

A BIG PICTURE VIEW OF REVELATION

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The big picture of Revelation can be found in the opening verses of the book (1:1-8). John is just as kind to the readers of Revelation as he is to the readers of his Gospel. In both cases he provides a prologue where he gives the game away at the very beginning. In the Gospel he gives all the clues about Jesus in the first eighteen verses. He tells us exactly who Jesus is. He is the Word, he is God, he is incarnate. As readers we have the score at the outset, while the characters in the story have to figure it out for themselves. Nearly every theme that is developed in the Gospel is already there in the prologue. It is John's Gospel in a nutshell.

The same is true of Revelation. The prologue is the Apocalypse in a nutshell. But what a strange little nutshell it is. It hardly reads like a prologue at all. Most of the eight verses read more like a list of bullet-points:

- *The revelation of Jesus Christ*
- *Blessed is the one who reads*
- *John to the seven churches*
- *To him who loves us . . .*
- *Look, he is coming*
- *I am the Alpha and the Omega*

It's all very staccato and it's an odd way to introduce a book. Yet it provides the key to all that follows. As we look at all these bullet points one by one, we will see that they introduce seven literary genres. Each of these contains a clue for understanding the book. The seven genres are revelation, testimony, beatitude, prophecy, letter, doxology and allusions to the OT. The book is a fine blend of these seven types of literature. A rough contemporary parallel would be a good newspaper. It's the variety that holds our interest. A newspaper is not just news articles. It also has editorials and letters. There are comics and cartoons. There are advertisements and weather forecasts. All kinds of materials make up a

newspaper. The same is true of Revelation. It is not just prophecy or letters or doxologies. It is all of these and more. That's what makes it such a great piece of literature. It's also what makes it so intriguing and challenging.

The opening eight verses also introduce the reader to the genres of the Apocalypse in a particular order.

1. Revelation

Verse 1 begins by stating the absolutely obvious: Revelation is a revelation! To some readers that may be a revelation in itself, but that is clearly the book's opening claim: *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.*

This introduction makes it clear that God is going to reveal something to us, not conceal something from us. A revelation is literally "an unveiling." The curtain is going to be pulled aside so that we can see what is going on behind the scenes. In her book *Affliction* Edith Schaeffer has a chapter entitled, "A Crack in the Curtain."¹⁰ It is basically an exposition of the opening chapters of the book of Job. In those chapters the reader is given to see what Job himself never sees, namely the spiritual reality behind his sufferings. We get a glimpse into the heavenlies. We see what is going on in the spiritual world. We hear the conversation between God and Satan, the deal that is done, the wager that is made. Job himself was never made aware of these things, but the reader is privy to them because of that crack in the curtain. The same is true in Revelation, but on a far grander scale. This is not just a crack in the curtain. This is a panoramic view of what is happening behind the scenes in the history of the entire human race. What the book of Job does for the life of one man, Revelation does for humanity as a whole.

Significantly, this is "the revelation of Jesus Christ." He is the one doing the unveiling. He is the one who draws aside the curtain, and he does it for the benefit of his servants. He does it for our benefit. We have been given this book so that we will have insights into our own lives, into our times, and into the history of the world that we would have in no other way. This revelation, however, does not come to us directly, but indirectly. In verses 1-3 there is a whole chain of communication:

¹⁰ Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction: A Compassionate Look at the Reality of Pain and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 48-64.

- (a) The revelation begins with God.
- (b) He gives it to Jesus Christ.
- (c) Jesus in turn makes it known by sending his angel.
- (d) This angel is sent to John.
- (e) John sees the revelation and writes it down.
- (f) Then there are those in the churches who read it aloud and there are those who hear it read.
- (g) Finally all of us are to take it to heart.

The final purpose is that we take it to heart. But how can we take to heart what we cannot understand? How do we get to that point – that we understand it enough and understand it clearly enough that we actually take it to heart? What a tragedy if we misunderstand the revelation and then take it to heart. So how do we avoid this danger? Again the opening verses are a real help here. Notice the kind of language that is being used:

- The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him *to show* his servants . . .
- Jesus *made it known* (or more literally *signified*) it by sending his angel . . .
- John testifies to everything *he saw*. You would expect “heard” because what he saw was “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

So the revelation is something that is shown, signified and seen. We are therefore dealing with phenomena that are visible, visual and visionary. This is extremely important. Take the word *signify* in this context. In Greek, as in English, it is related to the word *sign*. Now a sign is not the real thing. It is a pointer to the real thing. In everyday life if you get these two confused you will soon be in real trouble. Take a road sign for instance. If you confuse it with the town to which it is pointing you will

never reach your destination! A sign is different to the place or thing it signifies. A sign is one thing, the reality to which it points is another.

In Revelation 12 there are two great signs. First there is a woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet. Then there is a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns. Now the woman and the dragon are not realities in themselves. They are signs. The dragon signifies the devil and the woman signifies the church. These two examples are illustrative of the book as a whole. Its message comes to us in sign language. We are told this in chapter 1, verse 1 of the book! This is a warning right at the outset not to take the book literally. The revelation is signified to John. What is revealed is going to be primarily symbolic and figurative rather than literal. Needless to say, this perspective has huge implications for the preacher. Revelation will help him develop the highly desirable faculty of a biblical imagination. This will keep him from crass literalism on the one hand and unhealthy speculation on the other.

2. *Testimony*

Verse 2 declares that Revelation is also a testimony. John *testifies* to everything he saw – the word of God and the *testimony* of Jesus Christ. This raises the very real question whether Revelation is the testimony of John or the testimony of Jesus. The answer is of course “Yes”! There are seven more verses in the book that contain this word “testimony”. Mostly they refer to the testimony of Jesus. Clearly he is the chief Witness. But the word also refers to the testimony maintained by the martyrs whose souls John sees beneath the altar in heaven (6:9). Then there are the two witnesses in chapter 11 who are overpowered and killed by the beast (11:7). John himself is in exile on the island of Patmos because of the testimony of Jesus (1:9). Or think of Antipas of Pergamum whom Jesus calls “my faithful witness who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives” (2:13). Finally there is that dreadful picture in chapter 17 where John sees the great prostitute “drunk with the blood of the saints and drunk with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (17:6).

In these various references a pattern begins to emerge. Most of these witnesses give their testimony at great cost. The overwhelming theme for these witnesses is that “they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11). If this is the theme then it not difficult to see that Jesus is the great Witness. He the chief or model Witness. He is the paradigm that others are to follow. The way Jesus is described and the way

Antipas is referred to suggest that martyrdom is a live issue for John's audience. It's an issue they need to come to grips with. This is the sobering reality behind the book.

Yet John also wants to assure his readers that this is all part of a far larger reality. Not only are Jesus, John, Antipas and the martyrs witnesses, God is also the Judge. That's why the martyrs under the throne cry out:

"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10).

Later in the book this prayer is answered in direct and remarkable ways. The blood of the martyrs is avenged. The Sovereign Lord does judge the inhabitants of the earth. The seven bowls are poured out on the earth (chap. 16). The prostitute is judged (chap. 17). Babylon is destroyed (chap. 18). Ultimately there is the prospect of the final judgment (chap. 20).

So there is a sense in which Revelation is God's lawsuit against the unbelieving world. It all ends in the final judgment. God the Judge is prosecuting the world. It is as though he is saying:

"What have you done to the Chief Witness?"

"What have you done to his fellow-witnesses?"

"The blood of the martyrs cries out against you."

"You have rejected their testimony at your own peril."

Injustices will be remedied. Wrongs will be avenged. Justice will prevail. This is John's comforting message to his suffering readers. It is also a message that people still need to hear today.

3. *Beatitude*

From the testimony in v. 2 we move to the beatitude in v. 3: *Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

In contrast to those in the world who will be judged, here are the ones who will be blessed. John is obviously thinking of the churches where the book is going to be read. He pictures a church gathering where someone reads the whole book publicly and where the congregation listens. That's the way the message of Revelation was originally going to be communicated. There

were no printing presses. There were probably very few copies of the book. Many in the churches may have been illiterate. So the only way they would get the message was by hearing it read. Nevertheless God's blessing attends that situation - a good public reader and an attentive audience listening to Revelation read from beginning to end. What a liturgical experience that would be!

But what does this word "blessed" really mean? What is the meaning of this "blessed" word? The word clearly has an eschatological ring to it. As in Jesus' teaching, the truly blessed are those who share in the salvation of the kingdom of God. But even so, what do you do with a word like "blessed"? What does it look like when you take it out of its religious quarantine? Some of the more recent translations do that by using the word "happy": "Happy is the man who reads and happy those who listen to the words of this prophecy . . ." (NEB). But does that really capture it? Does this translation do justice to the biblical term? John Stott gives a perceptive answer: "Happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective statement about these people. He is declaring not what they may feel like ('happy'), but what God thinks of them and what on that account they are: they are 'blessed'."¹¹

In other words, happiness is how I feel within myself. Blessedness is what God thinks about me. Now that helps, but it still doesn't translate the word "blessed" from religious language into everyday language. For a satisfying answer to our question some further exploration is needed.

In classical Greek the term literally meant "to be congratulated." So John is offering his congratulations to those who read and listen to his prophecy and take it to heart. This is quite something for those scattered persecuted little groups of Christians in Asia Minor. In the ancient world they wouldn't be the first kind of people to spring to mind if you were offering congratulations. In fact quite the opposite. Plato, for example, regarded the truly blessed as the powerful, the wealthy and the privileged. So John, like Jesus before him, is putting worldly standards on their head.

So congratulations are a possibility, but let me make another suggestion that is totally radical and completely inappropriate. How about the word "lucky"? That hits the nail right on the head. That's what we say about

¹¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian Counter-Culture* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 33.

someone who has something really good going for him. The only problem is that as Christians we don't believe in luck. We could say "how fortunate the fellow," but that's nothing more than a more educated version of "lucky".

Another possibility is "how enviable". That's a bit clumsy, but quite accurate. The one who reads, hears and heeds the book of Revelation is the man to envy. This is the man who has it all together. He's got it made. That's the kind of blessing that comes with reading and taking this book to heart. That's who the blessed are. They are the really lucky ones. They are to be envied, to be congratulated.

Now there are seven beatitudes in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). These beatitudes essentially give a summary of Revelation's message. For the beginner it would be ideal to preach a series of sermons on Revelation by using these seven beatitudes as texts. That's a brilliant way of preaching through the book – particularly if you are still daunted by some of the scarier parts. In these seven beatitudes you have the perfect summary of the book and a key to its central message. Here you also have the heart of the gospel.

4. Prophecy

Verse 3 is more than a beatitude. It also introduces the next literary genre: *Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

It will come as no surprise to any reader that Revelation is a prophecy. Like the word *blessed* the word *prophecy* occurs seven times! But whereas the book contains beatitudes, it is a prophecy. Four of the seven references are in chapter 22 where the word 'prophecy' refers back to the book as a whole. So while only seven verses can be called beatitudes, the whole of Revelation can be called a prophecy. The very word *prophecy* gives us two important clues to interpretation.

Firstly, if John's prophecy can be placed in the same category as earlier prophecies in either the OT or the NT, we can expect that it will have both immediate and ultimate fulfilments. Some scholars have spoken of the problem of relevance and distance. That problem has been compared to that faced by every landscape artist. How do you get a three-dimensional

landscape onto a two-dimensional canvas? If an artist is painting both hills in the foreground and mountains in the background, he has no way of indicating the distance between the hills and the mountains. How far is it from the foreground to the background? Does a painting always clearly distinguish the two? Similarly, in Isaiah 13 we have a prediction of the fall of Babylon. History tells us that this event occurred in 539BC. Yet not all of Isaiah 13 was fulfilled that year. Jesus can use the language of that chapter to depict events related to his Second Coming. His own prediction of the fall of Jerusalem in Matthew 24 provides another illustration. Some of that chapter was clearly fulfilled in 70AD. Other details await the Day of Judgment. Both of these chapters have an immediate and an ultimate fulfilment. They are marked by both relevance and distance. The same is true of Revelation. All of it was relevant to the churches in John's day and it is still relevant for us today, and it will still be relevant in the future. Revelation 17 is another case in point. Originally it applied to Rome, but it also applies to our society today, and it will no doubt continue to apply till Jesus returns. That's why John can say that "the time is near" (v. 3) and speak of things that "must soon take place" (v. 1). Yet almost 2000 years later, it is all still relevant.

Secondly, because Revelation is a prophecy, there is another dimension that we dare not miss. Prophecy is not just prediction, it is also exhortation. It has an ethical cutting edge to it. Therefore it is not enough to read it or even to understand it. We are called on to heed it and to take it to heart. The blessing in this verse is not for those who are informed by the book but for those who are transformed by it. Revelation is not meant merely to enthrall its readers like a great work of fantasy, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. God forbid that we should be reading this book just to solve some kind of intellectual puzzle! God forbid that we should do this study just to satisfy our curiosity. Revelation is a fascinating book. It's intriguing. It's mysterious. But if we are motivated only by fascination we have sadly missed the mark. If we are grappling with this book only to titillate our fancy we have no claim on the blessing of which this verse speaks. Blessed are those who take to heart what is written in it. Blessed are those who heed its exhortations. These exhortations are primarily twofold – preparation for the end and obedience unto death. It was so then and it is still the case today. Heeding Revelation is serious business. The modern preacher will be diligent to bring out this dimension.

5. Epistle

Revelation is also a letter. It has the standard opening that is found not only in the NT epistles but in ancient Greek and Roman letters in general. Ancient writers had a standard formula for introducing a letter: A to B greetings. That's precisely the formula that John uses in vv. 4-5a:

A: *John*

B: *To the seven churches in the province of Asia*

Greetings:

Grace and peace to you

from him who is, and who was, and who is to come,

and from the seven spirits before his throne,

and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

So Revelation opens as a letter. Not only does it contain seven letters, it is itself a letter. There is another feature in this opening that is vitally important. In the NT Epistles the part that is expanded gives us an early clue as to what the rest of the epistle will be all about. In Romans Paul introduces himself (in the A section) in terms of his gospel. In this introduction he spends no less than five verses giving a thumbnail sketch of his gospel. In the epistle that follows we have the fullest statement of Paul's gospel to be found anywhere in the NT.

In Revelation's epistolary opening the expansion comes in the greeting – and what an expansion it is! The greeting is grace and peace from the triune God. Now “grace and peace” is the standard greeting in most of the NT Epistles. What is so unusual is the reference to the triune God. Here the persons of the Trinity are deliberately described in unusual ways.

God the Father is referred to as “him who is and who was and who is to come.” He is the eternal One, but that is not all. In the Greek there is bad grammar here. We have a preposition followed by the nominative case. In cultured Greek this is never supposed to happen. This is bad grammar, but it is deliberately bad grammar. If you were to translate it literally it would read: “Grace and peace to you from *He* who is and who was and who is to come.” That's bad grammar in any language, but it's great theology. God is

the eternal and unchanging One and he won't even be changed by a preposition!

The next person in the Trinity to be mentioned is the Holy Spirit. He is referred to as “the seven spirits before his throne.” We know this is a reference to the Holy Spirit for the simple reason that in the Bible grace and peace always have their source in God and never in any creature. Here is a good example of the principle that this book is not to be interpreted literally. The word “seven” is not to be understood numerically, but symbolically.¹² Here is the Holy Spirit in the perfection of his holiness. He is also before the throne of God. In Revelation this is the headquarters of the universe. This is the place of absolute and unrivalled power. If Revelation is a “theology of power”¹³ this is where it begins. The Spirit is perfectly holy and perfectly powerful.

Thirdly, Jesus Christ is called “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Note the historical order here: “He died as one who faithfully witnessed to the truth and the will of God. He was raised from death as the first of the many God will finally raise. He is now ruler of the kings of the earth.”¹⁴ So Jesus is described in terms of his earthly ministry, his death and resurrection, and his exaltation. It sounds like a very theologically orthodox description, as of course it is. But it's more. It's also a defiantly political statement. At the end of the first century AD in Roman Asia this is political dynamite. Did you ever wonder why John was in exile? Who alone was supposed to be “the ruler of the kings of the earth”? The politically correct answer of the day was that it was the Roman emperor. But in reality he was the usurper. Jesus Christ was the rightful ruler. Revelation's first ‘unveiling’ is beginning to take place!

The expanded greeting of Revelation's epistolary opening therefore gives an early hint of the major themes of the book. It's about God – God the Father, the eternal and unchanging One; God the Spirit, the perfectly holy and powerful One; and Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth. The Roman emperor has been put on notice! Revelation is all about God's sovereignty, a doctrine that is driven home most pointedly throughout the

¹² Thus Albertus Pieters, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 82.

¹³ See Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 21.

¹⁴ Paul Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then: Reading Revelation Today* (2d.ed.; Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 2004), 44.

book. This emphasis is a strong indictment on the man-centred preaching that plagues the modern (and post-modern!) pulpit.

6. *Doxology*

The unusual order for the Trinity – Father, Spirit, Son – is explained by what follows. In vv. 5b-6 a doxology is ascribed to Jesus Christ:

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,
6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God
and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

Here is Revelation's first outburst of praise and it seems to come from John himself. He is overwhelmed by the person of Jesus Christ. His work of redemption has changed the course of history. On the surface this doxology sounds purely liturgical, but once again it is also blatantly political. Eternal glory and power belong to Jesus Christ who has made us to be a kingdom. The wording is hardly accidental. On this point Ben Witherington makes an interesting historical observation: "In A.D. 90, shortly before this work was written, the Roman Empire received a new name – *Imperium Aeternum*, the eternal empire – and the emperor was meant to be the eternal king."¹⁵ But John has news for the emperor – there is another King, Jesus.

So it is to King Jesus that this first doxology is addressed. It turns out to be the first of a set of seven doxologies that occur at high points throughout the book:

- Doxologies dominate chapters 4-5 where we see God's throne in heaven and the Lamb opening the scroll.
- There are more doxologies in chapter 7 where we see the innumerable host of the redeemed with palm branches in their hands.
- There is another doxology in chapter 11 with the sounding of the seventh trumpet.
- In chapter 14 the Lamb is praised in the company of the 144,000.
- In chapter 15 God is praised for his justice before the seven bowls are poured out.
- Hallelujahs resound in heaven in chapter 19 after Babylon is overthrown.

¹⁵ Ben Witherington III, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

Finally we reach the new Jerusalem where there are no doxologies, but where the whole environment is saturated with praise. The city is in the shape of a cube. To be precise, it is 12,000 stadia cubed. This is the same shape as the holy of holies in the OT tabernacle and temple. Now the whole city is one giant holy of holies.

These doxological peaks in Revelation are like mountains in the Himalayas. They point to the highest peak of all which is Mount Everest. In between there are some deep and ugly valleys, but that's the book of Revelation. It alternates between lofty peaks and deep valleys. The doxologies are windows on heaven. They open out on Mount Everest and give us glimpses of what is to come. In today's church they should elicit strong echoes of resounding praise.

7. OT Allusions

Once more the focus is on Jesus and God in the OT allusions in vv. 7-8:

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

⁸ *"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."*

Verse 7 is about Jesus and heralds his coming. It echoes Dan 7:13, where a son of man figure is described as "coming with the clouds of heaven." This is the verse that Jesus cited when he was questioned by the high priest at his trial. He is that exalted figure who will come on the clouds. He is human but exalted. He is also divine but humiliated. The rest of the verse echoes Zech 12:10 where "they look on the one they have pierced," and that one is no other than Yahweh. It is a remarkable juxtaposition of verses. Jesus is the God-man – the exalted man and the humbled God.

So Jesus is both God and man, and God is both the Alpha and the Omega. He is the beginning and the end. This is how he is featured at both the beginning and end of the book. Here the Lord God says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega." In 21:6 he speaks again: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

Jesus makes exactly the same claims in the first and last chapters of the book. In 1:17 he declares: "I am the first and the last." Then in 22:13 he

sums it all up: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

This is the most beautiful case of inclusion imaginable. The book ends the way it began, with God and Jesus. They have everything under control. By them the world was created and in them history will be consummated.

Therefore God can conclude the prologue by saying that he is the One “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” He is just reminding us of what we have already heard in the greeting (vv. 4-5a). Here we have Revelation’s paraphrase of what Moses heard at the burning bush: “I am who I am.” The Eternal God, the Almighty, who was with Moses in the wilderness is also with John on Patmos.

God’s last declaration is an allusion to Exodus 3:14. A careful reading of these verses will also reveal allusions to Isaiah 41:4; Daniel 7:13; Amos 3:13; 4:13; as well as to Zechariah 12:10, 12. In fact, in verses 7-8 seven OT verses are alluded to. In all of Revelation there are about 500 allusions to the OT – no doubt an important key to the correct interpretation of the book, and also the topic of my next chapter. Suffice it to say at this point that the competent preacher will be developing a keen eye for links with the OT, which are there in profusion for all who are willing to see them.

An awareness of these seven literary genres that make up the Apocalypse puts the preacher in a strong position. Not only will he be aware of its complexities, but he will be well placed to preach the book in all its richness and variety. He will appreciate the splendour of its imagery and seek its deeper meaning by exploring its OT roots. As Revelation is a book of prophecy he will also be bringing out its contemporary relevance and its ethical cutting edge. At the same time his preaching will have strong legal overtones as he brings his hearers face to face with the Judge before whom they will all ultimately appear. Yet such preaching will not be legalistic but hold out the hope of the Gospel – as do Revelation’s beatitudes. Finally, there will be a recurring emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the Lamb and their unchanging purposes. For this they deserve unending praise – the kind of praise that fills the book’s majestic doxologies.