

Christians would surely shed their blood. John could promise, with more assurance than the author of the Book of Wisdom: "In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died . . . but they are at peace . . . they will govern nations and rule over peoples" (Wis 3:2-3, 8). He would encourage, not by conjuring up false hope of miraculous intervention but by his reinterpretation of the suffering of Christians. The beast could, and would, strike mercilessly and savagely; no doubt of that. The enduring comfort was that the powerless victims would be, and would be seen to be, the ultimate victors. There is comfort rooted in realism.

It was not John's last word. It was the *prophet* John who spoke the limitless graciousness of God. In his manner he voiced the conviction of Paul: "God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all" (Rom 11:32).

V. Lines of Interpretation

Revelation is largely, if not exclusively, an apocalyptic work. While in the early Greek and Syriac Churches it was treated with some suspicion, and was largely ignored, it was readily accepted in the Latin Church. Commentators on the book, however, seem not to have understood it or, at least, not to have appreciated the literary form and imagery of apocalyptic. And there was a preoccupation with millennialism—an interpretation, often literal, of the thousand-year reign of Revelation 20:1-6. Down the ages, the book has been subjected to varied and contradictory expositions. Yet the picture is not as confusing as it seems; in practice, we may discern four principal lines of interpretation.

1. *Non-historical or "idealist" interpretation*

In this view, the book is concerned with ideas and principles—with timeless truths. Its purpose is to depict the perennial struggle of good and evil and the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. It is not really concerned with the early Church; not at all with the Church of later times. While this aloofness from historical reference may enable it to have relevance for all periods of the Church's history, it is cavalier in its ignoring of specific historical references to the first-century setting of Revelation. The work is made irrelevant to the situation perceived by John and its first readers. And the fact that Revelation is cast as a letter and thus meant to address, directly, its original recipients, is ignored.

2. *World-historical (Church-historical) interpretation*

In this approach, Revelation is regarded as a detailed prophecy of identifiable historical events—in short, as an inspired forecast of the whole reach of human history. A variant form discerns seven stages in the history of the Church. In either case, the upshot is that the interpreter sees John as predicting the course of history down to the interpreter's own time. Indeed, the alleged historical references have to be so contrived that the time of the interpreter may be regarded as the promised last age. There are obvious flaws. The view presupposes a misunderstanding of biblical prophecy, which is taken to be prediction of future events of world history. Also, there has to be constant, and contradictory, revision of alleged historical references, as the end stubbornly refuses to materialize. And, until recently, the "world-history" envisaged was, in practice, European history only. Most damaging of all, the book, in this perception, could have meant nothing to its first readers.

3. *End-historical ("futurist") interpretation*

In light of this interpretation, Revelation is taken to be exclusively concerned with happenings at the close of the age. Even the seven Churches of chapters 2–3 are not real Churches of first-century Asia but seven periods of Church history. The "dead" Church of Laodicea becomes the apostate Church of the interpreter's own time. The rest of the book looks to the end of the world and the events that will usher in the second coming of Christ. Since chapters 4–22 predict only those events that are to happen in the last years of world history, and since the interpreter stands at the threshold of the end, the whole book is meaningless not only for its first readers but for all subsequent generations up to the last. Boring (49) scathingly observes: "It is this interpretation that has become so pervasive among media 'evangelists' and the purveyors of pop-eschatological literature." Something needs to be said about this most recent version of the interpretation in question.

Premillennial dispensationalism is a brand of fundamentalist eschatology that is notably prevalent in the United States. An indication of its popularity is the best-seller success of a book by Hal Lindsay: *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). This is also the position that underlies the teaching of the major contemporary television evangelists. The term "dispensationalism" refers to the theory that God "dispenses" or administers the divine purpose throughout history in seven distinct and successive stages, called "dispensations." The seventh dispensation is that of the millennium (Rev 20:1-6). "Premillennial" distin-

guishes this view from other beliefs about the return of Christ at the close of history. Premillennialists believe that Christ will return before the millennium. After a brief reign of Antichrist, he will come to destroy decisively the powers of evil in the great battle of Armageddon.

The concept of a millennium—understood literally as a thousand-year reign with Christ on earth—and the final battle of Armageddon shows the influence of Revelation on the dispensationalist stance. History is rapidly moving to a showdown: the final, decisive battle of good and evil will be fought in the valley of Megiddo (Rev 16:16). Even if some dispensationalists interpret Ezekiel 38–39 as envisaging a world-wide nuclear holocaust, the climactic moment will still occur in the valley of Megiddo. A further refinement is the “rapture”; this time the single text 1 Thesalonians 4:16–17 is pressed into service. Using vivid apocalyptic language, Paul had underlined the truth that all the faithful will live with the Lord forever. He spoke of all being “caught up” (“rapt up”) to meet the Lord of the parousia—hence the “rapture” of the dispensationalists. True believers will, at the end, be “raptured” from the earth and thus will escape the gruesome destruction of the rest of humankind.

Here we have not only gross misinterpretation of Revelation (and other biblical texts), but something unsavory and even dangerous. The idea of an elect minority being shunted to the safe regions of the upper air while a vengeful Lamb destroys the inhabitants of the earth is scarcely Christian. Politically, it could be maintained that world-wide nuclear war is really part of God’s plan for his world. All of this is far removed from the theology of John of Patmos.

4. *The contemporary-historical (“preterist”) interpretation*

This method presupposes that Revelation is wholly concerned with the circumstances of John’s day (“contemporary” meaning John’s contemporaries). In its extreme form it maintains that the author was wholly preoccupied with his own time; his book has no reference whatever to later ages. While the view makes the work meaningful to its original readers, it renders it basically meaningless for all subsequent readers. Taken more flexibly, the view implies the application of historical method to the study of Revelation. It assumes that Revelation, no differently from any other New Testament writing, is set in a particular first-century situation. On this understanding, it is the method followed by all modern critical biblical scholars. One may add that present-day scholars do, in practice, adopt some elements of the “idealist” interpretation. Revelation is surely concerned with the struggle between good and evil and with the ultimate triumph of the reign of God. These were concerns of John

and of his Asian contemporaries. To understand Revelation properly, one must begin with the communities to which it was written. This approach I have outlined above, and keep constantly in view throughout the commentary.

VI. *An Outline*

The author of Revelation wrote in idiosyncratic Greek. Some of his un-Greek idiom may be due to the fact that his native tongue was Semitic, most likely Aramaic. But this cannot be the whole story: his peculiar grammar and syntax appear studied and are not due to a poor grasp of Greek. It has been suggested that John wrote as he did in conscious protest against Hellenistic culture—his was “an act of cultural pride of a Jewish Semite” (Yarbo Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 47). The distinctive style pervades the book—a factor in the cumulative argument that speaks for a unified, structured work. This is not to say that it is easy to discern the precise structure intended by John. There are unmistakable features, notably, reference to three scrolls (1:11; 5:1; 10:1); and four septets: messages (chs. 2-3), seals (6:1-8:1), trumpets (8:2-11:9), and bowls (chs. 15-16). There have been many attempts to trace an elaborate sequence throughout. While the book is surely not shapeless, it seems to me that little is to be gained by imposing a logical plan on a work of such imaginative power and such deep religious feeling. It is more helpful to propose a summary of the book, one which may suggest a line of interpretation.

Summary

Overture (Ch. 1). The prologue (1:1-3) introduces Revelation as a letter of the prophet John to be publicly read at community worship, addressed to seven Churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:4-8). In a striking vision (1:9-20) John received his prophetic commission. One “in human form,” the glorified Christ, walked among seven lampstands (the seven Churches) holding in his right hand—that is, in his power—seven stars: the heavenly counterparts of the Churches. He is no absentee landlord.

Prophetic Messages (Chs. 2-3). In the messages, each Church hears a verdict based on precise knowledge of its situation, both external (there are topical references) and spiritual. There is praise and blame—usually a mixture of both. Ephesus receives both censure and commendation. The tribulation and poverty of faithful Smyrna are noted, as well as that Church’s special problem with Jewish hostility. The Church of Pergamum

holds out bravely in a center of emperor-worship; but the Nicolaitans, John's bugbear, have made inroads. The community of Thyatira, otherwise exemplary, tolerates a Christian teacher—scathingly labeled "that Jezebel"—who proposes adaptation to the prevailing ethos, a proposal anathema to the prophet. This is "Nicolaitanism." The Church of Sardis is in poor shape; it lacks backbone. Philadelphia, a poor, humanly powerless community merits unstinted praise. On the other hand, the opulent Church in the prosperous town of Laodicea fares badly: about this community alone the heavenly scrutinizer has nothing good to say. These messages should be kept in mind throughout the visions that follow. Though John might seem to live in a fantasy world, his concern is focused on these troubled Churches. His purpose is firmly pastoral.

The Scroll Vision (Chs. 4-5). The opening vision of the throne of God (ch. 4) is manifestly inspired by several prophetic texts, notably the inaugural vision of Ezekiel. Before the throne, the "twenty-four elders" are heavenly counterparts of the earthly people of God; the "four living creatures" represent all aspects of created life. In a great liturgy the whole of creation sings praise of the Creator. In chapter 5 the "One seated on the throne" (designation of God throughout) handed over to the Lamb the sealed scroll which he held in his right hand: a transfer of power. The scroll contained God's redemptive plan for his world, a plan to be put into effect by the "Lamb who was slain." The heavenly hymns, in praise of the Lamb, serve to interpret the vision.

The Seven Seals (6:1-8:5). The breaking of the scroll-seals by the Lamb unleashed a series of plagues which follows the pattern of events in the synoptic apocalypse (Mark 13 parr.): war, strife among nations, famine, pestilence, persecution, cosmic phenomena. The first four seals (6:1-8) are the celebrated "four horsemen of the Apocalypse"—war and its attendant evils. The fifth and sixth seals introduce martyrs resting underneath the heavenly altar (6:9-11) and the traditional cosmic signs that presage the End (6:12-17). Before the breaking of the last seal the servants of God were sealed with the seal of the living God (7:1-8), sealed for protection *through* the great tribulation: 144,000, the Israel of God. In 7:9-17 they, beyond the tribulation, celebrate victory in a heavenly feast of Tabernacles. The seventh seal (8:1-5) marks an end which is also a beginning: it heralds a fresh series of plagues (8:6-11:19).

The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19). The trumpets, modeled on the plagues of Egypt, are presented in much the same manner as the seals: the first four are described in a few verses (8:7-13); the others unfold at greater length, interspersed with other visions. The fifth trumpet (or first woe) depicts a plague of demonic locusts (9:1-12); the sixth (second woe) shows

vast demonic forces from beyond the Euphrates, bent on the destruction of Rome (9:13-21). These plagues strike one-third of the earth, just as the seals struck "a fourth of the earth." There will be no such qualification in the parallel plagues of bowls. Yet, even there, a prospect of repentance is still held out to "the inhabitants of the earth"—the enemies of God and of the Lamb.

Chapter 10 opens with a vision of a mighty angel holding a little scroll open in his hand: a fresh prophetic commission. It is an "open scroll": the time of waiting is over. Before morning comes the pre-dawn darkness of the final tribulation. Pagans will tread down the holy city for 1260 days (a variant of the three-and-a-half years of Daniel: a limited period of tribulation before final vindication) but the temple and those worshipping in it will be spared (11:1-2). The Church as such will stand; Christians must suffer the ordeal. Throughout the time of tribulation, the two witnesses (11:3-14), representing the Church, will exercise their prophetic ministry. Slain by the power of evil, they will be vindicated by God and restored to life. They mirror the destiny of the Lamb.

The Woman and the Dragon (Ch. 12). Chapters 12-13 offer a behind-the-scenes view of the power of evil at work in the present; chapter 14 will offer an anticipatory view of the victory of God in salvation and judgment. Chapter 12 combines a narrative describing an encounter between a pregnant woman and a dragon (vv. 1-6, 13-17) with a narrative depicting a heavenly battle (vv. 7-9). This sandwich-technique, reminiscent of Mark, indicates that the narratives must be understood in conjunction. The woman symbolizes the people of God bringing forth the Messiah; the dragon is the "ancient serpent" of Genesis 3. The woman's child was snatched, from the destructive intent of the dragon, to the throne of God: precisely by dying, Jesus defeated the dragon and was exalted to God's right hand. The expulsion of Satan—in his role of "accuser" of Christians—from heaven is the result of the victory of Christ on earth. Though defeated in heaven, evil still finds scope on earth. While the Church, as such, is under God's special care, the faithful are vulnerable.

The Two Beasts (Ch. 13). The two beasts of chapter 13, instruments of the dragon, are, respectively, Rome and the propagators of the imperial cult. John's first beast, emerging from the sea, is a composite of the four beasts of Daniel 7:2-8. To this beast the dragon (Satan) gave his power and authority. The beast is a parody of the Lamb; the healing of its mortal wound is reference to the Nero legend. It is not only enemy of God; it is enemy of humankind. The second beast (later called the "false prophet"), who induces all the "inhabitants of the earth" to worship the first beast, is the imperial religion in the service of Rome.

Salvation and Judgment (Ch. 14). In deliberate and striking antithesis to the beast and its followers stand the Lamb and his followers (14:1-5). Satan, the beasts and their followers ("the inhabitants of the earth"), the woman and her children, the Lamb and his companions—the *dramatis personae* of the eschatological struggle—have been introduced. Next comes the proclamation of the hour of judgment (14:6-13) which is, paradoxically, proclamation, too, of an "eternal gospel." This is followed by the proleptic harvest (14:14-16) and vintage (14:17-20) of the earth.

The Last Plagues (Chs. 15-16). The seven plagues "which are the last" are announced in chapter 15; the following chapter shows their execution. Modeled, like the trumpets, on the plagues of Egypt, the bowls follow the pattern of a rapid unfolding of the first four (16:1-9). This time, however, chastisement is universal and definitive: all followers of the beast are stricken. Moreover, they are already gathered at Armageddon, symbol of disaster (16:12-16), to await destruction (cf. 19:17-21). In chapter 16 the focus narrows from the cosmos to the representative of the world's rebellion against the Creator—Rome—leading to the climactic chapters 17-19.

The End of Babylon (17:1-19:10). Although the fall of Rome is proclaimed in 14:8, and is briefly described in 16:19, the end of the city, the great persecuting power, cannot be treated so casually. The whole of chapter 17 is given over to a description of Babylon—the goddess Rome—seated on the satanic beast. An *angelus interpretes* lists the significant details of the vision: the woman, the beast, its seven heads and its ten horns. The beast is that of chapter 13. The angel offers a two-fold explanation of the seven heads: seven hills and seven emperors. The ten horns are ten kings, united in wholehearted support of the beast. Dramatically, at the close, beast and kings will devour the harlot: a vivid image of the self-destructive power of evil. The fall of Babylon is solemnly proclaimed in 18:1-8. Then follows a series of dirges (18:9-24) over Rome—self-interested laments of kings, merchants, and sea-farers who had battered on the extravagant wealth of Rome. A heavenly liturgy (19:1-10) celebrates the vindication of God's people.

The End of Evil (19:11-20:15). The passage 19:11-21 deals with the victory of Christ and his followers over the beast, the false prophet, and the kings of the earth. Victory is complete: the two beasts are cast into the "lake of fire"—symbol of final destruction—and their followers are slain. Victory is achieved by a majestic rider, wearing a cloak "dipped in blood," whose public name is "Word of God." It is victory of the slain Lamb. Now Satan alone is left.

In 20:1-10 we have two events juxtaposed: on the one hand is the overthrow of Satan, in two phases; on the other, a reign of a thousand years.

While Christ and his faithful reign, Satan will be powerless in their regard. The binding of Satan coincides with his downfall described in the parallel passage 12:7-12. He has no power over those who have "conquered him by the blood of the Lamb." The picture of the millennium is only one of John's ways of thinking about the End. It is wrong-headed to view it out of focus.

Inspired by Ezekiel, John (20:7-10) presents a picture of the final destruction of evil: Gog and Magog are larger-than-life antagonists of God. In order to participate in this mythical scene, the devil "must" be released to engage in his characteristic activity of "deceiving the nations." Then, defeated, Satan joins the two (symbolic) beasts in the lake of fire. The conquest of all powers hostile to God is followed by the general resurrection of the dead and the last judgment (20:11-15). With the total disappearance of evil, the present world order has come to an end.

The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5). The former creation has been transformed and all evil has been wholly removed; now is the final phase of God's plan. The book closes with a magnificent vision of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, veritable kingdom of God. One of the seven angels of the bowls had shown John the great harlot (17:1); one of the seven now steps forward to show him the bride (21:9). The bride image is not developed but yields to that of the city "coming down out of heaven from God" (21:10). We might have expected the glowing description of the city (21:16-21) to be followed by a particularly stunning description of its temple (the Temple was the glory of the earthly Jerusalem). Instead—a brilliant touch—we learn that there is no temple, nor any need of one: God himself dwells there, and the Lamb (21:22). Consistently, the waters which in Ezekiel 47 (the model text) flow from the temple, here flow from "the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1). It is the river of the first paradise, and the tree of life is found again. There, the elect will look upon the face of God and of the Lamb and shall reign for ever and ever.

Epilogue and Conclusion (22:6-21). An epilogue (22:6-20) gives the closing words of the angel, the seer, and the Lord. John ends his work with the prayer of the early Christians, "*Marana tha*" ("Our Lord, Come!"), and with a parting blessing on all.

Outline

I propose a flexible plan for Revelation which I shall follow in the commentary. The point has been made that, beyond some obvious indications (the septets, for instance) it is not possible to be sure of any structural

intent of the author. My proposed outline is nothing more than a practical framework along reasonably discernible lines.

- I. PROLOGUE, ADDRESS, AND INAUGURAL VISION (Ch. 1)
 - Prologue (1:1-3)
 - The Address (1:4-8)
 - Vision of One Like a Son of Man (1:9-20)
- II. THE MESSAGES TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES (Chs. 2-3)
- III. THE SCROLL VISION (Chs. 4-5)
 - The Heavenly Temple (Ch. 4)
 - The Lamb and the Scroll (Ch. 5)
- IV. THE SEVEN SEALS (6:1-8:5)
 - The First Four Seals (6:1-8)
 - The Fifth Seal (6:9-11)
 - The Sixth Seal (6:12-17)
 - The Sealing of the Faithful (7:1-8)
 - Song of Victory (7:9-17)
 - The Seventh Seal (8:1-5)
- V. THE SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:6-11:19)
 - The First Four Trumpets (8:6-13)
 - The Fifth Trumpet (First Woe) (9:1-12)
 - The Sixth Trumpet (Second Woe) (9:13-21)
 - The Open Scroll (Ch. 10)
 - The Temple Measured (11:1-2)
 - The Two Witnesses (11:3-14)
 - The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)
- VI. THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON (Ch. 12)
 - The Woman and the Dragon (12:1-6)
 - Victory in Heaven (12:7-12)
 - Dragon and Woman (12:13-18)
- VII. THE TWO BEASTS (Ch. 13)
 - The First Beast (13:1-10)
 - The Second Beast (13:11-18)
- VIII. SALVATION AND JUDGMENT (Ch. 14)
 - The Companions of the Lamb (14:1-5)
 - Proclamation of Judgment (14:6-13)
 - Harvest and Vintage (14:14-20)
 - Harvest (14:14-16)
 - Vintage (14:17-20)

- IX. THE LAST PLAGUES (Chs. 15-16)
 Song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1-4)
 The Angels of the Bowls (15:5-16:1)
 The First Four Bowls (16:2-9)
 The Fifth Bowl (16:10-11)
 The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16)
 The Seventh Bowl (16:17-21)
- X. THE HARLOT AND THE BEAST (Ch. 17)
- XI. THE END OF BABYLON (18:1-19:10)
 The Fall of Babylon (18:1-8)
 Dirges Over Babylon (18:9-19)
 The Judgment of Babylon (18:20-24)
 Vindication of God's People (19:1-10)
- XII. THE END OF EVIL (19:11-20:15)
 The End of the Beasts (19:11-21)
 The End of Satan (20:1-10)
 Satan Bound (20:1-3)
 Reign With Christ (20:4-6)
 End of the Dragon (20:7-10)
 The Last Judgment (20:11-15)
- XIII. THE NEW JERUSALEM (21:1-22:5)
 The New Heaven and Earth (21:1-8)
 The New Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)
- XIV. EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION (22:6-21)

VII. *Theological Perspectives*

Revelation is concerned with *thlipsis*, tribulation. It saw the light in an atmosphere of contrived crisis and in anticipation of consequent widespread persecution. John's message of hope will be heard by Christians who, in their measure, are experiencing tribulation. But, then, has Revelation anything to say to our Western world? The answer is, yes—if we reinterpret its symbols and permit them to speak, meaningfully, to our situation. We may find that John offers a challenge to our theology and our Christology, and beyond.

God

In heaven, John saw a throne, and One seated on it. That One dominates Revelation. The Throne is the symbol of his Almighty power. He