

**Sermon**  
**Therfield Chapel**  
**27<sup>th</sup> July 2008 PM Service**  
**Title: Interpreting Apocalyptic Biblical Literature**  
**Alternative Title: Making Sense of the Book of Revelation**

The letters to the seven churches – that we’ve cover so far - form the first and relatively straightforward section of the Book of Revelation

But beyond them things get much more complicated and strange

And so I thought it useful to put together some thoughts about how we should approach the remainder of the book

But let me say at the outset that all I can do is to offer a few thoughts on how we should view the book

Don’t expect to go away tonight feeling that all the mysteries in the book have been demystified, because you’ll be disappointed!

During the past couple of months on several occasions whilst in conversation with other Christian leaders I’ve brought up the fact that I’m teaching from the Book of Revelation

And the usual reaction is something like: “Rather you than me”

Or “I haven’t got a clue what that book’s all about”

The Book of Revelation congers up all sorts of amazing ideas and images - the Battle of Armageddon, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the hideous Beast whose number is 666; angels; trumpets, dragons, a lake of fire and bottomless pits

It packed full of bizarre symbols and frightening predictions

And so compared with the rest of the New Testament, upon opening the Book we almost feel that we’re “entering a foreign country”<sup>1</sup>

Now there’s no doubt that we’re dealing with a difficult book to interpret and apply to our situation today

But I personally feel that the book has been made more difficult than it should be by wild and fanciful interpretations which became prominent during the twentieth century

Some commentators have seen the book as a kind of route a map to the end of the world – the historical interpretation

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<sup>1</sup> Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth p205.

Others have thought that the book's events began to unfold with the rebirth of Israel in 1948, whilst others think they are yet to unfold – both of these positions comes under what's known as the futuristic interpretation

One commentator I came across says that there are two distinct types of Christians:

Firstly, those who can't get into the book of Revelation – perhaps they're even frightened of it

And

Secondly, those who can't get out of it – people almost obsessed by wild and fanciful interpretations and speculations<sup>2</sup>

The commentator William Barclay says that the book has become a playground for religious eccentrics<sup>3</sup> and you can't help but think that to some extent he's right

So what I want to do tonight is to try to set out what we do know about the book and try to offer some pointers to interpreting it

What I'm not going to be do is to set out the various of interpretations of the book in detail

I don't have the time to do that – I can recommend a book if you're interested

But what I do want to do is to consider the book primarily in its context of the first century – in other words I want to think about what meaning the book had for those who first read it in the first century (around AD 96)

Like all books of the Bible, only when we have established what it meant to them – to its recipients - can we think responsibly about its relevance to us today

I think that so often misunderstanding of the book is the result of misconceiving the kind of book that it is<sup>4</sup> - and so tonight I want to begin by thinking about the kind of book it is

The Book of Revelation was written to ordinary people – Christian people but ordinary people<sup>5</sup>

That's very important to remember

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<sup>2</sup> David Pawson, Teaching Talk on The Book of Revelation

<sup>3</sup> The Daily Study Bible, The Revelation of John, Volume 1, p1.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation, P1.

<sup>5</sup> David Pawson – I am indebted to Pawson for the flow of this argument

That means that it wasn't written for scholars in university departments for them to write academic papers about in The Journal of Biblical Theology about who they thought the beast was and when he would emerge

No, it was written with a very practical purpose in mind

That purpose was to encourage and strengthen people who were about to face terrible suffering for their loyalty to Jesus

And since we're not suffering for our faith we have to face that fact that we probably can't appreciate the book as much as if we were

During times - down through the centuries - when the church has suffered terribly for her faith, this book has been rediscovered and devoured

People have found that it provides wonderful comfort and advice when things get really hot

In one sense we can say that suffering is the key to understanding the book

And that means that we can be sure that it doesn't exist to satisfy our intellectual curiosity about what will happen in the future

In other words it's not written "so that we can [work out] what time it is on God's secret clock"<sup>6</sup> and then be in the know and feel that we're very important because we have that knowledge

Nor was it written only to be relevant only to believers living in the Twentieth Century and beyond as some suggest

Contemporary people who think that only demonstrate the human tendency to think that our era is the one that counts – nowcentric people we might call them (to coin a phrase)

No, it was intended to mean something that the book's readers would have understood it to mean – not as a puzzle waiting to be unpacked 2000 years later

First and foremost it was written to help believers find hope despite their present lot in life

And so we need to think about the first century context into which it was written

Now I want you to imagine that you are a Christian living in the Roman Empire towards the end of the first century

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

You probably would belong to a small group of believers who are for the most part poor and politically powerless

You would be on the fringe of society – by and large not welcome in the main stream

Now for us living in the twenty first century, we're used to living in an era that generally supports a pluralistic view of the life

In other words, we have a political system that allows people to be different – to live and let live; different strokes for different folks we might say

So we can be different as Christians and get away with it

But for most of history and still for much of the world today that is not the case

And for those believers living under the watchful eye of Rome, life wasn't straightforward

Spanning such a large area of the known world, the Roman Empire knew that it had to accept the reality of many different tribes and religions and races; it couldn't turn everyone into a good, loyal Roman citizen overnight

So in one sense Rome was forced to accept a plural world

But on the other hand it was also worried about people having other loyalties and so being disloyal to the Emperor and his Empire

Consequently it sought to find ways of integrating a highly diverse Empire by instituting some common practices and loyalties

And they set about doing two things:

First, they built temples to include all the different gods in the same place of worship

These were temples where all the Empire's various gods could be placed together and worshipped together and were called pantheons – meaning many gods

The largest pantheon was built in Rome in the year 27BC

It was destroyed within one hundred years but rebuilt by the Emperor Hadrian (the one who built the Wall in Northumberland) and the rebuild version was very similar in size to The Royal Albert Hall

Interestingly, when the Romans conquered Israel and met with the Jewish leaders, they asked them to provide them with one of their gods to put in the Pantheon

This raised two problems

Firstly, the Jews said, “we don’t have any statues because we’re not allowed to have a graven image of our God - and in any case our God is invisible”

The second problem was that they said, “Our God is the only true God. There is no one beside him and so even if we had an image of Him we could never give him to you

In any case putting him alongside other gods would put them on a par with Him, something ridiculous and blasphemous”

In the event, the Jews were given an exemption from the Pantheon worship for the Romans registered them as atheists because in their minds they had no god or gods

The second way that the Romans tried to unite all the faiths in their Empire was to invent a new god that they could all worship

This god would be higher than the rest.

And what they did was to turn the Roman Caesar into a god.

The idea of the Caesar being divine evolved slowly but came to a head to coincide with the writing of the Book of Revelation

The first Roman leader to claim divinity was Julius Caesar who was born around 100 BC – after he’d encountered the concept of divine kings whilst in Egypt

Later Caesar Augustus had prestigious temples built all around the Empire to facilitate the worship of the Emperor

Now there were some subjects of the Empire who hated the Romans and grudgingly complied with their edicts – the Jews being one obvious example

But the people of Asia Minor - where the seven churches were located - were keen and loyal subjects

They saw it as a privilege to be part of the great Roman Empire and consequently they set about building temples for Caesar worship all over the place

And then along came Caesar Domitian

Domitian took Caesar worship to its final phase by called himself “Lord and God” and even set an annual day aside when all the peoples of the Empire were to attend the temple to worship him

Each citizen of the Empire – supervised by the local magistrate – was required by law to take a pinch of incense, throw it into the fire burning on the alter and proclaim Domitian as Lord and God

Now you'll remember that Chapter One of the Book of Revelation finds John on the Island of Patmos and it tells us that on the Lord's Day he was in the Spirit

Importantly, it seems that John was not referring to the Sabbath when he speaks of the Lord's Day- but to the day designated by the Caesar when all the peoples of the Empire were to appear to in the temple to make their claim of loyalty to him and proclaim him as their god

So in this case the, Lord's Day was Caesar's day – he was the lord in question (the Greek supports that view)

So it seems that the Lord Jesus gave John his vision on that day to set the context for the whole book

The vision contained in the Book of Revelation was in response to the testing times that were ahead – testing that would centre around who the Christians would call Lord

Not only were the Christians unwilling to participate in the Pantheon ceremonies but for them the titles that Domitian claimed for himself were simply blasphemous

They were titles that belonged to God alone

But refusing to claim that Caesar was Lord was seen as an act of gross disloyalty and ingratitude – it was treason against the Empire and carried a mandatory death sentence

So it was against that background that the Book of Revelation was written

### **Imagery and Symbols in The Book of Revelation**

Now before we think a little more about the historical context to the book, let me take a detour – and offer you a few thoughts about the literary style of the Book of Revelation

To state the obvious, the writings of the Bible come in various forms – what we call genre

Some people call the Bible a library – a collection of quite different books

Some books are poetry or song like the Psalms; some are wisdom books like Proverbs; some are historical narratives like Genesis or Acts; some are letters like Romans or the Letters to Timothy

All the Bible is the inspired word of God but it's not all written in the same format

And the literary form that we find in the Book of Revelation is mostly what we call apocalyptic

There's some epistle – (or letter) – and some prophecy but the main style is apocalyptic

In common speech we use the word apocalypse to describe an event of doom and disaster – almost end of the world Armageddon stuff

I'm interested in Vietnam War films and back at The Manse I have a copy of Apocalypse Now which seeks to portray what it sees as the devastation that American forces wreaked on Vietnam

But in the Bible an apocalypse is a prophetic disclosure or the unveiling of something

Something that couldn't be seen before has the curtain pulled away and it is now revealed – in the case of the book of revelation what is revealed is who is really in charge of history – who really has power and directs how it will all end

We live in the present – we have access to the present and the past which is recorded in our memories and in our history books

But the Book of Revelation allows us to look ahead and above

Ahead – because it allows us to see into the future

And above – because it allows us a glimpse into heaven

So in the future we see the triumph of God and the doom of Satan and all who live in rebellion against God's rule

But in seeing into heaven we see how events in heaven can affect things on earth – perhaps something we rarely give much thought to

I starting to think that lots of things that happen on earth are the consequences of events in heaven

But let me make seven comments about apocalyptic literature in the Bible and Revelation in particular

(1) Its Biblical origin can be found in the Old Testament prophetic literature – there are apocalyptic elements to the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and sections of Isaiah.

(2) Apocalyptic literature is largely concerned with pronouncing judgement and salvation during times when God's people are in open rebellion against Him or in other cases when they're being persecuted by their enemies

(3) A reoccurring and central theme to apocalyptic literature is an anticipation of a time when God will intervene in history and either turn things around or bring history to a triumphant climax

(4) Unlike the prophets who were mostly given words to write down by God, the writers of apocalyptic literature were called upon by God to write down what they saw:

## Chapter 1

<sup>10</sup>On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,

<sup>11</sup>which said: "**Write on a scroll what you see** and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

(5) Apocalyptic literature is usually presented as dreams and visions – the language is often cryptic and mysterious with hidden meanings and the use of special numbers.

It was written in a kind of code known only to the insiders so that their enemies would not be able to decipher God's plans

(6) For the most part the prophetic writers in the OT and the Lord Jesus himself used real imagery as teaching tools – for example the Lord used images such as salt and light and coins and sheep

But the Book of Revelation - for the most part - uses fantasy images rather than real ones – things that might have originated in Lord of the Rings like a beast with seven heads and a woman clothed with the sun

Lots of the images found in the Book of Revelation are borrowed from the Old Testament or from other apocalyptic literature written during the previous 300 years.

The images that we find though are not simple. They are often fluid rather than static – for example, The Lion is also a Lamb; there are two women – one is good and the other is the great prostitute Babylon

There are some images that are clearly identified by John – and when this occurs we must take these images as the starting point for our interpretation

Eg The Son of Man is Christ; The Great Dragon is Satan and The Harlot is the Great City which is Rome; the incense is the prayers of the saints

Other images are obvious: the Lake of fire is hell; the Great White Throne is the place of judgement; the books that are opened are God's records kept on every detail of our lives

Then there are some symbols paralleled elsewhere in the Bible – the Tree of Life; the Morning Star; the Rod of Iron and the Four Horsemen we find in Ezekiel

And finally there are some symbols that are not obvious – the number 666; the white stone etc

(7) Very importantly – I think that the visions in the Book of Revelation should not be taken as a orderly chronology of coming events but should be seen as parables which provide lessons about who really controls history and how God's people are to view and respond to events that happen – all the visions centre around these controlling ideas

And we'll be looking at each vision over the next 18 weeks or so

Just a few pointers – not exhaustive by any means – have a copy of the sermon if you want one

### **An Appeal to the Imagination**

Images can powerful

We often use images to convey something about ourselves that we want others to see or hear

Images impact the imagination and it's probably true to say that our lives are shaped more by our imaginations than almost anything else – perhaps much more than by rational argument and intellectual conviction

During the 19 Century the British nation promoted an image of itself that it was proud of and wanted others in other countries to admire and even envy

Britishness was associated with a vast Empire, successful industrialisation, the exploring pioneer spirit, military prowess, pompous classical architecture, lots of Union Jacks waving proudly in the breeze and songs sung like 'Land of Hope and Glory' and 'Rule Britannia'

My grandparents were keyed into this view of what it meant to be British – it was one factor that defined their identity

A projected image can be powerful – as it was on them

The Christians living in the Roman world would have been familiar with imagery – and it was Roman imagery

Roman architecture; Roman military symbols, statues of Rome's heroes; Roman money with Caesar's inscription

Brilliantly constructed aqueducts and roads and amphitheatres littered the empire

The public holidays were instituted by Rome; the soldiers were Roman soldiers; the festivals and ceremonies were Roman

The whole of society was set up to point to the triumph and power of Imperial Rome

And there's no doubt that Rome's presence conveyed in all these forms would have impacted upon the imagination of all its citizen; through its symbols Rome defined the world – how it worked and who called the shots

In other words, Rome was telling a story about itself, about who was boss

Rome was powerful, it was self-assured, it dominated the whole horizon

It had conquered virtually all that was worth conquering with its seemingly undefeatable army

Rome was the past, the present and it would be the future it boldly asserted each day

Rome named itself 'The Eternal City'; history had reached its climax – it couldn't be improved upon

Even for us living in Therfield or Royston we only have to drive for two minutes to the A10 to see the lasting legacy of their handiwork, for they built it

And now the small Christian communities in the empire find themselves on the wrong-side of their rulers

On the wrong side of the mighty Roman Empire; it was a scary place to be

The mind and imagination of your average Christian would be saturated with images and symbols and stories of Rome – its grandeur and power

And these Christians living during the Roman Empire may well have believed its pompous pronouncements about history having reached its destiny

They were being tempted to deny their Lord and if they refused they and their families literally faced being thrown to the lions or being dipped in melted wax and set on fire whilst the crowds cheered

And it was into that situation that The Revelation of Jesus Christ comes

The Book of Revelation dares the Christians of the day to imagine a different kind of world

That's what we means by an apocalypse – it's the lifting of a curtain on a whole new kingdom – a whole different way of imagining how the world works

It's an appeal to the Christians to get Rome into perspective and to help them remain faithful

It's the ultimate denial of the Roman narrative of reality and a powerful reminder of the Christian narrative

And so reading and believing the Book of Revelation for these Christians involved much more than hypothesizing about what it all meant – it was actually a matter of life and death - it was a preparation for death

That's why David Pawson calls the book, “a manual for martyrs”

As we will see next week in Chapter 4, when the Apostle John goes through the door into heaven he is shown a new and remarkable view of reality

No longer are there the boastful symbols of Roman power and splendour – for here we see the lasting symbols of an eternal kingdom to which the Christians belong

No longer is Caesar on the throne and being worshipped, but there is a Lamb being worshipped on the eternal throne of heaven and his robe has been dipped in blood – this is no other than the glorified Man of Calvary

It is he who is ultimately the director of history; for power is not with Rome it is with him – he is the First and the Last; who was and is and is to come

For Jesus holds the scroll of history – the future is in his hands

And in this real world – not in the fantasy work of Rome - the story of reality is not about armies, not about power, wars and control – it's a whole different story

Now we find that the agenda is a love story – the romance of the ages

That through the shedding of the life of the Lord Jesus on the cross He has bought men and women out from the world from every tongue, tribe and nation to be his bride

And in this vision we soon find that it is in the hands of the Lord Jesus himself to determine to fate of Rome - and that why by Revelation Chapter 18 we see the exposure of its myths and the destruction of the Empire as Christ finds her corrupt and barbaric and rotten to the core

Right at the heart of the book of Revelation we find this verse:

“This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rev 14:12

So knowing the future and knowing who is in control of their destiny, the Christians are called to be faithful

Their loyalty was to be tested and they were called to be found faithful even unto death

In fact in the book we come across the martyrs

The word in the Greek for martyr is actually witness – it doesn't necessary mean to die

But for them to be a witness to Christ and refuse to say that Caesar was Lord meant dying

And that's why when we think of the word martyr we think of dying for Christ

They were called to endure – a passive thing

But also they were called to overcome and the book is full of incentives to the ones who do

### **Contemporary Relevance of the Book of Revelation**

Two points

(1) According to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary<sup>8</sup> in the United States there were around 171,000 Christian martyrs in 2007

Average Christian martyrs per year 1800 2,500; 1900 34,400; 1970 377,000; 2000 160,000; 2007 173,000; 2025 210,000 (predicted)

I thought I would include that just in case we thought that the being a Christian no longer can result in martyrdom in the modern world

For many of these Christians – living in our era - the Book of Revelation is a great source of comfort and hope

In fact it's the most widely read Book of the Bible in China (according to one commentator who knows the country)

As a manual for martyrs it is still very much in demand

(2) In our society there's not currently any serious danger that we will be killed for our beliefs, but there is a danger that the Book of Revelation helps us identify and overcome

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/IBMR2007.pdf>

For the Book of Revelation helps us avoid being ‘captured’ or ‘seduced’ by the worldview of the times

Our society tells us a story all the time – the postmodern story

It’s founded on the idea the all human beings should be allowed to construct their own version of reality, for there is no truth that applies to everyone

And so all lifestyles are equally valid; all religions are equally valid

There is no truth – except that decided upon by me and for me

And this relativistic view of the world is seen as so well-established that its outworking is being enshrined in law after law in the Western World

Ironically for a worldview that is supposedly committed to freedom and liberty, it’s highly intolerant of dissenters

And we as Christians can expect to come under increasing pressure to accept this worldview and play by its rules

And when we do – feel that pressure - we must be careful to look at our society in the light of the Book of Revelation

For our hope does not rest with a liberal democratic society based on the rule of law, equal opportunities and material prosperity – beneficial and right though these things may be in their place

For any attempt to rebuild Eden without the Creator of the original Eden is doomed to fail

And so we need to constantly assess which ideas are shaping us

The Book of Revelation reminds us of true reality – of God’s narrative - rather than the fantasy one we see screened each day on our society

It reminds us that man is the not the centre of reality; the Lord Jesus is – the One who is worthy of our worship

That history is in the final instance not our story; it is God’s story

So still today the Book of Revelation, like it did with the Roman world, unmask the idols of the times

It exposes the false idolatries of the day

And it helps equip us to resist and challenge the false constructions of reality that announce one particular way of perceiving the world as the true

And it lifts the curtain on who has ultimate power in and over this world

To put it another way, the Book of Revelation is designed to, “purge and refurbish the Christian imagination”<sup>9</sup>

For in the end it is the Lord Jesus whose word it is that ultimately matters

His words and plans will never pass away – and if necessary they are worth dying for as we witness to them for they will outlast all others

And we must make sure that we keep close to him and not buckle under pressure to accept any words and plans that conflict with his

That’s the message of the book of Revelation

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Bauckham, p159.