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Revelation

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Revelation is the final book of the Christian canon and probably the last book that many preachers would care to preach. Even the Revised Common Lectionary is fairly selective about choosing from among the nicer lections from Revelation. Why all the nervousness about the Apocalypse of John? On one level, the text poses sometimes intractable historical questions (e.g., the name that corresponds to 666 in Rev 13:8), literary concerns (violent images and mythic narratives), and theological issues (divine vengeance and misogyny) that leave many preachers cold. On another level, preachers are concerned about how to interpret a Biblical text that has already generated so much apocalyptic *misunderstanding* in a culture quick to treat the work as if John the Seer were actually predicting the future like some Nostradamus. Fortunately, the Revelation to John itself offers some helpful cues for preachers negotiating this interpretive problem: it names itself as both an “apocalypse” (1:1) and “prophecy” (1:4). Let us begin, therefore, by attending closely to the text of Revelation in context by considering it as both apocalypse and prophecy for its time and place.

The word apocalypse in Greek means in the broadest sense “revelation” or “unveiling.” Here in 1:1, it is qualified with the words “of Jesus Christ.” This is an important theological lens for understanding the whole of John’s revelation. The verse functions like a superscription. By the end of this opening paragraph in Rev 1:3, however, John refers to Revelation as well as “words of prophecy,” that is, from God to this particular ancient context, and indicates that both hearing and keeping such prophetic words are important to anyone who reads them. This may also indicate that Revelation was meant to be “read aloud” publicly and

not just inwardly ingested in silent, subjective appropriation. For John, this Revelation is an apocalypse of Jesus Christ and a prophetic speaking for God. People who hear it should take note of its claim upon them from the outset—it is not so much a document for reflection as an apocalyptic and prophetic speech act for discerning. This is, by the way, why Revelation also begins with blessings (Rev 1:3) and ends with a gift, curses, and a benediction (Rev 22:16–21). The apocalypse and its words of prophecy intend to do something in relation to Jesus Christ.

Historical Context

That said, revelations and prophecies as well as blessings and curses do not just float detached in the air. These words have a context. Of course, the particular context of Revelation has been a matter of some dispute. Some scholars and traditions dated Revelation historically as early as the time of the Roman Emperor Nero (54–68), or perhaps just after his death. In general, however, scholars now date Revelation to the time of Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE) and thus try to take more seriously the historical problems posed by the emperor worship which had been taking hold especially in the Asia Minor context (today's Turkey) of the seven cities/assemblies addressed in the opening letters of the book (Revelation 1—3): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Emperor worship referred to the public activity of praising Caesar as god. While this was not done with serious religious devotion everywhere in the Empire, there were places in Asia Minor where it was more vigorously pursued as a way of demonstrating loyalty to the emperor and the Empire alike. While there is no evidence of official government persecution of Christians in Asia Minor in this period, it may be that the Christians (who were still closely enmeshed in Jewish identities in Greco-Roman urban life) were experiencing local persecution while trying to

discern to what degree they needed to disconnect from the religious/political/economic life of the Empire. Refusing to worship Caesar as god in the environment of urban life in imperial Asia Minor was not about intellectual propositions or some optional religious lifestyle choice. Loyalty to the divinity of Caesar was connected to being a good citizen of these cities and just being a part of the religious and imperial economic order.

Jews, as representatives of an ancient religion, enjoyed some exemptions from public life in the Roman Imperium. They were not expected to offer military service, nor especially to worship Caesar as a god given strong Jewish traditions against idolatry. Christians, as members of a Jewish sect that was only beginning to emerge out of Judaism, were faced with a crisis of their own: continue to hew closely to Jewish identity and share the same privilege about emperor worship, or adopt a more distinctive Christian identity of its own in the alluring and yet rough and tumble world of imperial Roman urban life.

This context is important for understanding Revelation as a whole—its attitudes about the synagogue, the emperor whose worship their non-Jewish fellow citizens view as a mark of political loyalty and interpersonal sociability, and the local crisis in Asia Minor that Revelation portrays.

John, the seer and recipient of this revelation and prophecy, communicates this vision-in-context to seven Asia-Minor churches while he is himself in exile on the isle of Patmos (off the coast of present day Turkey) on the Lord's Day (Rev 1:9–10). While we do not have evidence from the time of Domitian of a public, official persecution of Christians, it may be that local tumult around emperor worship in the cities of Asia Minor had gotten some upstart religious leader/troublemaker exiled in order to keep the peace. John, in turn, as recipient of this revelation/prophecy wants to make sure that the seven churches knew that he had gotten this

vision “on the Lord’s Day”—not just any day, but on the day of the assemblies’ common worship.

Revelation among Other Apocalypses (Chs. 1—5)

These contextual realities may explain some of the anomalies of John’s late first-century apocalypse when compared with other Jewish apocalypses from this period and before (Daniel 7—12, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Testament of Levi 2—5, Testament of Abraham). One well-known scholar describes an apocalypse as “...a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” The definition fits Revelation well enough.

Yet unlike all those other apocalypses, John’s is not pseudonymous—pseudonymous meaning that apocalypses are typically written to address something in the author’s present time but is attributed to some ancient Biblical figure from the past with enough foresight to see into a much later future like Daniel, Enoch, or even Abraham. In the Revelation to John, on the other hand, the hearers/readers in Asia Minor assemblies are presumably aware that a known contemporary is communicating this angel-assisted vision precisely to them in their context. Perhaps this is why Revelation calls itself both an apocalypse *and* prophecy. It is an apocalyptic revelation of Jesus Christ but it is also a living Word of God spoken to the recipients and their context, that is, prophetically.

That said, a yielding of ancient authority in the form of traditional apocalyptic pseudonymity requires some other ground for making the known seer’s vision compelling. If first-century John is no ancient, hoary Enoch, Daniel, or Ezra, how else will John be able to

convey the authorization of his apocalyptic vision and its prophetic claims? We already know John calls this apocalypse an “apocalypse of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1), a claim which presumably has some local currency for a seer exiled from his communities. Before the seer launches into the cycles of visions that make up Revelation 6—22, however, John does two important things unique to this apocalypse that are uncharacteristically connected with a (contemporary) name.

First, John launches into a series of letters to the seven communities in Asia Minor he hopes to address (Revelation 1—3). The letters address each of the communities prophetically and, in some, locally differentiated ways. John builds up his apocalyptic credibility on his prophetic relationship to Christians in the seven cities while speaking in the name of the Spirit. Only one other apocalypse in the Jewish tradition uses letters in relation to apocalyptic visions, namely, 2 Baruch, which is roughly contemporaneous with Revelation.

Second, John spends considerable time in Revelation 4—5 developing a typical apocalyptic scene called the “throne room vision,” well known first in what we call the Hebrew Bible (1 Kings 22:19–23; Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1—3 and Ezekiel 10, and Daniel 7:9–18) and mostly later in intertestamental literature (1 Enoch 14:18—16:3; Testament of Levi 3:4–8, 4:2–6 and 5:1–2; 1 Enoch 90:20–22; 1 Enoch 60:1b–10 and 71:5–16; 2 Enoch 20—22 [shorter recension]; and Apocalypse of Abraham 18:—20:5). That said, some of the language and imagery in John’s throne room vision, as elsewhere in Revelation, is not solely Jewish either. Sometimes John’s songs of praise, even those sung in heavenly regions, sound a bit like the praises for Caesar in the imperial cult! Even then, John as seer, in typical apocalyptic fashion, invokes the throne room vision to show both the humility of the messenger and the heavenly heights of his sources for what is to follow.

What follows the throne room vision, of course, are fourteen chapters of apocalyptic battle, death, carnage, and ultimate destruction (Revelation 6—20). Then, at the very end, comes a beautiful vision of the new creation (Revelation 21—22), transformed. For this reason, many preachers prefer the hopeful visions of the end to the rest. However, a critical reading of Revelation, even in those most troublesome sections, might just indicate that it need not be so.

Apocalyptic Visions: (Chs. 6—20)

Much of this central section of Revelation 6—20 is taken up with vision cycles: destructive visions of seven seals (Rev 6:1—8:1), seven trumpets (Rev 8:2—11:18), and seven bowls of wrath (Revelation 16). Some scholars note that the cycles of seven are a bit like looping back over the same thing symbolically again and again. The cycles in succession “loop back” to disclose different aspects of the struggle of faithfulness in Asia Minor (not, by the way, for setting up loopy timetables in each generation throughout church history for the Nostradamus prediction crowd). That said, even the more repetitive cycles of vision are not always about death and judgment.

Amidst the carnage of 6—20, John sometimes *breaks* the pattern of a vision cycle, especially between the sixth and seventh visions, as a way of showing how God interrupts judgment to remind of God’s salvific actions, persons, and purposes. Thus, the scene with those “robed in white” in 7:9—17, typically read on All Saints, is actually an interruption toward the end of the cycle of seven seals in 6:1—8:1. This brief vision of salvation interrupts the visionary cycle to offer a glimmer of salvation in the midst of apocalyptic pain and destruction.

Critical readers need also to be aware that not every Revelation text with violent content is prescribing violence. Christians living in times of relative peace or privilege may feel

themselves far away from John's apocalyptic vision and assume that such texts may actually advocate violence. Given Revelation's troublesome history—its binary symbolization of women as brides/whores and the way it sometimes gloats over the disastrous destiny of its enemies—preachers should be willing to deal with such texts critically in the pulpit. It is nonetheless equally important, especially in contexts of privilege, to acknowledge that texts like Revelation also sometimes describe a violence that already afflicts the saints because that is precisely where the goodness of God is being challenged to the utmost. Discerning Revelation for preaching today therefore requires understanding where Revelation *prescribes* violence and where it *describes* a violence that ought to offend us.

New Creation (Chs. 21-22)

Why should offense be the measure with scripture? Well, consider how this Apocalypse ends. The final two chapters of Revelation open up the possibility that such violence may even offend God, the One on the Throne. For here in these chapters God's purposes are capped off by a final vision, which ends beautifully with a tree of life whose leaves are ultimately for the "healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).