A Survey of Recent Discussion regarding the Christian Nature of the Book of the Revelation

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Approaches to Revelation

Serious doubts have been expressed about the inclusion of the Book of the Revelation in the New Testament canon. The work has been regarded as sub-Christian, if not unchristian, in content and tone. These difficulties are not just a modern phenomenon. Revelation, after early acceptance, experienced problems in being recognised as canonical, especially in the East.¹ Also at the time of the Reformation one notes Luther’s comments, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it, that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognised”.² Again, Calvin passed over the book in eloquent silence in his exposition of the New Testament. It is interesting that in June 2004 a new translation of the New Testament, *Good As New*, was published in England by retired Baptist minister, John Henson. This translation excludes the book of Revelation entirely from the canon on the grounds that it is contrary to the mind of Jesus, making particular reference to Luther’s comments noted above. Our purpose is to survey recent discussion, to examine again the book that has been a “frightening enigma”³ for many scholars. Even Ladd in his well-known commentary on Revelation could write, “Revelation is the most difficult of all New Testament books to interpret, primarily because of the elaborate and extensive use of symbolism. How are these strange, often bizarre symbols to be understood?”⁴

Excessive Emphasis and Unbalanced

C. H. Dodd claimed that the excessive emphasis on the future had the effect of relegating to a secondary place the elements of the gospel which are central to Christianity.⁵ For Dodd, the book’s conception of the character of God and his attitude to man falls far below the level, not only of the teaching of Jesus, which is said to reflect the new understanding of the infinite loving-kindness of our heavenly Father but also of the best parts of the Old Testament. Therefore:
The God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognised as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor has the fierce Messiah, whose warriors ride in blood up to their horses' bridles, many traits that would recall him of whom the primitive kerygma proclaimed that he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with him.6

Bultmann also adopted a similar stance, regarding the book as a “weakly Christianised Judaism” in which “the peculiar between-ness of Christian existence has not been grasped”.7

However, rather than simply viewing the Apocalypse as “too Jewish” or “more Jewish than Christian” should we not take greater note of the Jewish roots of Christianity? The fact that particularly distinguished the early Christian community from Judaism was the way Christians understood traditional hopes were coming to fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah. Dodd may claim that the book’s teaching falls far below the teaching of Jesus and the best parts of the Old Testament, but it should be remembered that in its judgement passages Revelation does exhibit a certain restraint when compared with other Jewish apocalypses, which detail the punishment of the wicked.8 Even if many scholars hesitate to fully endorse Beasley-Murray’s view that the judgement of the seals, trumpets and the bowls cover a short period in history,9 the majority will see a great deal of recapitulation in these three series of judgements. Again, we should note that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that in the gospels, Jesus himself is presented as not always just expressing words of love, but also at times warnings of judgement.10

The Judas of the New Testament?

D. H. Lawrence’s treatment of Revelation provided evidence that many modern writers have had negative views about the Christian Apocalypse.11 He described the book as “the Judas of the New Testament”. Lawrence explained that while authentic Christianity claims salvation is to be completed hereafter, but is already present and tangible now (11 Cor. 5:17, Col. 3:1), Revelation seems intoxicated with the future, the hope of reigning in glory hereafter compensating the frustrated desire to reign now.

He found in the book a vindictive harping on the torture and destruction of enemies (6:10, 14:11, 20; 18:20; 15:17-21), and claimed that the titles of God and of Christ in Revelation are always titles of power, never of love. He maintained that there are two kinds of Christianity in the New Testament: the Christianity of tenderness, focused on Jesus and the command to love one another, and the other focused on the Apocalypse, i.e. the undying will to power in man. So for Lawrence, the devil has slipped into the New Testament at the last moment, in apocalyptic disguise! “Just as inevitably as Jesus had to have Judas Iscariot among His disciples, so did there have to be a Revelation in the New Testament”.12
In his commentary, Sweet responded to these criticisms. As for the absence of a Christianity of tenderness, Lawrence has lost sight of the master image of the slain lamb, signifying the power of redemptive love. Again, he has also failed to grasp that the structure of the book makes the severity of chapters 6-20 subordinate to the pictures of creation and redemption in chapters 4-5 and of healing fulfillment in chapters 21-22.

**Pre-Christian?**

A rather unique approach to the question of the Christian character of Revelation was found in J. Massyngberde-Ford’s commentary. She maintained that Revelation is not primarily a Christian book. The authorship of chapters 4-11 originated in a trance-like revelation to John the Baptist, recorded by a disciple, before Jesus commenced his public ministry. Chapters 12-22 was written by a disciple of John in the mid sixties, who may or may not have been converted to Christianity. Chapters 1-3, 22:16a, 20b, 21 were added later by a Jewish Christian disciple, who still retained the fiery, somewhat pessimistic outlook of his former master John. Therefore, Massyngberde-Ford placed Revelation earlier than the gospels and most of the New Testament. It was “a prophetic link between the Old and New Covenants, and prepares the way for the gospel”.

The problem is that there are clearly Christian statements and references to Jesus in the book, which many are not ready to explain simply as interpolations. Also the majority of scholars have not accepted Massyngberde-Ford’s view that the lamb of chapter 5 is simply the unnamed divine-human Messiah of Jewish apocalypticism, with no direct reference to the triumph of Jesus and his sacrificial death. Jesus appears indeed to be the central figure in the Apocalypse and the determination of the future depends upon and issues from his enthronement and victory highlighted in chapters 4-5.

Massyngberde-Ford has more recently abandoned her “Baptist” thesis. David Aune explains that in the revision of her Anchor Bible Commentary she also has discarded her previous proposal of sources and regards Revelation as a unity, apart possibly for the seven letters.

Margaret Barker in her recent commentary has confessed a greater sympathy with Massyngberde-Ford than at her first reading of her above work. She now maintains that the Revelation is not a late text from Asia Minor, but the earliest material in the New Testament. It belongs to that time of religious and nationalistic fervour in Palestine, before the war with Rome. However, the book, contra Massyngberde-Ford’s 1975 commentary, is made up of visions collected and preserved by John the Beloved Disciple and the prophets, the greatest of whom was Jesus himself. He had spoken of what he had seen and heard in heaven (John 3:32), but the people did not believe his witness. So Barker stresses that not all of Jesus’ teaching was recorded in the New Testament. Some was deliberately kept secret,
especially the “secrets of the kingdom” (Mark 4:10-11), the heavenly places and the angels. Jesus in fact saw himself as the heavenly High Priest Melchisedek. Barker maintains that he appeared and was baptised when the Qumran Melchizedek text (11 Q Melck) claimed he would appear, the first week of the tenth Jubilee. He came to teach about the last days, establish the kingdom of God and make the great atoning sacrifice. The book of the Revelation unveils the things to come. For Barker, the seven letters are visions to his prophets in Jerusalem by Jesus, which he then sent to pillars of the churches in Asia Minor. Also before the destruction of Jerusalem, John received his own personal experience of the coming of Jesus. He refers to it as the vision of the Mighty Angel coming in the clouds of heaven (10:1). John received a new teaching, some to be kept secret and some to be used to reinterpret the teaching of Jesus.

**Essential Truths or Timeless Relevance**

Another approach to Revelation has been an appeal to the value of its “essential truths” or its “abiding message” for today. For example, Hunter in his work, *Interpreting the New Testament* suggested that John was involved in a particular historical situation and was sure that God is going to intervene catastrophically very soon, with the result that Rome’s end and the world’s end will come. For Hunter, John’s prognostications were not fulfilled as he expected. Rome did not fall. Yet if the seer’s lurid vision of the outpouring of God’s wrath on Rome was not literally fulfilled, his promises of divine succour for the stricken church were realised in the essential truths which he proclaimed through his apocalyptic imagery. Beneath that imagery the seer can emphasise that (a) all history is divinely controlled; (b) the world is a scene of great conflict between good and evil; (c) in the end of the day God will finally cope with evil bringing it to an end and (d) heaven is the most real place of all! According to Hunter, this “modern understanding” of Revelation makes us value it higher than the Reformers did.

A similar approach is adopted by Sweet, whose criticisms of Lawrence we have already noted. He asks whether this book, if based on the assumption, evidently wrong, that the world was about to end has any further importance or value? In reply, he likens Revelation to the writings of modern ecologists. Their predictions of disaster may fail to come off, but their basic perceptions of disaster may still be sound. Therefore, “in spite of its timebound imagery and unfulfilled promises of Christ’s return, Revelation may still be saying things which are of timeless relevance to the world’s health”.

Not all New Testament scholars will be content just to defend Revelation’s place in the canon by affirming simply its “essential truths” or some “timeless relevance” for today.
Astral Prophesy

Bruce J. Malina has suggested a completely new approach to viewing the Book of Revelation. He contends that John’s milieu was one of fascination with the sky. The constellations, planets, comets, the sun and the moon were “beings” which controlled the destiny of man. John “the seer” had his own convictions of the sky and interpreted the planets not along the lines of the Greco-Roman myths, but the Jewish and Christian story of God’s salvation. This “astral prophet” interprets the sky in accordance with what has come about through the advent of Christ. He rejects the categories “apocalyptic” and “eschatology” as the theological jargon of the nineteenth century which fossilise perception and misdirect interpretation. For many scholars Malina’s approach involves reading a great deal more astrological myth into Revelation than is clearly there. In addition, his attempt to move Old Testament prophetic books and Jewish apocalypses in an astrological direction and into astrological contexts has not been convincing to many. For example Beale is doubtful about finding a primary lens in an astral setting instead of a background in the Old Testament and Judaism. He cannot see the altar of 6:9 as equivalent to the Milky Way, or the four horsemen and the seven trumpets and bowls as representing comets. Clear verbal allusions and parallels have long been recognised in the book.

Persuasive Rhetoric and New Interpretive Approaches

E. S. Fiorenza has produced an impressive number of articles on Revelation over many years. In recent work she continues to acknowledge the difficulties theologians and preachers have with Revelation’s “bizarre imagery and bloody content”. The approach to Revelation which Fiorenza now adopts can be described as involving “rhetorical reading”. This “rhetorical” approach for Fiorenza does not mean interpreting Revelation as “mere rhetoric” or something that does not correspond to fact or truth. She proposes that “rhetorical” be understood in its classical sense of “the art and power of persuasion”. Revelation should be understood as a dramatic poem to be read aloud, whose language is to be approached as apocalyptic, which is, for her, not predictive descriptive language but mythological-imaginative language. It has been developed by John to persuade his audience to accept his prophetic interpretation of their situation. It appears however, that for Fiorenza, when all is said and done, John’s dramatic poem is only his interpretation.

Fiorenza’s work is one of a number which involve new interpretative approaches to the book of Revelation. In the past the traditional method of interpreting the book was through a study of its history, i.e. its original author, sources he employed, purpose and the Sitz im Leben from which he wrote and what he intended to reveal to his original audience. This has been
called the diachronic approach. More recently commentators have adopted a new emphasis, i.e. what the text says to the reader in its present form. As the contemporary individual encounters the text he can be challenged, encouraged or comforted by the truth. This is identified as the synchronic approach.

Gilbert Desrosiers assesses the new methods of interpretation and their contribution to the study of Revelation. First, narrative criticism belongs here, focusing as it does more on the story and what it is saying. The narrative critic is interested not in the historical author but rather in the image of himself he unconsciously projects upon the text, the implied author. Also there is a focus on the ideal reader that the writer had in mind. Therefore, the book of Revelation can be interpreted as consisting of a story with a plot (the battle between good and evil, God and Satan), setting, characters, with power in its images.

Liberation theologians have tended to consider the book as outlining an account of resistance which can be exemplified by how Revelation 6:9-11 is interpreted. The souls under the altar are identified as the poor, the landless who suffered at the hands of corrupt governments, powerful landlords, often backed by European and North American economic and political interests. For Desrosiers, their reading of Revelation is a powerful message that should be taken seriously, making western Christians deeply concerned for the poor of the world. But many scholars, while sharing their concerns are not willing to so interpret this book in this manner.

Feminist Theology also when considering Revelation tends to concentrate on gender issues in the book. For example, 14:1-4 pictures the 144,000 “who have not defiled themselves with women”. Desrosiers explains that Feminist critics see in this a condemnation of sexual contact with women and are not ready to understand it in a metaphorical sense of sexual immorality as a symbol for idolatry. Again, in 17 John presents to his readers the Great Harlot. But feminist critics see her raped and killed in the end, all within God’s plan. In 2:20 the false teaching leading astray the church in Thyatira is said to be propagated by “Jezebel” the prophetess. Adela Yarbro Collins considers John’s name-calling has obscured the fact that we have here an important indication of the leadership of women in the early church of this region!

Feminists also find positive images of women in Revelation, i.e. 12:1, the woman clothed with the sun, who gave birth to the man-child; 19:6-9, the bride, the Lamb’s wife. For Desrosiers the motive of all this is to affirm the spiritual equality of men and women in Christ.

Care is needed with the new interpretations of Revelation. If certain guidelines are not followed then it is possible to read a great deal into the text. As Paul R. Noble has suggested:

The text was produced in a particular historical-critical situation, knowledge of which is indispensable for a sensitive synchronic reading; and conversely, historical reconstructions of what lies behind a text are dependent upon an accurate literary appreciation of the texts final form.
A Perceived Social Crisis in the Mind of John or the Community?

Biblical studies, which examine the social situation reflected in a particular work, have become quite popular in recent years. This “sociological perspective” has also been adopted in the study of the book of the Revelation. In addition, several recent discussions seem even less concerned with the historical or social realities of the situation as with John’s perception of it. We have already mentioned Fiorenza, who sees the communities to which John wrote facing persecution in the reign of Domitian (AD 95), but focuses more on the “rhetoric” by which the author seeks to persuade them to remain faithful. Others are not so certain that actual persecution was even happening at the time. Collins can speak of a “perceived crisis” in the writer’s own mind. Although, admittedly, she does suggest that the situation may not be all that different from that in 1 Peter, i.e. the conviction from present experience that there were more and greater trials still to come.

Thompson in *Apocalypse and Empire*, clearly concludes that the crisis is only in the mind of John and his community, which he sees as a “cognitive minority” far from representative of Christians generally in Asia Minor. This minority saw the main body of Christians who conformed to Asian society as compromisers, while the Jews were a synagogue of Satan. Ramsey Michaels also takes a similar approach. He acknowledges that we have all known individuals in our own time who lead quiet and peaceful lives in prosperous suburban communities and yet can speak constantly of “spiritual warfare” or “attacks of Satan” and the like. He suggests that most of us would be reluctant to think of John as such a person. Yet he confesses that when the book of the Revelation is stripped of actual historical references “we are tempted to conclude that it is merely the expression of a mood or an eccentric world view and is not about anything”. We should, however note his acknowledgement that there is always the possibility, disturbing to some, that a “naive” approach to Revelation may be right after all.

It is difficult to accept that this book is only about the expression of a mood when one sees the claims the author makes for the origin of his visions. They are God-given, through Jesus Christ (1:1) via an angel and in the Spirit (1:10; 4:2; 17:3 and 21:10). The conjunction of God, Jesus Christ and his angel has, as Beasley-Murray explains, the effect of according an unheard-of authority to the content of John’s prophecy or “perceptions”. In this context we should mention Stephen Smalley’s recent book on Revelation, *Thunder and Love*. He also focuses to a large extent on the Christian community in Asia Minor. This community is seen as beset with theological and ethical problems to which Smalley believes the apostle John gives an early response, before the composition of his Gospel or the Johannine Epistles. He seems able to explain any reference to a “vindicative
tone” in this book, which he sees for example in Rev. 18, as John’s own reaction to his Patmos experience. “Such rage would be in line with the Psalmist’s hatred of God’s enemies (as in Ps. 58), and the holy anger of Jesus when he cleansed the temple (John 2:12-22)”.

**A Truly Christian Book?**

David Aune in the introduction to his three volume commentary discusses what he claims to be the stages or the history of the composition of Revelation, further identified as “diachronic composition criticism”. He sees the text as the end product of a literary process over an extended period of time. He suggests an initial stage in the composition, probably in the 1950s or 1960s, involving the production of twelve self-contained independent textual units, followed by the formation of a “first edition” and a “second edition”. The first edition, thoroughly apocalyptic in character, comprised approximately 1:7-12a and 4:1-22:5, where the twelve units were included, and was possibly anonymous or pseudonymous. The second edition, which has a strongly prophetic and parenetic emphasis added 1:1-3, 1:4-6, 1:12b-3:22 and 22:6-21, plus a number of expansions in the text of the first section. The author-editor, whose Palestinian Jewish origin is demonstrated by his familiarity with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, plus the influence of both Hebrew and Aramaic on his Greek style, moved from Judaism to Christianity at some time in his experience. This changing theological perspective explains why parts of Revelation have a thoroughly Jewish character and other sections a thoroughly Christian character. The author has become an early Christian prophet, demonstrated in the striking differences in the early and later Christology. In the “second edition” probably completed during the 1990s titles and attributes normally reserved for God in Judaism are applied to the exalted Christ.

With regard to the Christology of Revelation, to achieve the separation of two editions Aune must acknowledge the presence of “exceptions”, “interpolations”, “explanatory glosses” and “Christianising additions” in both, e.g. 1:4; 1:11; 11:8; 12:11; 13:10; 14:12-13; 16:6, 15; 17:6; 18:24 and 20:4-6. Not all scholars will be ready to follow him here, but appreciate the emphasis on the Christian nature of both “sections”.

Certain earlier scholars have taken a more positive approach in seeking to arrive at an understanding of the Book of Revelation. G. R. Beasley-Murray argued for the acceptance of a truly Christian interpretation. He examined the supposed sub-Christian nature of its Christology, its eschatology and its doctrine of God, which has been claimed obscures the apostolic gospel, lying at the heart of the New Testament. In considering its eschatology, he compared the portrait of the Messiah as a lamb in the Jewish apocalyptic work, Testament of The Twelve Patriarchs (2nd century BC), with that in Revelation chapter 5. In the Testament of Joseph ch. 19 we have in fact two Messiahs, one from Aaron and another from Judah, a lamb...
and a lion. The lamb arises to destroy the mighty nations and bring deliverance to Israel by way of orthodox conquest in battle. It has nothing to do with sacrifice, but is the young champion of the Flock of God. In Revelation 5 the two figures of the lamb and the lion are fused together and unlike the lamb in the Testament of Joseph, John’s Lamb “stands as it had been slain”, i.e. it has been slaughtered but lives again. Since Exodus typology is common in the Book of the Revelation, it seems clear that John intends his readers to recognise here also God’s Passover Lamb, in 5:9 the Lamb ransomed men to God. The Warrior Lamb has thus conquered by accepting the role of Passover Lamb and so has made possible a second Exodus. For Beasley-Murray this transformation of the orthodox viewpoint of apocalyptic cannot be exaggerated. “It is more than the change of an apocalyptic figure into a Christian symbol for the Saviour. The very nature of eschatology and salvation has been transformed in this change of concept of the Messiah”.46 The eschatology of Revelation is proclaiming that the long awaited deliverance that initiates the new age has already been achieved!

Beasley-Murray also maintained that the Christology of Revelation is “very lofty”.47 Worship is offered to the Lamb such as belongs to God alone. He is Alpha and Omega (22:13), mediator of creation (3:14) as of redemption (ch. 5) and of the final kingdom (19:11ff), which is the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ (11:15). Again, the doctrine of God in the Revelation should not be viewed by itself, but rather in the light of the Christology, soteriology and eschatology presented in the book. The God of creation (ch. 4) is also the God of redemption (ch. 5). It is God in Christ who delivers mankind and God in Christ who judges mankind.

For Beasley-Murray, Revelation’s unfolding of the judgement of God has often been misunderstood. Although, as we have mentioned already, not all will readily accept this view, for him, the three series of messianic judgments, seals, trumpets and bowls, present from three different aspects a single, short period of judgement in history. Most however will be happy with Beasley-Murray’s further insight that the brief period in Revelation of whatever length, ought to be seen as a repetition of Israel’s experience in Egypt. Antichrist is another Pharaoh, who resists God and brings judgment on himself and those associated with him, like the plagues of Egypt. But, as in Exodus, the crucial event is not the plagues, but the redemption which brings deliverance.

These arguments which Beasley-Murray has presented make a strong case for seeing the true Christian nature of Revelation. Its purpose will not only have been the encouragement of the saints in their dark hour but, for him, the bringing of men to their senses (9:20) and to belief in the gospel (14:6), that they might share in the blessings of Christ’s redemption (ch. 5) and future glory (ch. 21-22) – a truly Christian book.

Kümmel also examined the Apocalypse of John as an apocalyptic and prophetic book.48 In a masterly way, he outlined how the Christ event has meant Christian modification to the apocalyptic view. As others have, he
found many links in Revelation with this genre. However, he stressed the fact that “at more than one point the seer of the Apocalypse frees himself in a characteristic way from the scheme of apocalyptic literature and sketches an historical picture of quite a different sort from Jewish apocalyptic”.  

Some notable differences are the fact that Revelation is not a pseudonymous book. John writes under his own name, he presents what he has seen, not secret wisdom allegedly from primitive times. The book is intended for a large circle and its literary framework, a preface (1:4f) and conclusion (22:21) is reminiscent of the epistolary form of much early Christian literature. For Kümmel, it is in its view of history that the Apocalypse contrasts even more sharply with the Jewish type. What we have in Revelation is “a total recasting of the apocalyptic view of history out of the Jewish into the Christian mold”.  

The apocalyptic view of history has received a new substructure through the historical appearance of Jesus. The apocalyptic character of Revelation is distinct from the normal pattern in Jewish apocalypticism where, for example, 1st century works like 1 Ezra or 2 Baruch were penned as if by their original heroes. Here in Revelation there is no look back into the past or predictions of the future written after the event or as Kümmel put it “no forward view out of the fictional past into the present. For John, the point of departure for his eschatological hope is rather the belief in the saving act of God in Jesus, and in his redemptive work which signifies victory”.  

In the light of this, we must acknowledge that while apocalyptic has been strongly influential in this book, it has experienced significant modification because of its presentation of Christ’s appearance or God’s intervention in world history in him. The apocalyptists looked forward to the end of the age for deliverance and blessing. John stresses that this deliverance has already been achieved in Christ.  

Morris also acknowledges that with its interest in end-time events, its symbolism and the revelations made through angels, Revelation has generally been classed as an apocalyptic book. Yet he sees a different emphasis here. Apocalyptists were normally very pessimistic about this age, with the present world dominated by evil. John however, while recognising that there will be an outbreak of increasing satanic activity in the last time, still sees history as the sphere in which God has accomplished his redemption. “The really critical thing in the history of mankind has already taken place, and it took place here, on the earth, in the affairs of men”.  

These are vital insights from both Kümmel and Morris. It is so important to grasp the fact that for John the lamb has already been victorious and all future history flows from this. As one who shares “the tribulation and the kingdom” (1:9), he wishes to assure the threatened church that it is not Rome which rules, it is God who rules (see 4:2, where a throne stood in heaven), in fact, in his understanding, it is the Lamb who rules, for he has taken the book out of the right hand of him who sits upon the throne (5:7). The Lamb will execute the future purposes of God for the world. Recent commentaries have also adopted this understanding. Beale in his recent major work on Revelation clearly accepts this, for he entitles the
subsection on 5:1-14, “God and the Lamb are glorified because they have
begun to execute their sovereignty over creation through Christ’s death and
resurrection, resulting in inaugurated and eventually consummated
judgment and redemption”.54 Aune also in Excursus 5A, Christ as the
Lamb, suggests that the author of Revelation has fused both sacrificial and
apocalyptic or messianic associations together in the single figure of the
Lamb.55 The scroll of God’s redemptive purpose given to the Lamb who is
worthy consists of “the entire eschatological scenario extending from 6:1
through 22:9”.56

Desrosiers, while acknowledging that many commentators have been
uneasy with the images of God and Christ found in the book of Revelation,
accepts that these images can be reconciled with Gospel passages and
traditional faith.57 The book is one of the most theocentric in the Bible, with
God as Eternal ruler, Almighty and Creator. It also affirms the centrality of
Christ and could be said to be more a book about him than the end of the
world. Some of the titles bestowed upon Christ are original to this work.
“The book is a repository of information concerning Christ’s role in God’s
redemptive history as well as in his sharing in God’s divinity and
sovereignty”.58 In addition, the Holy Spirit is presented as the agent of
John’s visionary experience. In the letters he is mentioned at the end of
each which suggests that he is closely associated with the prophetic
mandate of John. The phrase “seven spirits of God” has been interpreted by
certain scholars as affirming that the Spirit is God’s and the Lamb’s agent in
the world.59

Finally, Smalley adds support for accepting Revelation as a Christian
writing in concluding that the beloved disciple and apostle wrote both it
and the Gospel on the basis of significant similarities between the two
books.60 He highlights the Exodus-Moses Motif, eschatological ideas, its
presentation of Jesus as Word, Lamb and Son of Man, the fact that he is
glorified also through his death and the manner in which they use early
exegetical traditions.

Revelation therefore is an optimistic book and the message is that the
God’s purposes are sure and cannot be overthrown.

True Prophesy

The final positive approach to Revelation we should note is by Richard
Bauckham. John is a prophet himself with a fresh revelation to contribute
(1:1-4; 22:6, 9).61 He was convinced that God’s purposes in history were
consistent and therefore His great acts of salvation and judgement in the
past could be understood as models for what He would do in the future.
John could therefore echo the Old Testament imagery and prophesies, for
example, of the exodus or the fall of Babylon or Tyre. This does not mean
that he was ignorant of their original reference to the great pagan powers
contemporary with the prophets who pronounced these oracles. But he saw
Rome as the successor to Babylon in its political opposition to the church. For John, since the evil of such cities was echoed and surpassed by Rome, God's judgement would certainly also fall upon her. As Bauckham explains, “The city which the prophetic cap fits must wear it”, and adds further, “This principle allows prophetic oracles to transcend their original reference, without supposing that somehow when Jeremiah referred to Babylon he meant Rome”. Again, as Bauckham explains, Old Testament prophetic promises frequently exceeded the fulfillment. In other words, what was promised was not fully realised in the return from exile and in this lay the roots of John’s further visions as to how they would be fulfilled.

Bauckham also makes clear with regard to the prophecies of Revelation that the book still has a kind of eschatological excess. This is seen in the use of universalistic language that was not fully relevant at the time, since the church was not yet truly universal. It is however this language which gives it power to reach as far as the parousia. For Bauckham, we can only understand this if we grasp the true nature of biblical prophecy. Biblical prophesy always both addressed the prophet’s contemporaries about their own present and the future immediately impending for them, but it also raised hopes which meant that the readers were able to transcend their immediate relevance and continue to direct them and later readers to God’s purpose for the future. This is also so when we come to the Book of the Revelation. Should the question be asked as to whether we can accept that Revelation is true Christian prophecy, Bauckham in The Climax of Prophecy maintains that this matter cannot simply be answered by the judgment of individuals or groups. The use of the book as scripture by the church over many centuries in a wide variety of historical situations vindicates, for him, its ability to convey the Word of God to God’s people today.

Concluding Comments

It was common in the past in seeking to interpret the book of the Revelation to outline four main approaches. Those who adopted the Historicist approach sought to find throughout the book the entire history of the church until the return of Christ. The Idealist view avoided having to find any such historical fulfillment in the symbols of Revelation and saw only a symbolical portrayal of the spiritual cosmic conflict between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil. The Futurist interpretation views the seven letters as successive periods of church history followed by the rapture of the church as John is caught up into heaven in 4:1. The rest of the book is future and leads up to the millennial reign of Christ, the judgement and the end of the world. Finally, the Preterist view understood the book as a “tract for the times” written in response to the persecutions which God’s people were experiencing. The beast was imperial Rome and the Asian priesthood promoting the worship of Rome was the false prophet. The book
proclaimed that God would intervene, Christ would return, the beast would be destroyed and the kingdom of God would be established. The fact is that God did not intervene, Christ did not return and Rome was not overthrown. Many today who would adopt a positive approach to Revelation suggest that there may very well be elements in all four views that are useful in interpreting the book. However it seems important to clearly grasp that the book should be read in the light of its own time and the particular situation of the Christian community under the cruel might and power of the Emperor and Rome. The author’s purpose is to give a prophetic interpretation of the difficult situation of the church in the end-time from the perspective of the eschatological future. The real point here is that to begin to understand Revelation one must be transported back to John’s day and see him prophetically addressing the threatened church as to what will happen in the future. What we have here is “a prophesy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in a letter form.” Thus the people of God are being made aware how God will undertake for them, since the future of the world is in his hands. Rather that compromise with the Roman powers, which some may have been advocating, as the letters express, the Lord calls for faithfulness unto death (e.g. Rev. 2:10). Therefore, in understanding Revelation we must seek to get back into John’s time and see what God revealed about the future from that perspective.

It is possible then that the best approach to Revelation is a blending of the preterist and the futurist view. A moderate futurist view will find no need to only see the church in chapters 1-3. The seven churches cannot be only a forecast of the seven ages of church history. They were actual churches in a threatened situation, but the church as the people of God will also be seen in the later chapters. The primary purpose of John throughout the whole book is to call God’s people to be faithful until the final outworking of God’s purpose and the end of the world.

It is here that the reader must appreciate the blending of two approaches, the diachronic approach and the synchronic. As one encounters the text today he must, as has been explained, read the message from John’s point of view, but allow it to speak into the present situation and to be moved to remain true to the Lord God through its inspiring message.

It is time, in the light of our discussion to turn afresh to the book of the Revelation. Even if we will still have difficulties with not a few of the details of the book, the overall message (the Lord God omnipotent reigns) and it subsequent call to faithfulness is vital and no doubt will become increasingly more so, in the age in which we live.

Notes


6 Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching, 33.


12 ibid. 14.


14 ibid. 48ff.


16 ibid. 37.


18 M. Barker, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).


20 ibid. 103ff.

21 Sweet, Revelation, 2.

22 ibid. 4.


24 ibid. 12.

25 G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids, 1999), 42.


28 ibid. 20.

29 ibid. 36.


31 ibid. 31

32 ibid. 70.


34 Desrosiers, An Introduction to Revelation, 81.


38 R. Michaels, Interpreting the Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids, 1992), 49.

39 ibid. 49.

40 ibid. 49.


42 S. S. Smalley, Thunder and Love, John’s Revelation and John’s Community (Milton Keynes, 1994).

43 Smalley, Thunder and Love, 144, n. 137.

44 Aune, Revelation, cviii-cxxiv.


46 ibid. 279.
47 ibid. 282.
48 Kümmel, 458f.
49 ibid. 459.
50 ibid. 461.
51 ibid. 461.
53 ibid. 93.
54 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 337.
55 Aune, Revelation, 368.
56 ibid. 374.
57 Desrosiers, An Introduction to Revelation, 95-100.
58 ibid. 97.
59 ibid. 99.
62 ibid. 153.
63 ibid. 156.
What are some of the main arguments as to whether the Book of Revelation was, or was not, written by the same person who wrote the three Epistles and/or the Gospel according to John? What do we know about the social and historical context of this book? What was going on in Asia Minor in the late first century, when this book was most likely written? What do the letters in Rev 2–3 tell us about the early Christian churches in Asia Minor? How is the Book of Revelation comparable to modern science-fiction books or movies? Make a list of similarities and differences in content, purpose, style, symbolism, etc. How are the teachings of the Book of Revelation still applicable for people who live fairly comfortable and secure lives today, without experiencing much religious persecution? The Revelation The first word of this book, Ἀποκάλυψις [Apokalypsis], should be kept in mind by the reader throughout the book. For it is God’s intention to reveal rather than conceal: In the New Testament, apokalypsis always has the majestic sense of God’s unveiling of himself to his creatures, an unveiling that we call by its Latin name revelation. . . . It depicts the progressive and immediate unveiling of the otherwise unknown and unknowable God to his church throughout the ages. 2. The last of six lectures in a Survey of the Bible class taught at liberti church center city in the summer of 2012. This lecture contains a survey of the contents and background of the letters of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, and a discussion on how to use the Bible in one’s own personal spiritual life. Copyright: Attribution Non-Commercial (BY-NC). Download as PDF, TXT or read online from Scribd. Flag for inappropriate content. saveSave Bible Survey 6: NT Letters, Revelation, & The Bibl For Later. Related.