

HOW TO PREACH THROUGH REVELATION

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SYNOPSIS

Revelation was one of the few books that John Calvin never preached on. I suspect that Calvin like many preachers felt the genre of Revelation was too foreign, the structure too difficult and the message too convoluted to confidently preach. How then should we preach Revelation? How can we begin to digest its message if we fail to understand the forms it comes in? Moreover, we need to understand the structure of the book to enable us to interpret it correctly.

Thus in this essay, I will argue that an understanding of genre and structure are essential to the interpretative approach we adopt. In appreciating the significance of the apocalyptic genre and its symbolic forms as well as the literary structural markers of an '*opening in heaven*' are particularly important in understanding the Book of Revelation. Accordingly, this essay supports a modified idealist position as the scheme that best enables us to hear the message of this book. For John is careful to show us that things are not as they seem, because although the Lamb and his followers are slain and apparently defeated, we are assured the Lamb and the Saints will be victorious when he comes again. Consequently, the Asian Churches should understand that this calls for patient endurance on the part of the Saints.

Introduction

The book of Revelation in the mind of many is the Rubik's cube of the N.T. On the one hand it is curiously attractive and on the other, infuriating in its capacity to confound and frustrate those who would seek to understand its message. Like the Rubik's cube, Revelation is often toyed with only to be put aside and never pursued because of its complex imagery that inevitably leads to multifarious interpretations. In addition to this, the popularisation of dispensational hermeneutics and the sensational interpretations of various aspects of Revelation can at a bare minimum fill one with trepidation.

Moreover, it is not coincidental that a significant portion of those who preach and teach on the book of Revelation (particularly at the popular level) are dispensational in their theology and/or take a futurist (sometimes modified) view of Revelation. This raises the question of why non dispensational preachers seem more reticent than their futurist counterparts to expound the message of Revelation to their congregations. Furthermore, it seems at the anecdotal level, that some of that reticence is predicated upon the non dispensationalists ability to understand the book and its message. Personally, I believe there is a certain congruity in one's confidence in their understanding of the structure of Revelation and ones willingness to preach the book. As a consequence, there seems to be four issues that must be worked through, the date, the genre, the structure and the various interpretative approaches. However, in my opinion the latter two issues seem to be of greater importance in shaping how one might preach on the book of Revelation.

The Date Of Revelation

The issue of dating is such that there are only two dates that are championed by most scholars (68-9 or 96).¹ The earlier date is less than persuasive because it rests entirely upon internal evidence based on literal readings and computations.² For this reason the later date is to be preferred since it has both external and internal support.³ Moreover, it should be said that the dating of Revelation is not highly significant although a later date would rule out a preterist approach to the book.

¹ Class notes on the book of Revelation: W. Dumbrell, *Summary of Lectures on Revelation* (PTC, 2003) 1. See also W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 14-15. However, for a comprehensive evaluation of the arguments see G.K Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 4-27.

² Generally there are three internal arguments harnessed in support of this position. The first assumes a literal reading of Rev 11 which pictures the temple as still standing and a literal rendering of Rev 11:8 that identifies Babylon or the 'great city' as Jerusalem which in my view seems incompatible with the consistent symbolism of Revelation. A third argument is the reference to the seven Kings of Rev 17:9-11 as an historical marker that places Revelation in the time just after Nero (the reign of Galba). Again, though this might be possible, the assumptions required are many including a literal computation of a symbolic figure that leads to a high degree of uncertainty. Consequently positive evidence for an early date is inconclusive and in my opinion unconvincing.

³ Contrastingly, the later date of 95-96 has the external evidence of Irenaeus who assigns Revelation to the end of the Domitian reign in a time of persecution. Though widespread persecution under the Domitian reign seems to many, to be an exaggeration of the evidence. None the less, there are indications that the traditional understanding of Christian persecution during this time is credible. See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 4-27.

The Genre And Purpose Of Revelation

Revelation is classified in the literary genre of apocalyptic. Apocalyptic is different from prophesy in that the prophets main focus was the concerns of the nation whereas the apocalyptic concern is international, although the differences are not as many as some assume.⁴ However, one important difference is the greater usage of symbolism in apocalyptic writing (particularly Revelation) of which there is several biblical examples like the books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. Hughes, commenting on the necessity of symbolism in the apocalyptic genre states, “*There is a need for symbolism because the reality of the scenes revealed and recorded is transcendental in character. Vistas of eternity and infinity cannot be fully described by our human language which is finite and bound by time.*”⁵

Appreciating how symbolism functions in Revelation allows for, indeed demands a non literal interpretation of numbers, places and phrases. This is an important point since it is contra the dispensational hermeneutic of literalism. That is, a hermeneutical commitment to interpret the numbers and references of Revelation in a non symbolic fashion, of which the 1000 years of Rev 20:1-6 is a classic example.⁶ Despite this, Beale argues that Revelation is so concerned with the source and origin of revelation that we are forced to see our experiences from a heavenly perspective, rather than an earthly one.⁷ Consequently, all of this steers us away from the dispensational hermeneutic of literalism and prepares us to grapple with the various symbols and their parabolic function of encouraging and exhorting the readers in their current circumstances. However, though the forms of Revelation are apocalyptic its purpose is certainly prophetic, in that it is particularly concerned with history and how God is fulfilling his Old Testament promises of Redemption in the coming of Jesus Christ. Such prophetic anticipation manifests itself climactically at the Parousia when the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of God and of his Christ.⁸

The genre of Revelation is further complicated because although we can see the form of revelation is apocalyptic, and its purpose is prophetic, it is none the less, still an epistle.⁹ That is, John wrote to a specific audience, to a specific historical situation where the Asian churches were in danger of misunderstanding their experiences and drawing the wrong conclusions concerning their internal and external conflicts. As E.W Wall notes, “*Revelation is written to interpret the collision of the sacred and the profane, when the faithful must own all the more their conviction that God has triumphed and that their devotion is not in vain.*”¹⁰ In other words, they needed to be reminded that things are not as they seem; therefore, they are reminded to patiently endure until the Kingdom of the world becomes the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ.¹¹

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 37.

⁵ P.E. Hughes, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990) 8.

⁶ A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible And The Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979)194-222. Hoekema gives a comprehensive critique of the dispensational hermeneutic of literalism and Revelation.

⁷ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 38.

⁸ Revelation 11:15.

⁹ E.W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBC: Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991) 14-25.

¹⁰ E.W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBC: Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991) 39.

The Structure Of The Book

There are a plethora of suggestions concerning the structure of the book of Revelation most of which are concerned with the theme of seven.¹² It is my belief that an understanding of the structure is pivotal in coming to grips with how we should interpret this book (as well as our willingness to preach it). A good example of the importance and influence of structure determining interpretation is seen in the belief that Revelation 1:19 is the interpretative key to unlock the following chapters of Revelation.¹³

Consequently, my own structural analysis of the book provides the basis of how I will understand the various visions and scenes contained within it. Thus my own belief is that the repetition of the literary structural marker an 'Opening in Heaven' in Revelation 4:1; 11:19; 15:5 and 19:11 introduces us to the beginning of each new vision as well as its parameters.¹⁴ Moreover, just as each vision begins with John looking into heaven, similarly each vision ends with the judgement of unbelief and the praise of the Saints (Rev 11:15-18; 15:1-5; 19:1-10 and the last vision of 19:11-22:21 is of the final things).¹⁵

These visionary structural markers are helpful in that they enable us to understand each vision as a repeated sweep of the last days, only from different perspectives and with increasing severity concerning judgement.¹⁶ Visions 2-4 are concerned with the period of time that spans from the first to the second coming.¹⁷ And in each vision the opening in heaven allows the readers to see things from the heavenly perspective, whilst the reader also notes that each vision climaxes when the kingdom purposes have reached their fulfilment (that is, the judgement of unbelief and salvation for the Saints). However, we note that the first vision (chp 1-3) is concerned entirely with the present situation of the Asians and similarly the last vision (19:5-22:21) is concerned entirely with the final judgement and consummation.

Consequently, the shape of Revelation is that of five visions. The first vision takes in 'what he has seen and what is now' that is, the historical situation of the Asian Churches and the exhortation to over come (1-3). And the last

¹¹ The theme of patient endurance appears frequently in Revelation 1:9; 2:19,25; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12-13 etc.

¹² V.S. Poythress, *The Returning King* (New Jersey: PR Publishing, 2000) 57-66. Poythress has many examples of possible structures, mostly ordered around the theme of seven, yet does not consider the literary marker heaven was open[ed] in 4:1; 11:19; 15:5; 19:11 as a possible clue for a structural analysis.

¹³ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 161. Beale outlines the chronological approach to 1:19, "Things that you have seen" refers to chp 1; "Things that are" refers to chp 2-3; "Things to take place after these things" refers to chp 4-22. See also dispensational writer W.W. Wiersbe, *Be Victorious* (Colorado: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1985) 21.

¹⁴ Rev 4:1 John saw a "...door standing open in heaven" and in 11:19 he saw "God's temple in heaven was opened" and again in 15:5 he looked and "heaven the temple... was opened" and then finally the last vision in 19:11 we read "I saw heaven standing open."

¹⁵ The second Vision ends in Rev 11:16-17 with praise, "we give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty...because... you have begun to reign." 11:18 "The time has come for judging.." Again the third vision ends in Rev 15:2-3 with praise, "...and the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb, Great and Marvellous are your deeds.." and with judgement in 15:1,4 "because with them God's wrath is completed... all the nations come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." Again Vision 4 concludes with praise and judgement in 19:1-10, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgements."

¹⁶ W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 16-23. Though Hendriksen argues for a sevenfold division of Revelation his argument that parallel ages are in view is persuasive.

¹⁷ The boundary of visions 2-4 can be seen above in footnote 15.

four visions concern 'what must take place' (4-22) that is, each one is introduced by the literary marker 'Opening in Heaven'. Each vision is a parallel vision of this age from differing perspectives so that the Asian Christians might understand that things are not as they seem.¹⁸ Moreover, Vision 2 describes God's sovereignty over a world where the Saints are persecuted and unbelievers despite warnings and witness refuse to repent and worship the Lord. Vision 3 is an explanation of how and why the Saints are persecuted. Vision 4 is an explanation of how and why the world remains unrepentant despite the witness and warnings. Vision 5 is a description of the ultimate victory of God through the judgement of unbelief and the vindication of the Lamb and his followers.

Understanding the structure of the book in this way gives clear divisions to the text and encourages the idea of preaching Revelation in larger sections. For example, you could easily preach through the book in eight weeks. That is a sermon for vision 3 and 4 whilst breaking up vision 1 (intro to Revelation 1 and the situation in Asia 2-3) vision 2 (seals 4-7 and the trumpets 8-11) and vision 5 into two separate sermons each (judgement and millennium 19-20 and the new creation 21-22). Moreover, its message remains the same, it is an encouragement to believers that things are not as they seem, and though it looks at times that Satan is winning the war, we are reminded to patiently endure because the Kingdom of the world will become the Kingdom of our God and his Christ.¹⁹

¹⁸ My understanding of the literary structure of five visions is as follows:

VISION 1 Describes the situation of the Churches enduring difficult times. [chp 1-3]

Scene 1 Of Christ amongst the lamp stands [chp 1]

Scene 2 Of the Churches in difficult circumstances and appropriate exhortations [chp 2-3]

VISION 2 Describes life as experienced by believers and unbelievers in this age. [chp 4:1-11:18]

Scene 1 Throne room of a sovereign God [4-5]

Scene 2 Life under the seals (believers) – generally marked out by persecution [6]

Scene 3 The picture of the secure future for believers – the glorified Church [7]

Scene 4 Life under the trumpets (unbelievers) - mini judgements or warnings [8-9]

Scene 5 Witness compliments the trumpet blasts so that a shaken world might repent and believe [10-11:14]

Scene 6 The final scene of praise and judgement [11:15-18]

VISION 3 Describes the Instruments through which Satan persecutes the Church of God. [11:19-15:4]

Scene 1 Describes the spiritual war behind the historical events concerning Christ and his Church [12]

Scene 2 Describes the earthly instruments of persecution (of Saints) in terms of political and ecclesiastical figures [13]

Scene 3 The great multitude (the 144,000) as a picture of the Church to remind us of our destiny and the final judgement of Babylon [14]

VISION 4 Describes the instruments through which Satan blinds the nations to God. [15:5-19:10]

Scene 1 The bowls as confirmation of the sinful and unrepentant disposition of unbelievers that lead to their final defeat and destruction (Armageddon) [16]

Scene 2 Babylon is the symbol of the world system and the sum of those who are not God's people. The prostitute gets the nations to drink her maddening wine, explaining why the nations do not repent and glorify God [17]

Scene 3 Babylon has fallen and all those who were in her weep, because like her they too will come to ruin [18]

Scene 4 Hallelujah! Glory and power belong to the Lord [19]

VISION 5 [19:11-22:21] Describes the victory/judgement when the Kingdom of the world will become Kingdom of God.

Scene 1 Final battle and defeat of the enemies of God [19]

Scene 2 Description of Satan's binding (this age) and as a consequence of his limited influence people believe [20]

Scene 3 The final picture of when the purposes of God reach their fulfilment in a new heavens and earth [21-22]

¹⁹ This is in contrast with Beale who believes that Revelation's emphasis is to exhort the believer to holiness as opposed to perseverance as his/her only reasonable response to God's glory and power. G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 151.

Interpretative Approach

Of all the major interpretative approaches (preterist, historicist, futurist and idealist) a modified version of idealism is to be preferred. I agree with Beale when he calls this modified idealism an eclectic view, or a “*redemptive historical form of modified idealism*”.²⁰ Thus it seems that the combinational weight of a later date, the symbolism of the apocalyptic genre and the literary structural markers of an ‘opening in heaven’ support a non chronological, symbolic approach like that of the modified idealist position. Such a position advocates that each vision is a successive sweep of the ages with each vision taking a different perspective. As such preaching through Revelation is not about identifying the antichrist, as it is about encouraging Christians who live in a world where the clashes of sacred and profane are all too familiar.

Revelation reminds us that God is working out his plan of redemption, but we can expect difficulty as good and evil clash. We can expect persecution as the beast seeks to oppress the Church. Yet at the same time, we can anticipate victory as the Lamb conquers the Beast and judges all those who oppose him. In a world that appears at times to Christian to be out of control, Revelation reminds us that in fact, the Lamb is on his throne, and victory, judgement and vindication are assured. Therefore, we are to patiently and faithfully endure whilst witnessing and waiting for that glorious day when Jesus returns.²¹

The Sermon Series on Revelation

- (Rev 1) Talk 1 - Introduction to Revelation.
- (Rev 2-3) Talk 2 - The Churches of Asia.
- (Rev 4-7) Talk 3 - Describes life as experienced by believers in this age.
- (Rev 8-11:18) Talk 4 - Describes life as experienced by unbelievers in this age.
- (Rev 11:19-15:4) Talk 5 - Describes the Instruments through which Satan persecutes the Church of God in this age.
- (Rev 15:5-19:10) Talk 6 - Describes the instrument through which Satan blinds the nations to God and its destruction in this age.
- (Rev 19:11-20) Talk 7 – Describes the final judgement of Satan and all who belong to him at the end of this age.
- (Rev 21-22) Talk 8 – The Kingdom of the World becomes the Kingdom of our God and his Christ, the new age.

²⁰ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48. This is a similar interpretation to J. Richardson, *Revelation Unwrapped* (London: MPA Books, 1996) 12. M. Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (BST: Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989) 23-24. And the reformed classic W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 16-23.

²¹ W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) 8.

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