

# Preaching Apocalyptic? You've Got to be Kidding!

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## I

The first question is: Why? Why in the world would one offer to do this, to give a lecture on preaching from apocalyptic texts of all things? On the one hand, one would think that in a world of Star Wars and Star Trek this should be easy. Unfortunately, it is also a world in which the creators of the Left Behind books and movies have become millionaires. These books and movies are so seriously flawed as literature and art, not to mention as impossible interpretations of Scripture, that one feels a sense of despair over the mental and spiritual flabbiness of contemporary North American evangelicalism.

How, one wonders, did this kind of selective literalism gain such a strong foothold in so much of the contemporary church? Then one realizes that it is ultimately the result of one of the twentieth century's greatest ironies: that a church culture whose rhetoric railed against a world shaped by modernism and historicism had itself been so thoroughly permeated by the basic tenets of this worldview that it was the only way they could read their Bibles. The idea that God could inspire apocalyptic, or that God could inspire the telling of a story whose truth did not lie in whether it actually happened or not, sent chills of horror up and down the spines of people whose *mindsets* were fundamentalist, but who preferred to be known as evangelical.

The further irony of this worldview, the worldview that not only created Left Behind—and was bought into to the tune of billions of dollars—is that when it came to the Apocalypse itself, John's marvelous revelation that concludes our biblical canon, they could only make it work by abandoning their so-called literalism. The scheme that was brought to the reading of the book was the Darbyism that gained its foothold in North America through the Bible Conference movement and the Scofield Bible at the beginning of the last century. This scheme insisted that all Scripture must be read literally, which of course they did not really mean. After all, the absolute central feature of the scheme was a doctrine called the rapture of the church. Because the Revelation of necessity had to be read through dispensational lenses, then the Rapture, it was assumed, must be embedded in the Revelation. So sure enough, in 4:1, John's being told to "come up here," where he is to see his marvelous visions of God and the Lamb, was *not* to be taken literally as having to do with John. John,

we were told, is now representative of the church; and this is where the Rapture takes place in the book. What happens to the church in chapter 10, one wonders, when John again appears on earth?

At the end of the day, that kind of reading, which has no appreciation for the *genre* of biblical texts, turns out to be more apocalyptic than the Apocalypse itself. Thus, my primary concern in this lecture is to urge you to recapture this great book for the sake of the contemporary church. Here, indeed, is a biblical book that is not only worth recovering for today's church, it is absolutely crucial that it be heard the same way in our day as the Word of God that it was for the churches of western Asia Minor at the end of the first Christian century. Here is a truly prophetic word, spoken with power and insight into a world dominated by a secular power that would soon be hell-bent on wiping out all resistance to the Empire and to the policies of emperors, whose greed and power were raving the world of its natural resource treasures for the sake of the few filthy rich who ruled the world from Rome.

I have set for myself a twofold task this evening: First, I would hope to whet your appetite, indeed to create in you a longing to preach and teach from John's Revelation for the sake of today's church; and second, I hope to offer some very practical helps as to how you might set yourselves on such a path.

Before I do that, I need to say a few words about what we are about in this conference: Preaching Apocalyptic Texts. Our difficulty is not with the noun, *apocalypse*—the technical term that refers specifically to the Revelation. This is what John himself calls his book. Our problem lies with the adjective apocalyptic. Here is an "accordion" word, if ever there was one, having to do with how much air one can pump into or out of a word to give it meaning. When it has all the air pumped into it, apocalyptic refers to something about to happen that is foreboding and huge and disastrous. When some of the air is pumped out of it, it comes closer to its original meaning, having to do more specifically with the unveiling (the word's actual meaning) of the future, and especially with the return of Christ.

When all the air is pumped out of it, apocalyptic has taken on its technical, but derived, sense of referring to a kind of literature represented in our Christian Scriptures by Daniel (especially chapters 7-11) and the book of Revelation. Thus, when we refer to apocalyptic texts we primarily mean these two biblical books, plus parts of other passages that belong to the second meaning of this word. Now to the Revelation itself.

At the outset, let me encourage you to buy three books. The first is Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), which is the absolutely best book on the Revelation that has ever been written. Written by one who has unusual expertise in apocalyptic, he has captured the essence of the theology of this book in seven brief chapters. This is a book that should set your heart on fire to take this great biblical book and make it known to your congregations. When I teach the Revelation, it is the one book

that I require everyone to read and write a review of within the first three weeks of term. I want them to be on the same page with me, so that we can get on with hearing God's Word in this great book without getting bogged down in the apocalyptic details.

The other two books are two of the most recent, and easily the best, commentaries on the Revelation, in terms of their usefulness for pastors. Pride of place right now goes to:

Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). Here is a readable, sane interpretation of the text that every pastor should own. For "keeners," who want more detail, and especially want to know how the Revelation works in relationship to the rest of the biblical revelation, you will find an enormous amount of good help in: Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

## II

I begin with a passion of mine: that in order to study well and preach well, one needs first to learn how to *read* well. I want to say a few preliminary words about establishing a strategy for *reading* the Revelation, because good reading (and studying) must always precede biblical preaching.

In order to read the Revelation well, one must first have an adequate answer to two basic questions: *What* is it? and *Why* is it?

### The Revelation: What Is It?

At the very beginning, in 1:1-5, we are confronted with three realities that warn us that the Revelation is a unique piece of literature. (1) In verse 1, we encounter the word that serves as the theme of this conference: *apocalypsis* (*apocalypse*): an unveiling; (2) in verse 3, we find the language: "the words of this *prophecy*"; and (3) in verses 4-5, we meet the formal salutation of the ancient *letter*. With these three pieces of information given to us at the beginning, we come face to face with what is unique about John's Apocalypse—that it is a fine blending of each of these distinct genres into a single whole piece. We need to say a few words about each.

First, regarding "what" it is, in *form*, the Revelation presents itself as an *apocalypse*, a word used to describe a kind of literature that flourished among both Jews and Christians around 200 B.C. - A.D. 200—though its roots are much earlier. Apocalypses have certain specific characteristics:

Its tap root is the Old Testament prophetic literature, which means that it is primarily concerned about judgment and salvation. However, apocalyptic was born in persecution; thus, these authors no longer looked for anything within history. Indeed, they pictured God as bringing a cataclysmic end to history.

Unlike the prophets, apocalypses are literary works from the start. By way of contrast, the earliest prophets were not first of all *writers*, but spokespersons for Yahweh, who began their oracles with phrases such as: “Thus *speaks* Yahweh”; or “This is what Yahweh, Yahweh Almighty, *says*.” Their effectiveness in part was related to the fact that they spoke in short oracles—and in poetry, full of powerful images. The apocalypses, on the other hand, were pieces of literary prose, carefully structured and worked out—as ours certainly is—whose authors had a story to tell and where all the pieces fitted into the whole.

The “stuff” of apocalyptic includes certain literary devices, which we all know well, even if we have not thought them through well:

First, they took the *form* of visions and dreams; and it is this formal matter that gives readers like us some basic concerns. Were these actual visions later written down? or were they visions in the second sense, having to do with seeing the world through the lens of apocalyptic images. Here at issue for many of us is the language of John’s “being in the Spirit.”

Second, their *language* was cryptic and symbolic; that is, their images are forms of fantasy, rather than reality. The prophet speaks of Israel as a vine or olive tree or a flock, or “a half-baked cake”; the apocalypse speaks of messianic Israel as a woman clothed with the sun, and speaks of the Empire as a beast with seven heads and ten horns. We instinctively respond to the images of reality and can make connections between the image and Israel, but we have no categories for a seven-headed, ten-horned beast. That is, even though we understand beast and heads and horns, we do not understand them in this configuration.

Third, very often the whole work is *formally stylized*, with a tendency to divide time and events into neat packages. Our apocalypse, for example, has three major sections, all of which are sets of seven, packaged in smaller sets of four and two, followed by a twofold interlude, and then the final one. In keeping with this, they have a common code regarding the symbolic use of numbers.

Fourth, in all the apocalypses but ours, *pseudonymity* was the rule, a phenomenon not wholly understood: Was it intended to give a contemporary piece a hoary age? Was it a reflection of the “quenched Spirit”? Was it an attempt to authenticate it by someone from the past? We simply cannot be sure; maybe it was a bit of all three.

Finally, and very often related to item 4, the writer is told to “*seal it up*” for a later time, which was a kind of literary fiction, not so much intended to deceive as it was to speak to the present situation from out of the past. The actual authors and their people in fact *were* the later day, for which it was now to be unsealed.

When we turn to the Revelation of John, we find that it fits the first three of these characteristics, but not the latter two. This is a significant difference indeed! Whatever else, it is not pseudonymous; John both identifies himself to, and is clearly known by, his readers. Rather than sealing it up, he is explicitly told not to do so: 22:10—“Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this

scroll, because the time is near.” Slight though these may seem, they reflect the great, significant difference between our apocalypse and all others; that is because this one is more than simply an apocalypse.

Second, when we turn to the Revelation as prophecy, we come to the crucial matter: Here we are confronted by John’s thoroughly New Testament understanding of the end, as already and not yet. In contrast to his Jewish predecessors and contemporaries, John is not simply anticipating the end. He knows the end to have begun with Jesus.

Absolutely crucial to this is his understanding of the Spirit. Other apocalypticists wrote in the name of an ancient worthy because theirs was the age of the quenched Spirit. They were awaiting the out-poured Spirit in the coming age; prophecy, which comes by the Spirit, had ceased in Israel. John belongs to the New Age, evidenced by the coming of the Spirit. In 1:10-11, he says he was “in the Spirit”; in 1:3 and 22:18-19, he calls what he writes, “this prophecy.” In 19:10 he says, “The testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy,” which means something like: the message given by and about Jesus is the clear evidence that the prophetic Spirit has come.

Thus, John gives us a combination of the prophetic and the apocalyptic. It is cast in the mold of apocalyptic. Whatever else, it was (1) born in (or at least standing on the brink of) persecution; he (2) intends to speak about the end, and does so (3) by way of this carefully constructed piece of literature, which (4) uses the cryptic language and fantastic imagery of apocalyptic and deals ultimately with salvation and judgment.

It is thoroughly prophetic in intent and content. Here is a word from God to their present situation, but it is spoken against the backdrop of the future with its certain judgment and salvation.

Third, and very briefly, we need simply to point out that the Revelation comes to us as an epistle to the seven (both real and representative) churches of the Roman province of Asia. This is a crucial matter for exegesis. It is not a Word sealed till the end of time. For John, the end has already begun, and by the Spirit, he has been led to speak a prophetic word into the lives of these seven churches.

Thus, as with all epistles, it is ad hoc (occasional); that is, it is addressed to the specific needs and situations of those churches. Therefore, as with all biblical epistles, we must try to understand the historical context to which it was first addressed.

The purpose of our apocalypse seems clear; it is spelled out in 1:19. John is to write what he has seen, that is, what is now, and what is about to happen. Listen carefully to 1:3: Blessed is the one who reads (meaning who reads it aloud in the congregational setting [after all, these people were only about 15 percent literate in the sense of being able to read and write]), and blessed are those who listen and keep the things written. Because one cannot easily keep

judgments and visions, this seems clearly to be a call to keep the faith in light of what is happening and what is going to happen.

So that is the What: A prophetic word, written in the code of apocalyptic (since it was a subversive document regarding the Roman Empire, whatever else), and sent as a letter to real, but also representative, churches in Asia Minor.

### The Revelation: Why Is It?

The Why of the Revelation has to do our with getting at the historical context itself. Here we come to the crucial matter of its being a letter. Two issues absolutely dominate our Apocalypse.

First, its most dominant motif is that of the Holy War, which in the Revelation takes on a most thoroughly New Testament twist! Indeed, the theme is played out at the highest theological levels. God, for example, is called ο πῶτοκράτωρ, which is used in the Septuagint for “God the Almighty,” a word that appears often in contexts of God as Warrior, Yahweh as the Lord of hosts.

The Messiah himself is first of all “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (5:5), a title that picks up Messianic warrior motifs from Genesis 49:8-12 where he is specified as the “Lion . . . who has triumphed” TNIV (for νικῶ, which occurs seventeen of twenty-eight times in the New Testament in the Revelation). However, when John turns to see the mighty Lion, all he sees is a slain Lamb, the figure that dominates the rest of his revelation until the Messiah appears again at the end as a heavenly warrior (19:11-21).

Second, the role of God’s people is to engage in the Holy War; and herein lies the heart of the book, the second dominant motif. The lot of God’s people will be suffering—present and impending, and they, too, will triumph over the Dragon but only through the blood of the Lamb and their own witness, even to the point of death (12:11). Listen to John:

I John, your brother and companion in the suffering (1:9)

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name (2:3)

I know your afflictions and your poverty (2:8-9)

You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city (2:13)

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. (3:10)

Add to these the repeated “to the one who triumphs/conquers” in each letter; the fifth seal in 6:9-11, which pictures the martyrs who have been slain because of the word of God (the gospel) and the testimony they had maintained; and the great multitude in 7:14 that has come out of the great tribulation (cf. 7:16, no more suffering). Note further 12:11 and 17, where suffering and death are again linked to bearing “the testimony of Jesus,” while in chapters 13-20, the suffering and death are specifically attributed to “the beast” (13:7, 9-10; 14:12-13; 16:5-6; 18:20; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4).

This motif is the obvious key to understanding the historical context of the book—and fully explains its occasion and purpose. John himself is in exile (apparently) for his faith. Others were also experiencing suffering; one, in fact, has already been killed (2:13). The threat itself comes from the beast, which is clearly imagery for the Empire. In his exile, in the Spirit, John had come to realize that these were but the beginning of woes for those who would refuse to “worship the beast” by bowing down to the image of the emperor.

At the same time—and this is John’s urgency—chapters 2-3 make it clear that there are some internal disorders that make him not at all certain they are ready for the great onslaught that is about to come. Indeed, at issue is a church that is on the brink of disaster over the issue of sovereignty and oppression, on the one hand, and fear lest the church not resist it, on the other. This accounts for the words found in the opening and closing inclusio:

God’s blessing rests on those who keep what is said in this book (1:3).

Blessed are those who keep the words of the prophecy in this book (22:7). Listen further to how John concludes in 22:11-15, identifying the two basic, contemporary groups as those on the “inside” and “outside”:

<sup>11</sup>Let those who do wrong continue to do wrong; let those who are vile continue to be vile; let those who do right continue to do right; and let those who are holy continue to be holy.”

<sup>12a</sup>Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done. <sup>13</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

<sup>14</sup>“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. <sup>15</sup>Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

This concern alone accounts for the repeated warnings throughout the book—especially in connection with the plagues—and in chapters 13-14, about going along with the Beast. Thus, when John sings his funeral dirge over Rome in chapter 18:1-3—one of the truly great moments in all of Scripture—there is the final warning (v. 4): “‘Come out of her my people,’ [Jer. 51:45] so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.”

Therefore, the main themes seem clear. The church and state are on a collision course over the fundamental issue of who “runs the universe.” John fully recognizes that power and victory presently appear to belong to the state, but because of Rome’s arrogance and oppression, God will bring her to ruin:

<sup>6</sup>Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.

<sup>7</sup>Give her as much torment and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.  
In her heart she boasts,  
‘I sit enthroned as queen; I am not a widow,  
and I will never mourn.’ [Isa 47:7,8]

<sup>8</sup>Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
 death, mourning and famine.  
 She will be consumed by fire,  
 for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

Along with her will be judged all the petty kings and merchants who have courted her favors (18:9, 11). At the heart of everything is the cult of the emperor, who was worshiped as *κύριος καὶ σωτήρ* (“Lord and Savior”).

Thus, John warns the church that suffering and death lie ahead. Indeed, he makes it clear; it will get worse before it gets better. He is greatly concerned that they do not give in. Listen to these texts that serve as warnings:

“If any worship the beast and its image and receive its mark on the forehead or on the hand, they, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath” (14:9-10).

“Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues” (18:4).

This prophetic word is also a word of encouragement. God, not the Empire, is in control of history, and the church will triumph even through death. At the end, God will finally pour out his wrath on the persecutor and bring eternal rest to the faithful.

Let me add a final, crucial word in this regard. It is absolutely imperative to note the distinction John makes between two crucial words: *θλίψις* (tribulation) / *ὀργή* (wrath). Tribulation, suffering, and death are clearly part of what the church was enduring and was yet to endure in even greater measure. God’s wrath, on the other hand, is his judgment poured out on those responsible for the affliction—and on all others who join the rebellion against him. These distinctions are consonant with the whole New Testament (cf. 2 Thess. 1:3-10).

### III

If this is what is necessary in order to read the text well, what does it mean to preach from it? Well, here I could configure things in a number of ways, but I want to offer as an illustration something that I actually did in our small community church on Galiano Island just this past fall and winter.

At the outset, let me offer two anathemas: Whatever else, do not preach for a year on the Revelation; that is a true anathema! Not only will you get bogged down on details that are the icing, not the cake, but you will lose the grandeur of the book and make people wish they had never heard about the Revelation. At the same time, let me say just as strongly: Do not try to preach from the Revelation apart from a series. You simply have to spend too much time explaining things so that a single sermon from the book has any number of pitfalls associated with it. The following suggestions have to do with doing a series in the Revelation.

First, there is more than one kind of sermon series. The most common, of course, is a series on the seven churches, which is the least apocalyptic part of



the book; the sermons are often divorced from the book as a whole. This is out of bounds for this conference.

A series depends ultimately on the time frame one has set. For example, a year ago, I did an Advent series from the Revelation, which worked quite well because the first day of Advent celebrates the second Advent, and that is how the Revelation begins. That led easily to a sermon on the vision of Christ in 1:13-20, with emphasis on Christ as the Lord of the church, the Lord of history, and the Lord of life. The final two were from chapters 5 and 12.

Best of all however, would be a thirteen-week series, say, the Sunday after Easter through June, or perhaps even better, September up to Advent, with the final one falling on the first Sunday of Advent. In any case think through the series very carefully. The following outline is simply an example of what one might do.

1. The Intro (vv. 1-12)
2. The picture of Christ (1:13-20)
3. The seven churches (emphasis on Christ's knowing them)
4. The seven churches (emphasis on their being a mixed bag = reality)
5. Chapters 4-5 (the divine framework for the whole)
6. Chapters 6-7 (the seven seals / two interludes / justice for the martyrs)
7. Chapters 8-10 (God's judgments and evangelism)
8. Chapter 11 (witness and martyrdom / God's final triumph)
9. Chapter 12 (the theology center of the book)
10. Chapters 13-14 (primarily ch 14; how are we to live in this context)
11. Chapters 17-18 (God's judgments on abuse of power)
12. Chapters 19-20 (God's final judgments on evil and righteous)
13. Chapters 21-22 (the final glory)

The point is, that one can say some things about each of these sections of the book, in terms of how it works regarding the larger concerns of the book, without trying to explain all the imagery. One will need wisdom regarding how much of the detail one explains because at issue is primarily to point out how it works in the section while explaining only the most essential images for that section.

In such a series, one keeps coming back to the essential things while at the same time one proclaims the main point of each section. Just take chapter 11, for example, which by many people's reckoning is one of the more difficult in the book. The main points are clear enough: that the church is measured (marked off as God's thing in the world); that their task is to bear witness to the Lamb, even if it leads to martyrdom; and that God's kingdom will come, and that calls for Hallelujah's all around.

Let me emphasize at the end: Preaching Apocalyptic: You Gotta be Kidding? No, I am not kidding. In contemporary North American culture, which has lost its way by losing its essential moral bearings, God's people are going to be called on more and more to bear witness to the eternal God and to the slain Lamb, and in a culture where the new pagan trinity of relativism, secularism,

and materialism are the absolute deities, we have the happy privilege to bear witness to the greater truth that transcends all such earthbound values. By means of the Spirit, we have been stamped with eternity; and we are called upon to bear witness to the glory of the eternal God and the Lamb. The Revelation of John is one of the best ways to get at that point for the sake of God's people in this present world.