

## **The Book of Revelation: Prophetic Only or Apocalyptic as Well?**

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### **Introduction**

Today's church is flooded with all sorts of predictions about what is yet to happen given the present trends. Nearly every day, there is a plethora of claims from pulpits right across the world. Some claim to have discovered a previously hidden truth from the Bible or think that they alone are right while everyone else is wrong. Most prophecies of our times have their roots from prophetic books like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, Malachi or some passages in other portions of scripture that seem to suggest some eschatological sentiments uttered or written by a Biblical character (Dyer 3-24; Yerby 7-9). As a result, thousands are led astray ending up disillusioned while others treat the relevant prophetic books or allusions to prophecy with some level of contempt. But Prophecy is not to be treated with contempt but rather accepted and tested for its validity (I Thessalonians 5: 19-21). The apostle Paul gave a timely caution when he wrote to the Thessalonians that they needed to be alert and yet receptive to the word of prophecy without skepticism (Cara 158). Thus, every child of God must have a healthy interest in what is happening in the world and its implications on prophecy. This, therefore, means that prophetic books like Revelation must be diligently studied today and tomorrow. The Revelation is, as Brooks has rightly observed, full of Christ (13). This paper proffers some highlights on selected aspects relating to probably the only prophetic book in the New Testament.

### **Author, Primary Readership, Location and Date of Authorship**

The book of Revelation, as earlier intimated, is the only prophetic book in the New Testament which was revealed to the apostle John when he was on the Island of Patmos (Berkhof 186). Though the book itself states that John the apostle was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day and led by celestial beings to record what he saw and experienced (Revelation 1:10), God is the actual source of this book (Brooks 14). This book is dubbed "*The revelation of Jesus Christ*" for a good reason because Christ and His redeeming work lies at the core of the entire prophecy (Brooks 13). The celestial beings portrayed as delivering this glorious message could be angels from God representing the most high and thus showed John what was soon to take place. The apostle, being a mere mortal, was

accordingly overwhelmed at the glorious sight and fell down as dead but was instructed to rise to record whatever was yet to transpire (Revelation 1: 11). Thus, internal evidence demonstrates that the apostle John is for a fact the author of this book although some dissenting voices are heard to object based on the genre type, style and elaborate symbolism that marks the book. External evidence that includes the testimony of the Church fathers and their successors point to the fact that John wrote the gospel, letters and the apocalypse. As pointed out, John was in the Spirit when he received this revelation in form of visions of things that were soon to be. In all probability the apostle was banished to the said Island for his faith and in the process was taken up in that mighty spiritual experience. Later, he is said to have returned to Asia Minor and resided at Ephesus the last 25 years of his life (so some claim) where he probably exercised a powerful apostolic Ministry, a much more mature and transformed individual. From a fiery son of thunder, he seemed to have mellowed into a mature caring apostle. Naturally therefore, the primary readerships were the seven churches in Asia Minor that received warning and encouragement from the Lord (Revelation 2-3). But John writes to a wider audience/readership, the Church of the Lord that would eventually read and receive his message. It is worth mentioning that other possible authors like John the presbyter or some other person have been suggested to have actually written the book rather than the apostle. This school of thought's arguments revolve around genre, style, structure and form that the book takes. That said, the prophecy has divine stamp though took quite some considerable time to be accepted as canonical because of its complex message expression, as well as the approximate date of its writing, probably after AD 90 during Domitian's reign (Hale 661; The Zondervan NIV study Bible 1963). Others, however, suggest an earlier date such as during Nero's reign (AD54-68). The exact date is inconclusive.

### **Purpose For Writing The Book**

The primary purpose of this book is to reveal what must soon come to pass. How soon exactly is difficult to state whether during the apostolic era, the church age or over a long period of time. The book communicates divine truth using symbols, signs, visions and at times, literal expressions that carry the divine message relevant for all ages. At first, the book appears confusing and lacks structure or consistent logical arguments compared to those found in the gospel or even the epistles but this is accounted for by the type of genre at play. The seven letters to the churches highlight some probable maladies that had swarmed and affected the once thriving churches (Revelation 2 & 3). For instance, some of the Churches were entertaining heretical tenets, wrong practice or hypocrisy (e.g. Revelation 2:15). The Church at Ephesus is commended for having remained resilient in the face of many years and yet is condemned for having left its initial form of love, a form of incipient declension (Revelation 2:2-7). Each respective Church is given directions on how to recover and/or stay away from trouble, failure to which would attract divine retribution, including annihilation of the

particular Church from the face of the Asia Minor land scape. The book of Revelation is even broader as it reveals the fate of the Churches, the saints or the wicked and righteous alike. For instance, the Revelation highlights the worship of the lamb by the 24 elders (Revelation 4:4-11), the seven seals (6:1-17), the glorious songs of praise to Him that sits on the throne, the martyrs, the tribes, the 144,000, people from every Nation (Revelation 7; 14:1-5), the beast and his mark (13), the abyss, the millennium (Revelation 20) and the final recreation of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:5). All these point to a bright recreated future which will be the chief delight of the saints while the wicked, found wanting and not found written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20: 15). This is a fearful end for those that would persist in their sinful and wicked ways. The book therefore is for both warning and encouraging hope because Jesus is said to be coming soon for His own for whom the lamb was slain before the creation of the world. It talks about the last days and struggle between Christ and Satan with the former ultimately triumphing (Hale 661). John ends the book with a stern warning for those that that would add or deduct from his prophecy while yearning for the imminent return for the lamb. His "*Maranatha*" is a fitting close to a great prophecy (Revelation 22: 20).

### **Characteristic Features of The Book**

The book of Revelation has interesting unique characteristics which it may or may not share with other Old Testament prophecies. It is certainly very different from the epistles and gospels in its style, structure, form and genre. By that token, one needs to take extreme care when interpreting the book since the symbolism littered all over the book may mean different things depending on who is reading or hermeneutic employed (The Zondervan NIV study Bible 1963). To get round this hurdle, one suggestion would be to understand the authorial intent as well as the context in which the writer wrote. Furthermore, the prophecy has some apocalyptic aspects that point to what is yet future, which future may not be easy to infer or determine (African Bible Commentary 1543). Various arguments have been advanced about the true nature of the book, whether it is only prophetic or a combination of both apocalyptic and prophetic or indeed none of these! Writers and authorities like Ray Steadman have written whole books based on what he perceives as to what the Bible is saying from a dispensational perspective. Steadman attempts to prove that the message from across the scripture points to one premillennial return of Christ. Ian Murray or Robert Murray McCheyne are others that equally wrote extensively from a premillennial perspective. A vivid example of Ian Murray's work is *The Puritan Hope* published by the Banner of Truth Trust. Others however, argue from another stand point either Post millennial or Amillennial. Robert Carla is one such example. But there are other perspectives to the book as to how it is interpreted or exegeted. The Preterist for instance insists that all the prophecies in revelation took place in the first century while others hold that some prophecies are yet future. The extensive

use of numbers, symbols and visions certainly set the book apart more so that each of these has a specific meaning in its original context which may be lost to history hence leading to, sometimes, uncertain or wrong conclusions. Being the only fully fledged prophecy in the New Testament, it is difficult why this is so or why more or possibly none of the prophecies were incorporated in the (NT) canon of scripture. That said, the book is linked to the other prophetic books or those that allude to eschatological aspects like Matthew's gospel, the Thessalonian epistles or any other such writing. Admittedly, some aspects of the prophecy are difficult to interpret let alone synchronize with other prophecies. We thank God that the angel told John to write what he saw and thus bequeathed us with an enduring record for both warning and encouragement of the Church.

### **Interpretation of the book**

The book has prophetic genre and therefore demands an appropriate and correct hermeneutic. While the dispensationalist claims to be the most literal on the text unless the passage expressly states or dictates otherwise, others assert that some parts must be interpreted symbolically or literally contingent on how clear or obscure a given passage is. For instance, the *millennium* mentioned in Revelation 20, is that to be interpreted literally or symbolically? If symbolic, then the thousand year period may refer to a mere long period of time but if the literal approach is taken, it means Christ will reign for a literal one thousand year period. Which is which? Schools of thought abound and we dare not delve into the discussions in this short write up. In short, we may safely conclude that the book is to be taken literally as possible unless the text dictates otherwise of course bearing in mind the abounding symbolism littered across the book.

### **The key Message of the Book**

As earlier alluded to, the exact hermeneutic and exegesis of John's prophecy is elusive to come by, at best impossible to really ascertain for sure. Pundits from different schools have made serious attempts but each school's position has some weak points. But what are some of the salient features of the book itself? What does it teach exactly? Given the narrow scope of our enquiry, we settle for few selected points, some of which Blomberg and others proffer in the landmark work *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Firstly, the book (i.e. Revelation) uses a unique genre from the rest of the New Testament writings, hence its difficulty to interpret. Secondly, the book begins on the earth and at times delves into the spiritual realm where visions, pictures and symbols come in to play. Thus, to properly appreciate this book, one needs a wide and deep knowledge of the other prophetic books in the Old Testament as well as the prophetic/apocalyptic genre. Thirdly, the prophecy is not a logical chronological argument like other writings in say, John's gospel, Pauline or Johannine epistles. While the epistles are relatively easy to logically follow through, Revelation stands in its own class.

Given the above, the enquirer into the secrets of this prophecy must bear in mind but remain as objective, literal and inquisitive where possible. As to its message, the book may be said to be "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*" or "*The Revelation of John*" as some have preferred. This author prefers the former rather than the latter because Jesus is the primary focus of this book. Jesus is said to be the one that was slain before the foundation of the world as a lamb to redeem the elect. Further, Jesus is said to be the alpha and the omega, one with divine power and pre-existed. He came into the world, lived and was crucified, rising on the Lord's day (Revelation 1:10). Thus, in the first few chapters, a brief narrative of what transpired when John encountered the Angel of the Lord and then reveals seven summary epistles or letters directed to the Churches with respective charges and warning. In some cases, a commendation is given but it would appear that the Churches did not heed to the Christ's warnings and today have been obliterated from the face of the Asia Minor landscape, where Islam has firmly planted its feet. As the apostle John glides through the spiritual realms, he sees many depictions of how God in Christ has redeemed a people for himself, some of whom are disembodied looking forward to the resurrection. The prophecy points out that there is battle between good and evil with Christ triumphing in the end while the Devil and his cohorts or agents are cast into the lake of fire. There is mention of the nations, the child, the beast and his mark (666) as well as a regeneration of sorts in Revelation 21 & 22. The book ends with a cry and longing to have Jesus return. Though the over view may sound easy and straight forward, there are many different detours, schools of thought about how best to view and interpret this book. That said, Jesus is depicted as the triumphant lamb that becomes the King the worshiped in the entire universe. In addition, from the Revelation, we may note that holiness and persistence is called upon to be the characteristic mark of the believers in the midst of trouble such as the *Armageddon* or when people refuse to get the mark of the Beast paying dearly with their lives. Another aspect that comes out clearly is that the wicked will not escape God's righteous judgement as some are wont to believe and hold in these degenerate latter days. Books are in place that record every detail (of events or one's life) and will have to be opened on the last day, whether the white throne judgement and/or the final judgement as some would argue. A question that begs answering is whether the saints will be judged and on what basis? Reading from Revelation 20, it would appear that the final Judgement will be based on works done in this life. If that be the case, where does justification by faith stand? This and many other sound questions come to the fore demanding a level of consistency and logic. The Bible student is urged to prayerfully read the book, seeking light from above. A second suggestion is that the student must read a wide variety of works by the saints gone before to compare with what they will have come out with during their exclusive meditative Bible reading (before reverting to the said commentaries). William E Cox and Robert Carla say the Rapture to take place is neither secret, pre or post millennial. Rather, it shall be public and at the last day as I Thessalonians states. Michael J Svingel on the other hand asserts that the secret rapture is actual, premillennial with a millennial literal physical reign of Christ on the earth. Given

these strong positions, what should warm the saints; is that Jesus lives forever to intercede for the saint and the object of their first desire here below or what? In eternity, the saints' chief occupation will be to worship God forever! This point alone knocks out the accidental presence of the wicked in the city of God. The book is surely worth repeated & meditative reading, treasuring and frequently musing over.

### **Perceived Challenges in the Book**

Given the complex nature and genre of the prophecy, it is hardly surprising that it attracts not a few queries. The books' structure, style or form all point away from the apostle John, for if he was the same one that wrote the gospel and epistles, something within the text would have pointed to him. Additionally, the book directly claims that John wrote the book which is very unlike the apostle John's way of writing. He never mentions or directly identifies himself as the author of any of his other books, why this book being the exception? While the argument against John the apostle's authorship of the epistles based on his perceived conflicting character, the argument on Revelation is the style of writing. Another challenge with this book is its apparent disjoint nature again very different from other Johannine writings. The heretics in the second century loved this book thus suggesting that it was a second century work, therefore, not a product from the apostle John. Finally, there is considerable debate whether the book is apocalyptic or prophetic, given its genre and content. These and other considerations have generated perceived challenges around this book leading to some doubting its canonicity. This also gives currency to the theory that another wrote the book in a later century.

### **Take home Lessons Hewn from the Book**

The book of revelation is, in many senses, an interesting book. Its genre is very different from the rest of the New Testament literature and yet an essential part of the New covenant. It is a book requiring more study and familiarization than presently receives. This revelation is therefore teeming with many lessons as we shall attempt to highlight below:

1. The Revelation is the only prophetic book in the New Testament canon. Other books like Thessalonians or Matthew have prophetic aspects or portions but none is to the same degree as this book.
2. Being prophetic, the book is certainly of a different genre, form and structure therefore demanding a relatively different hermeneutic from the rest.
3. People interpret the book differently from the literal to dispensational hermeneutics contingent on one's eschatological leaning.

4. The book makes extensive use of symbols, numbers and visions to communicate its message. For instance, some have suggested that there are seven prophecies, seals, churches, trumpets and bowls etc. (Berkhof 187).
5. Divine warnings must be seriously heeded. The warnings to the seven churches went unresponded to and today, nearly all those churches have been wiped out from the face of the earth. It is possible to be active, have a good reputation and do many impressive things and yet be rotten to the core (Revelation 3:17).
6. The book uses the number seven on several occasions to signify completeness. Examples include the seven churches, seals, bowls or visions. Symbolism is very important and needs to be properly understood.
7. Revelation is both Prophecy and apocalyptic in some sense (Berkhof 187). This is because it carries aspects of both genre though largely prophetic in nature and message. A distinction between these is given in the ensuing point.
8. Prophecy looks at the past and present but an apocalypse looks at the future. Some further state that apocalysm has some fearful aspects of what will or might happen in case a particular condition is not met.
9. Interpretation of Revelations varies depending on one's leaning. The Preterist views prophecy in Revelation has having already taken place/fulfilled in the first century. Then there is the premillennial, post millennial and Amillennial eschatological perspectives (Berkhof 192; Hale 661; Ryle {Practical religion} 280-321; Cox 1-6; Mahan 16-18). The dispensational hermeneutics claims to be the most literal and correct mode of exegetical interpretation of prophecy (Omondi 8). This is debatable. Other schools of thought object offering alternative hermeneutical and exegetical approaches.
10. The book of Revelation houses seven epistles or letters to churches. Though short and highly summarised, the said letters are exceedingly loaded.
11. The Revelation is understood by some to be representing what is happening in the spiritual realm or happening in the natural but viewed from the spiritual heavenly perspective. An example to this effect is what we read from Revelation 1:10,11.
12. The book shows Satan as the ancient serpent while Babylon is interpreted as Rome or actual Babylon (though the latter is most unlikely so some argue). The Revelation cites figures or places from the Old Testament like Jezebel to communicate a message.

13. Revelation is very different from other writings of John, which itself has generated speculation as to whether the apostle John actually wrote the book (Africa Bible Commentary 1543).

14. The book is thought to have been written last of the all the aged apostle's writings though its genre is prophetic unlike the other writings.

We may safely assert that they who ignore or side step this book do much injustice to themselves because much can be learnt from this rich prophecy.

## **Conclusion**

The Revelation stands as a monument and beacon of the past, present and future. Some aspects have been fulfilled while others are yet to be. Though interpretation modes vary, the book definitely has an important message for the Church today. The saint is encouraged to be inquisitive enough to explore the book and yet at the same time not fall into the pitfall interpreting every symbolism, sign or event with the wrong hermeneutic (Africa Bible Commentary 1543). Literalism through out the book or over spiritualizing everything are opposite extremes to watch out for. The book is not only prophetic but apocalyptic in nature as well, hence relevant to the present day.

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