalyptic is revelatory. It shows us something that we wouldn't have seen otherwise, and it's given within a narrative framework, which means there's something of a story form to it in terms of a series of events and dialogue and those types of things. One of the key components to apocalyptic literature is the disclosure or the revealing of this reality or this vision to a human recipient or human being by means by some sort of a divine mediator. So an angel of the Lord might be that exact mediator that comes and invites the human being onto this otherworldly tour where a different place and a different time are experienced. The different time is typically in the future. How will it end? Well, we're going to take a look at that. And a different place, the new age, or the way things will be on that day. Now, in addition to that, I think that one of Collins' main contributions in his work is the development of something of a schematic of apocalyptic. And so what he does is he lays out a variety of works that are classically considered to be a part of this genre, and then he identifies a list of attributes that in varying ways and varying degrees can be associated with these different works. For instance, he notes that, for example, with an ancient work entitled 2 Enoch there are elements of cosmogony, elements of judgment and the destruction of the wicked, and elements of judgment and the destruction of the world, along with a transformation of the cosmic reality as we know it. So, there is a short list of attributes of apocalyptic. By contrast, if we go to another kind of a work, for example the book of Daniel from the Old Testament, which has some apocalyptic material in it, we notice that there's a recollection of the past. So there's a certain historicity to that. There's also potentially a retrospective look at prior events and casting those prophetically. There's also an emphasis on persecution and a certain degree of upheaval that's happening in the *eschaton*, or in the final age. Now what's interesting about this particular schematic is that not all works exhibit all the same attributes. And in fact, it's possible for one work to have very little affinity with or relationship to another work but still be considered as part of the same genre of literature. By contrast, he highlights one particular attribute, that

being the judgment and/or the destruction of the wicked as being common to all forms of apocalyptic. So that would be a red thread that's woven through all of it.

Question 9:

Why does the Bible use so many images and metaphors?

The book of Revelation consists largely of prophecy and apocalyptic literature. And that means that it contains many images and metaphors. But many readers find imagery and metaphor hard to understand. So, if the Bible is intended to reveal God's truth to his people, why has God made it so hard to interpret? Why does the Bible use so many images and metaphors?

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Some people wonder, when the Bible uses so much imagery and metaphor, doesn't it just make it harder to understand? Well, I guess the first question is, "What does God mean when he uses it?" and if it makes it harder or easier, that's secondary. If God intends us to interpret symbols and metaphors, then that's what we have to do. But I think the answer to the question is: well, it depends. Is it harder for us to interpret metaphors and symbols? Well, often for Western people, people from Western cultures, it is harder, because we're not accustomed to those forms of communicating, but for the vast majority of the world, non-Western people, it's a perfectly natural, in fact sometimes preferable way of speaking and communicating. It's often said that children understand the book of Revelation better than grownups do, which is sort of a reminder of what C.S. Lewis played out in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When the children got to a certain age, they were no longer allowed to go back to Narnia. They had grown up, and they had outgrown the kinds of demands on the imagination that going to Narnia required. And in Lewis' presentation, that's not a good thing. He, in fact, commends to us a more mystical and open-ended view of the world, rather than a sort of reductionistic, precise, and formulaic view of the world. And so, to answer the question, although God hasn't said this is why he uses poetry and symbols, I think we can derive pretty clearly that God uses symbols, he uses imagery, he uses metaphors, to give us a greater sense of the transcendence. Metaphors introduce tension into ideas or concepts that cause us to open our eyes wider. And also they appeal to the whole person more, to the emotions as well as the intellect. We can identify with metaphorical language because they connect concepts to sensory experience, whether it's sight, sound, smell and so forth. And so I don't see how we could possibly know the Lord apart from whatever he would prefer to do. To the contrary, I don't see how we can possibly know the Lord apart from symbol, metaphor, imagery.

Dr. R. Todd Mangum

For us, the imagery and metaphor can make it more difficult. For the original audience, it probably made it more vivid. So there's a cultural, historical distance between us and them that, yeah, like any kind of ancient literature, means we have to

translate it, we have to bring over the analogies into more contemporary parlance. In the book of Revelation there may be an additional element. Besides Revelation drawing from Old Testament imageries — it's often missed — but most, and maybe even all, maybe we just haven't figured them all out, but most of these imageries of the visions of Revelation look like they're actually throwbacks to or hearkenings back to Old Testament revelation or prophecy or prophetic imagery with which God's people at the time would have been familiar. The other thing that may be going on in the book of Revelation is that John is writing from Patmos in exile. He's essentially in prison. Like prison today, when you write letters, your mail is being read by the authorities. It's possible that part of what John is up to — the Holy Spirit through John is up to — is sending messages to God's people that would have been very clear but in such a clouded, riddled way that the authorities who put him in exile wouldn't have gotten it, wouldn't have gotten the punch lines, wouldn't have gotten the jokes, much like Uncle Remus' fables were actually designed to communicate to African-American people living under oppression of how to operate, how to navigate a world in which the authorities are always watching, in which you are disenfranchised, vulnerable, unempowered and thus subject to the abuse and the oppression of the authorities and here are some stories to give you wisdom and encouragement to persevere in an environment like that. The book of Revelation may work very much like that as well.

Dr. John E. McKinley

The Bible uses a lot of metaphor and imagery, and this does make it harder to understand, but it also makes it applicable to people in different times and different places. If everything was spelled out in crystal detail about chronological fulfillments, then it might not apply to people who live later times or other cultures where these events might not take place. So there's a kind of fuzziness around the edges of these messages, and that makes them applicable to people in different times and places. And there's also a definiteness that makes them — everybody — have a sense of readiness that, "I'm not sure when this is being fulfilled; it could be fulfilled in our time." And most generations of Christians have thought these events could be fulfilled in our time. We need to be ready to meet the Lord. So God has accomplished giving us assurance and certainty that history is in his hands, and he has a definite plan for making things work his way and winning in the end. And yet, there is an indefiniteness, a fuzziness through the metaphor and imagery, that allows every generation of Christians all around the world to say, "We're not sure when this is. It might apply to us; it might not." And so it remains applicable for us.

Question 10:

How can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy?

Biblical prophecies, like those in the book of Revelation, typically addressed issues that were most relevant to their original audiences. And that sometimes makes it

hard to know how to apply them to modern life. Still, Scripture assures us that biblical prophecy continues to apply to God's people in every age. So, how can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy?

Dr. R. Todd Mangum

Alright, I want to talk about how to draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy, but I want to talk a little bit first about how not to draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy and let that serve as a backdrop to some more viable and helpful approaches. It's very common, sells a lot of books, very popular sometimes, to look at biblical prophecy as though what God has done has provided a crystal ball so that modern, contemporary, suburban American Christians can get a peek at what the future has to hold in case they're curious — you know, “Just thought you might be interested in what's going to happen 100 years or 1,000 years from now, so that you could see what's going to happen.” And probably just as bad, if not worse, is approaching prophecy as though it's designed to, newspaper in hand, try to identify who these prophetically foreseen characters are. “Ooh, I think this one's the antichrist.” “You know I never liked this political candidate anyway. I think he's sinisterly, actually the antichrist.” Or that preacher that I disagree with, “I think that's the false prophet,” and try to identify specific figures with specific imageries and what not. That's probably unhelpful, wrongheaded. It's been going on a long time. Martin Luther thought as early as the mid-sixteenth century that the pope at the time was the antichrist. I mean, so that's been going on for a long time, but no one's been right yet. And we've had enough misses on that that we probably ought to learn the lesson that that is not the most helpful way to approach prophecy. Rather, biblical prophecy is given to God's people, generally anyway, as a set of warnings or a set of promised blessings in reward of faithfulness. So we're under some of the same obligations that God's people have always been under to obey, to be faithful, to persevere under trial, to persevere to the end, to not succumb to temptation, to not be mistaken into thinking that God's people are going to lose in the end, and to not succumb to the temptation to think that this is all there is so I might as well get all the joy and pleasure I can get out of this life; I might as well just cave to the forces of evil in this life. Biblical prophecy comes along and says, “No, persevere.” The price may be high. The cost may be heavy. The persecution may be great. You're not the first ones to suffer so, you're not the first ones to be called to rise above temptations and persevere. You're part of a long line of believers that have been called to just such cost, just such perseverance. And biblical prophecy can be applied in such a way as to continue to encourage God's people to be faithful and to continue to warn God's people of what the disciplinary price will be for disobedience.

Rev. Valery Babynin (translation)

When many people hear the word “prophecy,” they think of an image of something mystical and secret that they have to see, that will tell the future for them, and so on. And of course, in the history of mankind there have been many false prophets who uttered certain prophecies concerning the future. But when we speak about biblical prophecies, we have to understand that they have to do with the revelation of the Almighty. It is his word going out from his mouth, we may say, and reaching man,

because biblical prophecy is the word that he sends to man. And the prophet Isaiah says that — relaying to us the word of Yahweh — “my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” And when we speak about biblical prophecies, when we think about biblical prophecies, we should have this reverential, longing attitude because the word that goes out from God’s mouth, it changes reality; it guides reality; it directs reality. And when we hear biblical prophecies, reading the Holy Scripture with faith, we have to understand that we are taking part in the process of changing reality according to God’s plan. So when, for example, we read God’s word spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness,” it concerns not only Israel; it concerns not only individuals who lived at that time; it concerns the whole of [God’s] church. And that is why the practical meaning of these words, read by a man living in our time, is of extraordinary importance because I embrace this as revelation, which has gone out from God’s mouth, and that is why biblical prophecy is bread and comfort and support in life. It is something that I can really rely on, that really is the truth.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat

There’s a verse in Isaiah 40, I think it’s verse 8 that says, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever.” And this is the way which I frame my understanding of the prophets, that the prophetic word of the Lord, it’s alive, it’s not locked in Israel’s ancient Near Eastern past, but it’s a fresh word; it’s an alive word. And I think this is a real issue within evangelical hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation today, where one begins to engage the material, and the first thing that’s talked about is the problem of distance, that the real problem with engaging the Bible is that it’s so culturally “other” than where we are today. And in a sense that’s true, and we have to fill in those gaps. But that’s never the way the history of the church has described the Bible. Herman Bavinck, for example, describes the Bible as the eternal youthful word of the Lord. It’s young. I mean, it’s alive, it’s fresh. And whatever gaps we may have between the ancient world of biblical prophecy and the modern world in the life of the church, that gap is filled by the promised presence of Christ in his Spirit. So, the prophets didn’t just speak to Israel’s past, but the prophets continue to speak today, and we need to listen to the word in which they have. And it can be cryptic. I mean, Martin Luther said, the prophets have a queer way of talking, rambling on from one subject matter to another. I mean, the prophets yield their fruit with a lot of patience, but they do continue to speak into our world as they expose us for who we are and as they reveal the God who has redeemed us. And I think you see this dynamic in the New Testament as well. Just quick examples of this are: Jesus with these men on the road to Emmaus, where he says, he begins to tell them about himself, and he does it from the Law and the Prophets, and he speaks of himself from the Old Testament. Paul says something similar in Romans 15 where he said, these things were written for our instruction. So he had a very immediate sense of how the Old Testament continued to exert pressure, a revelatory pressure on the church as it listens for God’s Word in our midst. So, the prophets continue to exert a very immediate and dynamic voice in the life of the church, and they need to be listened to.

Question 11:**Why is perseverance and overcoming sin important in the Christian life?**

The original audience of the book of Revelation faced profound persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. Many were tortured, and some even died for their beliefs. But John exhorted them to persevere, and to remain pure to the end. Why is perseverance and overcoming sin important in the Christian life?

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

When I think of perseverance and overcoming sin, I think of the book of Revelation, for example. That's fundamentally, the purpose of the book of Revelation, is to call upon the saints to persevere and to overcome to obtain life eternal. Now we have to be careful with that. That might sound initially like works-righteousness. But Revelation is calling upon believers to trust in Jesus, and that trust manifests itself in perseverance. So it isn't works righteousness actually, it's a manifestation of faith. Perseverance is rooted in trusting God. Are the believers in Rome and other parts of the Greco-Roman world, are they going to trust in the Roman Empire, in the comforts of this world? Or are they going to put their trust in Jesus? Perseverance is required to obtain that final blessing. We have in chapters 2 and 3 in the letters to the churches, we have again and again a call to persevere to obtain eternal life, to obtain the tree of life again and again. So I think it's a practical call to believers to give themselves entirely to Jesus. If one is not persevering, it's a sign that they are trusting in something else, in someone else. It's ultimately a sign that they don't truly belong to God. I think it's interesting and instructive that the New Testament has many admonitions to persevere. I take it that that means that all of us as Christians need those admonitions. We ought not to think I don't need such an admonition because I'm already a Christian. God uses those calls to persevere as means by which we do persevere and trust in God until the end.

Rev. Valery Babynin (translation)

When we speak about Christian perseverance against sin we have to understand that this question addresses, first of all, understanding human essence, understanding human nature, because sin is not just a deficiency; sin is not just a mistake. Sin is a rebellious nature that compels every man to struggle with God, to oppose his commandments, to oppose his will. Sin distorts our thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. Sin distorts our intentions. And Paul says that everyone inherits Adam's sinful nature. So that's why, for Christians, it's a very important question. Even when we turn to God, this old nature is preserved in us. It's preserved in us, and it prevents happy and joyful relationship with the Lord. The apostle John says that, "If we claim to be without sin ... the truth is not in us." That is, people converted to Christ, people who have come to Christ, regrettably continue to suffer under the burden of sin, and it remains a problem in the church. It, we may say, is the biggest problem because, as a

pastor, I have to deal with this every day, both inside me and in my relations with other people. And when we think about the truth of perseverance against sin, we come again to the truth of grace and God's predestination, because his preordinations for his church consist in the fact that he changes our nature when a new man is born, created after God in holiness and truth. And this man is able to oppose sin, able to overcome sin, able to find the true good. In other words, the truth of perseverance points at the nature of man and at the unchangeable, immutable promises of God, which are fulfilled in the life of Christians born again of the Spirit.

Question 12:

How should we treat Christians who interpret the book of Revelation differently than we do?

The book of Revelation includes many metaphors, symbols, and other figurative language, and this can make it hard to interpret. So, it's not surprising that Christians often disagree over its meaning. Sadly, this has led to some bitter battles within the church. How important is it for us to defend our own interpretations of John's work? And how should we treat Christians who interpret the book of Revelation differently than we do?

Dr. Simon Kistemaker

There are a number of ways of interpreting the book of Revelation. You've heard about amillennialism, premillennialism, postmillennialism, dispensationalism. There you have all the views and interpretations of the book of Revelation. My approach is we are not here to debate and to be angry. We are here to show light and to show the Lord Jesus in all his love and kindness. And therefore I say there are different views, but we have to treat one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

There are so many different interpretations of the book of Revelation, the question easily becomes, how do we relate to and how do we agree or disagree with those who share different views? Well, one, we need to relativize the different issues. While we may disagree with some people who hold to the full and final authority of the Scriptures and believe the book of Revelation is the very word of God, we share in common with them that view: This is God's very word. And so we need to appreciate that we share that in common. Secondly, we need to appreciate what each major interpretive approach brings to the table. Not everyone is right in their disagreements. There are many things where only one option is the right option because they're contradictory, but as far as general approach, different traditions bring certain values to their interpretation that we all need to honor and respect and desire. Some people who look at the book of Revelation as a complete historical prediction, they often emphasize being ready and being prepared and being watchful. Now, those people, like me for instance, who see this as a representative of history for all time between the first and second coming, people like me often don't emphasize preparedness,

don't emphasize the discontinuity, the radical difference that the second coming makes. And so I learn from people who share different views of the book of Revelation that they have emphases that sometimes I neglect or underemphasize. Likewise, somebody who sees the book as primarily predictive future, they can neglect the fact that Christ is on the throne, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are reigning in the present and there is nothing that is going to separate us from the love of God, that the kingdom is present as Jesus taught in the Gospels. It's present as well as future. So even though we disagree of major approaches, we can appreciate the things that cause people to have those major approaches. And then finally, where there are real differences, we need to with civility and Christian charity talk through the particulars and in the end agree to disagree if we must and still appreciate and love and care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dr. R. Todd Mangum

Well, the book of Revelation, at least since it was adopted into the Canon has proven notoriously difficult to interpret. The early church fathers had good, solid, church tradition evidence that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John, but because they didn't understand what it meant, they were so puzzled by the meaning of its visions, it almost didn't get into the Canon. Now of course, by God's providence they're discovering what's canonical, not determining, so understanding that... But there was some resistance, or at least some puzzlement, some hesitation, to adopt the book of Revelation into the recognized canon of God's inspired Word because of puzzlement over what it meant. John Calvin wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible but specifically does not write a commentary on the book of Revelation because, as brilliant an interpreter and skilled an interpreter as John Calvin was, he confessed, "I can't make heads or tails out of what most of it means." So with that kind of background, we probably should approach the book of Revelation with a certain level of humility, with a certain recognition that there are puzzling elements there. It's highly inappropriate for anyone to come to the book of Revelation, declare themselves wise. I mean, I know that there's a couple of phrases in Revelation that say, "Let him who is wise recognize," but let's also remember that it's a very dangerous thing to declare oneself wise in one's own eyes. So don't be too quick to identify yourself as the one that's wise that can interpret Revelation. So, it may be wisest for us all to approach the book of Revelation recognizing that it's God's inspired Word, but there are elements in it that will likely remain puzzling until Jesus comes back. We know in hindsight that no one saw the prophecies regarding the Messiah, and the Messiah's first coming, being fulfilled the way they were fulfilled. Some interpreters recognized, well, there are two sets of descriptions: whether he's going to be suffering or whether he's going to be victorious. But they didn't know. Some thought, well, maybe it depends on whether we're obedient or disobedient as to which one he'll be. But no one saw one Messiah, two comings. No one saw a Messiah coming as God-man who would rise from the dead and fulfill the other ones in the second coming or something. Well, it makes perfect sense in hindsight, most of them, but nobody saw it coming in foresight exactly the way it was fulfilled. It's likely to be the case, regarding the prophecies of Christ's second coming and the time period between now and the second coming, that they'll make perfect

sense in hindsight, but none of us will be able to have a batting average of 1,000 when it comes to interpreting them in foresight. There's one other element on that. One of the unfortunate byproducts of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century was that the premillennialist stream among the early fundamentalists believed that one of the fundamentals should be considered the second coming of Christ by which they assumed a second coming in which a 1,000-year earthly kingdom would be set up such that they mistook those who did not affirm a premillennial return but did affirm a bodily return, mistook them as liberals, those who denied authoritative teaching of Scripture and whatnot. We Bible-believing, evangelical Christians are notorious for drawing lines, well-meaningly drawing lines, at the wrong place. Well, here was one place where that happened. There is a line of demarcation, but it's bodily return of Christ, not necessarily premillennial return... Recognizing that, biblical prophecy and its interpretation is an area where we should really just allow more latitude to one another, have good robust discussions, disagreements, arguments, but with the understanding that the authority of Scripture isn't at stake.

The book of Revelation can be difficult for modern readers to understand. But John's purpose wasn't to confuse or exasperate us. He wrote Revelation to encourage and support us, especially when we face challenges like persecution. And when we understand Revelation's historical context and imagery, we're better prepared to grasp its meaning and to benefit from its message.

Rev. Valery Babynin is Senior Pastor of Evangelical Reformed Presbyterian Church in Odessa, Ukraine.

Dr. David W. Chapman is Associate Professor of New Testament and Archeology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri.

Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. is Department Chair and Professor of Old Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Dr. Brandon Crowe is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Dr. William Edgar is Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Dr. Mark Gignilliat is Associate Professor of Divinity Old Testament at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

Dr. Benjamin Gladd is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson Campus.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando Campus.

Dr. James M. Hamilton is Associate Professor of Biblical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and Preaching Pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church.

Mr. Bradley T. Johnson is Instructor of Biblical Languages at Asbury Theological Seminary and is in his final year of coursework for a PhD in Biblical Studies.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson is Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

Dr. Craig S. Keener is Professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Dr. Simon Kistemaker is Professor of New Testament, Emeritus at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Robert G. Lister is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

Dr. R. Todd Mangum is Professor of Theology and Academic Dean at Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania.

Dr. John E. McKinley is Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California.

Dr. Greg Perry is Associate Professor of New Testament and Director of City Ministry Initiative at Covenant Theological Seminary St. Louis, Missouri.

Dr. Scott Redd is Campus President of Reformed Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. and Assistant Professor of Old Testament.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner is the James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Dr. Glen Scorgie is Professor of Theology at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, California.

Dr. Mark Strauss taught at Biola University, Christian Heritage College, and Talbot School of Theology before joining the Bethel Seminary faculty in 1993.

Dr. Miles Van Pelt is the Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages, and the Academic Dean at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson Campus.

Dr. Peter Walker is Tutor in Biblical Theology at Wycliffe Hall and lectures in New Testament studies and Biblical Theology.

Dr. Ben Witherington III is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.