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The Revelation of Jesus the Messiah Revelation 1:1-8 Fr. William Klock

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The book of Revelation has, I think it can very safely be said, produced more useless commentaries than any other book of the Bible. Every generation churns out books, almost all of which are quickly and mercifully forgotten. That said, our generation has turned writing and preaching nonsense about Revelation into an art form, but no generation in Church history has been immune. In the last few years I've been invited to pick through the libraries of several retiring clergymen and have found a number of "gems". A book from the 70s about computerised credit systems and how they were connected to the "mark of the beast", one outlining how Khrushchev is the antichrist—and another doing the same for Henry Kissinger, and yet another for Saddam Hussein. Oops. And one little book titled "88 reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1988". Oops again. That author went on to pen another tract titled "89 reasons Why the Rapture will be in 1989." And there were some more recent—but already past-their-expiry-date—books about blood moons heralding the end. And, of course, more recently there are so-called "Bible prophecy" folks finding the current pandemic in Revelation. I had a phone call from a woman, nearly hysterical, who was convinced mRNA vaccines are the mark of the beast, that they'll mess with your genes, erase your soul, and leave you eternally damned. Revelation is for far too many people, at best, a book of doom and gloom, picked apart and explained and expounded by pessimists, and all too commonly at worst, a fertile ground for kooks and outlandish prognostications. G. K. Chesterton quite accurately wrote, "Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he

saw no creatures so wild as one of his own commentators."¹ These sorts of things end up undermining faith in God's word and faith in God's church. And, Brothers and Sisters, if there's anything you take away from these forthcoming sermons on Revelation, I hope it's the opposite: that Revelation reveals the faithfulness of God in Jesus and is meant to strengthen our faith, enliven our hope, and embolden our mission.

Now, part of the problem is that Revelation is a notoriously difficult book. It wasn't meant to be. The Christians to whom it was written, it's safe to say, had no trouble understanding what it was that the Spirit was communicating to them through the pen of St. John. It has become difficult for us thanks to our distance from the original context. And because of this difficulty—and because all of you have, over the years been exposed to so many different ways of approaching Revelation, some better and some worse than others—I think it's important to talk about these approaches. That's not something I normally do when I'm preaching, but bear with me this morning as I swap my surplice for an academic gown and play professor rather than pastor for a few minutes.

There are four basic approaches to Revelation. And, of course, within each of those approaches you'll find plenty of variation, but this is just an outline so that we can have some interpretive bearings.

The first approach is what we'll call the "Futurist". I put it first because you may or may not be familiar with the other three, but I guarantee that everyone here has been exposed to this one. While it's not the dominant view historically, it is the dominant view today in North American Evangelical circles and it's also the one that gets all the popular attention, because it's the one that purports to tell the future. This is the approach behind the sensationalist best-sellers and Bible prophecy teachers on TV. Simply put, this approach to Revelation sees most, if not all, of the book's events as taking place in the

future. This was the dominant view of the Church in the Second Century and well into the Third. We don't have many details of how they parsed everything out, because this view pretty quickly fell out of favour. In part that was because the "future" came and events didn't happen as these folks had thought they would. (When "88 reasons Jesus is Coming Back in 188" didn't pan out, they were smart enough not to write another tract on why he would come back in 189!) Like our own era, it did produce some sensationalist and goofy predictions, but unlike our era, when those predictions failed this approach to Revelation simply fell out of favour. But it also fell out of favour because, in the Third Century a new approach to interpreting the Bible arose that gave allegory primacy of place. Futurist interpretations pop up here and there in Church history, but usually amongst weird or cultic sects. That's exactly what happened in the 19th Century. That century was a breeding ground for odd, new approaches to biblical interpretation and numerous cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, which put a lot of emphasis on weird eschatology. The Plymouth Brethren, generally orthodox despite some odd beliefs, developed their own system—something now called "Dispensationalism"—but due to a number of factors, it didn't die out like so many others. It was there in relative obscurity for almost a century when three things happened: First, in 1909, a guy named C. I. Scofield published the first modern study Bible and incorporated Dispensationalism into its notes. The Scofield Reference Bible quickly became wildly popular. Second, in 1906, the Pentecostal movement began and quickly latched onto Dispensationalism's claim that the "last days" were about to begin as an explanation for why the Spirit had suddenly returned miraculous gifts to the Church. And, third, in the heat of the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies of the early 20th Century, Dispensationalists' claim—a dubious one, but that didn't matter much—it's claim to be a consistently *literal* means of interpreting the Bible became very popular. And within a couple of decades this odd, obscure, and very recent approach to the Bible became the

¹ *Orthodoxy* (Hendrickson, 2006), 13.

dominant view amongst many Evangelicals—even to the point that anyone who doesn't hold to it has often been viewed with suspicion or accused of being a "liberal". This is the school of interpretation behind the vast majority of "end times" and "Bible prophecy" literature since World War II. But as prominent as it is, it's not the only evangelical approach. It took hold in many of the new Evangelical churches and denominations, but the older Evangelical traditions—Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterian and Reformed, and some Reformed Baptists—already had confessions of faith and established theological traditions that are at odds with Dispensationalism and especially its key defining feature, which is that it maintains a distinction between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalists claim that when the Bible speaks of Israel, it refers and can only ever refer to ethnic Jews, and that the Church is a specifically gentile body.

Dispensationalism not only divides the people of God into two distinct groups, denying the continuity between the old and new covenants, but it also teaches that God essentially has two plans of salvation. The Church is for gentiles and he's got another plan for the Jews. The entire Dispensational approach to Revelation is uniquely built around this belief, which makes it distinct from all other approaches. For this reason classical, confessional Protestants have rejected Dispensationalism. In the last few decades, I think mainly as a protest against Dispensationalism, there has been a movement to revive a more historical Futurist reading of Revelation. It's produced a number of very good, serious commentaries, but hasn't gained much traction at the popular level. The general problem with most Futurist approaches to Revelation, Dispensational or otherwise, is that they leave the book largely irrelevant to the people to whom John wrote it in the First Century. It also ignores the overwhelmingly imminent and urgent nature of John's message. And that's not to mention that this approach has an utterly abysmal track record of ever getting anything right.

The second approach is one we'll call the "Idealist" approach. This approach, in one form or another, has dominated the Church's approach to Revelation from the Third or Fourth Century until the Seventeenth or Eighteenth and continues to dominate both Roman and many confessional Protestant circles. It began as the Church Fathers placed emphasis on interpreting the biblical text allegorically instead of literally. There have often been elements of this approach that have been Futurist, but the trend has been towards flattening the biblical narrative into sort of universal and timeless truths. There have been some positives that have come out of this approach and it's often been seen as the best way to let Revelation speak both to the original audience and to people today, but it falls short in that it largely ignores the original context and, as I said, in that it flattens out and often fails to account for the big biblical narrative.

Third is what we'll call the "Historicist" approach. This is often combined with various Futurist approaches and understands Revelation to be describing the history of the Church from beginning to end, so for example, while the seven churches addressed by John in Chapters 2 and 3 were real churches in Asia Minor, they represent progressively the Church from Acts up to the return of Jesus. The rest of the book plays out the same way. The major problem with this approach is that it accounts only for the church in the West and that every generation that uses it finds itself at the very end and has to massage the details to make them fit the new timeline. Every few years it has to be scrapped and reconstructed. Like the Futurist approach, this may appeal to people today, but it leaves the book largely meaningless to the original audience and simply ignores most of global Christianity in its artificially constructed timeline.

The fourth and last approach is what's usually called the "Preterist" approach—"preter" meaning "something past". This approach has been around since at least the Eighteenth Century. It understands most or all of

Revelation to be describing events which took place in the First Century, typically centring around the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and reads Revelation in close connection with the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus. Again, there are plenty of variations, but most Preterists hold that at least the last few chapters of the book remain in our future. There is an heretical variant of Preterism holding that *all* of the events of Revelation have already taken place, but this isn't very common. The common criticism of Preterism is that while it makes a great deal of sense of the book for Christians in the First Century, it doesn't leave much for us today. This is, however, the approach that I'll be taking here and I think it makes the best sense of the book within the context of the bigger biblical narrative. I think this approach does the best job of reading Revelation as First Century Jews would have done with their deep grasp of the Old Testament and I think it takes account of what Revelation actually is—something we'll get to shortly. It's also really the only approach that takes seriously the language of imminence we see both here in Revelation and in the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus. When John says "soon" and when Jesus says "before this generation passes", Preterists believe they really meant "soon" and "before this generation passes"! I think, too, that Preterist and some Idealist approaches are commended by their optimism. They see the Church, commissioned by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, actually succeeding in the mission we've been given, rather than whisked—or "raptured"—away just as everything turns for the worst.

So, off with the academic gown and back on with the surplice, let's look at the first Chapter and St. John's introduction. Revelation 1:1-8.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who

reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

This is the revelation—in John’s language it’s the *apokalypsis*, an unveiling, making something known. Specifically, it’s the revelation of Jesus the Messiah. John writes that God gave this revelation to Jesus to reveal to his servants—to his Church. What does that mean? Well, first, we know that these early Christians were struggling. These were people who had heard the good news about Jesus, that he had died and risen and that he is Lord. Some of them may even have witnessed those events first-hand. And they believed. In Jesus, the God of Israel was fulfilling his promises. In Jesus, the God of Israel was making all things new. In Jesus, the God of Israel had defeated sin and death and inaugurated new creation. They saw the promises fulfilled. They saw and experienced first-hand the transformation brought by Jesus and the Spirit in the Church. And yet they struggled. The good news was spreading. Little churches were springing up all over the world. But they faced opposition, persecution, and sometimes even martyrdom. They proclaimed: “Jesus is Lord”. And they believed it. They saw the evidence first

hand. But Caesar’s claim to lordship was only growing stronger and his cult was spreading fast—and Christians were facing pressure to acknowledge him. Great temples were being built in some of these cities. And back in Jerusalem, as much as Jesus had denounced the unbelief of his own people, as much as he had pronounced judgement on them, they too were violently persecuting the Church. What did it mean? What was God’s plan? Was their hope misplaced? Was Jesus really Lord?

In those desperate days, God spoke to his Church. Now, consider that in the days of the old covenant, the temple has been the place where earth and heaven met, the place where men and women went to meet God—often to pray and to wait for his revelation. But now there’s a new covenant. Now we meet God in Jesus the Messiah. He is the new temple. He is the one in whom earth and heaven, God and man have been brought together. God gives his word to Jesus and we come to him to receive it. There’s some deep covenantal truth in this first verse.

God’s revelation in Jesus is delivered by an angel to John. It’s the angel who comes to him and acts as a kind of tour guide and expositor of the things he sees. Briefly, who is John? This has been debated since the Second Century and I don’t know that the question will ever have any ultimate resolution this side of the New Jerusalem. The majority view has always been that the John who wrote Revelation is the same John who wrote the Gospel and the three epistles that bear that same name. That’s John the Son of Zebedee or John the Apostle and Evangelist. There may have been another well-known figure in the early Church known as John the Presbyter or Elder. Some have said that he may be the author. Some who don’t want to commit refer to St. John the Divine—the namesake of the parish down the hill on Fifth Street—who was maybe one of these two or maybe a third person. At the end of the day I don’t think it really makes much of a difference and I’m happy with the evidence for John the Apostle—the author of the Gospel and epistles—also

being the author of Revelation. He describes himself as the one “who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw” and I think that certainly sounds like the man who was Jesus’ close friend and who wrote the Gospel. That he could introduce himself to these churches as simple “John”, not “John This” or “John That”, I think also points to his being the well-known John the Apostle.

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy,” John writes. He’s not talking about reading Revelation as if it’s some kind of talisman—just pick something at random and read it and you’ll be blessed. Again, he’s addressing these churches where it will be read aloud to the congregation—where God will reveal himself in Jesus through the reading of his word—and in that these people full of question and maybe even fears and doubts, will be blessed. The word of God will strengthen their faith, their hope, and their joy. It will prepare them for the difficult days to come. And it will remind them of the faithfulness of God.

Brothers and Sisters, this is true about God’s word in general. Read the Bible and be blessed as God reveals himself through his word to you. But I encourage you to let God speak to you this week through the uniqueness of Revelation and to be blessed as your faith, hope, and joy are strengthened. It takes about forty-five minutes to an hour to read the whole book and I guarantee that there are plenty of things you’ll do this week that take longer that won’t leave you as blessed as God’s word will. As John writes, Jesus loves us, he has freed us from our sin by the shedding of his own blood, he has made us priests to God his Father. And even after all of that, if we’re left wondering or left troubled by our situation, come to him and be reassured. John writes at the outset to these churches: “Jesus is coming with the clouds... every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes on earth will wail on account of him.” John draws on the language of the Prophet Zechariah

(12:10-14) to say that Jesus will vindicate the faith of his people. As the Father has revealed his faithfulness to do what he has promised and as he had done so in Jesus, Jesus himself will be faithful to do what he has promised and to finish what he has begun. Have faith. Read his word—his self-revelation—and have even greater faith.

And the last line there in verse 8 points us to the ultimate purpose of everything that has happened and everything that will happen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Jesus has come so that the world will know the Lord God, the one who is both the source and the goal of all of history. That’s what “Alpha and Omega” is getting at. The first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet. Rebellious humanity has rejected and forgotten him, but Jesus has come to make him known—in judgement on those who persist in their rebellion and for salvation to those who believe. For he is the Almighty, the *pantokrator*, the Lord of hosts, whose dominion encompasses the cosmos.

So clearly Revelation is important. But as I said, it’s not an easy book to understand. What can we do that will help us understand beyond just being careful and prayerful as we read? Brothers and Sisters, in these first verses John tells us just what kind of a book this is and that’s a good starting point. First, it’s a letter. And not just any letter. Like the epistles, it’s a letter written to a specific, real, historical people. In the case of Revelation, it was written to a cluster of seven churches in Asia Minor—Western Turkey. It was God’s Spirit-inspired word directly to them and only indirectly to us. That means it had to make sense to them. When we don’t understand something, we often make the mistake of reading it through our present situation and cultural lens, but we can’t do that with the Bible. Before we can start talking about how a text relates to us, we first have to ask what it meant to the people to whom it was originally addressed.

Second, John writes that this is a prophecy. And as we read it, we see that John not only writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, but that he is constantly drawing on those prophets and their language and imagery. This is, I think, the biggest obstacle we face in understanding the book. John’s readers were steeped in the Old Testament (and in a certain way of reading it) that very, very few people are today. The average Christian, at best, knows the Old Testament only as disconnected Bible stories and struggles to string them together into a full narrative. Many know familiar passages from the Prophets, but don’t know anything of the context or history those prophets were addressing—and then just assume that the prophets speak directly to us or to current events. In contrast, for the early Christians the Old Testament was their culture and many knew large sections by heart. We’re not nearly so steeped in the scriptures and so we miss the connections and we misunderstand—or we try to understand them through categories that we do know and make a mess of things. We read about weird astronomical happenings and instead of looking back to the use of such imagery in the prophets, we look to literal events in our own day—like the “blood moons” fiasco of a few years ago. We hear about weird grasshoppers or scorpions and instead of looking to the Old Testament, we try to see how their descriptions fit with modern military hardware and interpret them as tanks and helicopters.

Third, and this follows closely on the last point, we need to read Revelation with the big narrative of God and his people constantly in mind. Getting back to my earlier example, an interpretation that divides the people of God in two rather than stressing the unity and continuity of the people of God between the old and new covenants, can’t be right because it simply doesn’t fit the narrative. Of course, this assumes we’ve got a good grasp of that big story—which is why I so often put the stress I do on exactly that.

Finally, Brothers and Sisters, as we read Revelation we need to keep our eyes on

Jesus. He is the central figure through whom the Father reveals himself and his faithfulness. In his death and resurrection he has accomplished the purpose of God. In him we see not only the love of Jesus, but also the love of the Father for sinners. The Father gave his Son and that Son gave himself for the sake of his rebellious creatures. He is the firstborn of the dead. He is the king. And there’s an obvious promise there as we look around us and see that the work of his kingdom has yet to be fulfilled. The God who has proved himself to be faithful has more work to do and in that we can find faith and hope. In that we find reason to worship the King both for what he has done and for what we know he will do. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Let’s pray: Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.