REVELATION

Holt H. Graham
Second century Christian writers tell us that John wrote his account of the Revelation in the closing years of the reign of the Emperor Domitian, which would be 95-96 AD. John is on the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor, either as a political exile or in order to preach there ("on account of the Word of God" can be taken either way 1:9-10). In John's view, the real author of the revelation is Jesus Christ who has revealed the message of the book to John, through an angel. But John did the writing, which means that we are dealing with a combination of inspiration and art, for what John "sees" is set down in a skillfully composed work. It is addressed to the seven churches (of Asia Minor): the perfect number seven indicates that the letters are an encyclical to all the churches, while at the same time there are specific references to the character or history of each church. We are
dealing here, as elsewhere in the book, with a combination of the symbolic and the empirical.

John means his book to be read aloud, as indeed we should read it. It will help us if we think of listening to it as we listen to a symphony. When we do that, we are not put off by changes in key or rhythm, nor by the repetition of phrases or themes. We "take it in" as whole. One does not get a copy of the score and reduce the music to individual notes, nor should one reduce the book of Revelation to a bundle of verses.

What we are hearing (reading, if we must) is a book that is (a) prophetic in content, (b) apocalyptic in form, and (c) pastoral in intent.

Prophetic: the function of the prophet is to interpret history as reflecting the action of God. What we see is what is happening on the human scale; what is really going on is the work of God.

Apocalyptic in form: the word apocalypsis is the Greek equivalent of revelatio in Latin. It means to unveil or disclose. What is really going on in history is not evident
until the prophet draws back the curtain to show what he has seen.

Pastoral in intent: John writes to strengthen and encourage his fellow Christians in a time of peril. Horrors he knows: he has witnessed (or heard about) the execution of Christians in Rome under Nero in 64, the fall of Jerusalem at the end of the Jewish War in 70, the civil war after the death of Nero in 69, a vast destruction resulting from the eruption of Vesuvius in 80.

Such events and others are woven into his symbolic language, which is drawn mostly from the Old Testament (especially Daniel and Ezekiel) and is required because, among other things, he is writing about what is going on in heaven as well as what is going on on earth.

Underneath the profusion of symbolic language which we find daunting (though there are commentaries to explain it), we can discern a message that can be summarized in four points.

(1) When a civilization exalts itself against God, it is doomed. From the decision of Rome there was no appeal, and that
usurps the prerogative of God. The Emperor Domitian was styled *dominus et deus noster* (our lord and god), again usurping divine authority.

(2) When a civilization goes down, its collapse takes a long, long, long time. Hence the three visions of destruction (the seals, the trumpets and the bowls) which are modeled on the plagues in Egypt described in Exodus 7-10. Tranquility will not soon be restored.

(3) Faith has the power to endure even the death of a civilization, for its investment is not in civilization, but in God.

(4) Ultimately, God will bring down upon the ruins a new order whose design will be not ours, but his: the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

John's canvas is the grand sweep of world history, but we want to know, where does the destiny of the individual believer fit in that picture? The answer is found in chapter 22, verses 3 and 4. The proportions are disconcerting, to say the
least! 22 chapters devoted to world history, two verses devoted to the individual's destiny! Here are the phrases:

1. "His servants shall worship him." The worship of God can be carried on only intermittently in the midst of life. In the consummation one can worship endlessly—or as Calvin put it, the end (goal, purpose) of man is to worship God and enjoy him forever.

2. "They shall see his face." Face to face, or as Paul put it, we will see "no longer through a glass darkly."

3. "And his name will be on their foreheads," i.e., their character will be conformed to his. The lost image of God in the human will be restored.

Such is the message of the book to a church in peril. There is no evidence of a persecution of Christians under Domitian (contrary to popular belief), but it was always possible. The action of Nero condemning and executing Christians in Rome provided a precedent upon which the Roman authorities can act at any time.

We are going to move directly to the
first of the interpretive visions which punctuate the narrative, but we must pause for the "prologue" in verses 1-3 of chapter one which provide us with "revealing" information: the real author of the Revelation is Jesus Christ and it is intended to show the believers what must "soon" take place. (There is no legitimate way to stretch the word "soon" to cover 20 centuries—John is writing for his own time). John is the human author who calls his message a "prophecy" and intends it to be read aloud, "for the time is near," reinforcing the "soon" of verse one.

The letters occupy the first three chapters, following which we arrive in chapters 4 and 5 at the interpretive visions (see outline pages 11-16). There is an open door, and John can see into heaven. What he sees is the throne of the Almighty surrounded by the elders and the living creatures; but what is infinitely more significant, he sees in the midst of the throne ("between" is a mistranslation) the Lamb standing as if he had been slain. The throne represents the sovereign, creative power of God, the lamb represents
redemptive, sacrificial love. In the being of God, power and love, which in our experience are contraries and mutually exclusive, are one. The lamb is in the midst of the throne, and throughout the book the formula will be, "the throne of God and of the lamb." That is the ultimate principle for the interpretation of history.

The vision in chapters 4 and 5 is one anchor of the great arch that spans the visions of judgment, of conflict, and of doom in chapters 6-20. There are three series of those with seven in each series, interrupted by an interpretive vision in the sixth place. The plagues, modeled on the plagues in Egypt at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 7-11) with notes from John’s own time interspersed. The series of plagues signaled by the opening of the seals strike 1/4 of the earth, that signaled by the trumpets strike 1/2, and that signaled by the bowls the whole earth. [An interpretation of a number of the symbols is provided at the conclusion.] For the present, we pass directly to the other end of our arch, the vision of the consummation in chapters 21 and 22. Some of the terminology found
there has to be looked at fairly closely, for it differs from our usual usage. The first verse of chapter 21 speaks of a first heaven and first earth, so we should be inclined to think of the new heaven and the new earth as the second: but no—John is not speaking of temporal sequence, but of qualitative newness. The new heaven and earth are not future only, for as they come from God they are present realities. He is the alpha and the omega (vs 6), the beginning and the end together. (Think of Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.”)—Christ is the one who was, and is, and is to come. So the divisions of time are here done away, and so also those of space. The sea is no more, for to John on the island the sea stands for separation and division. Our understanding of time and space is irrelevant, for God need not act in that framework. It is the new situation in which God need not be sought, for He is with us (vs. 3), and so the promise of the name given Jesus (Emmanuel, God with us) is fulfilled in the new heaven and earth. The former things do not need to
be repaired; they have passed away with the coming of the new.

Once again, there is a reversal of our usual language, for “He who conquers” in verse seven is the martyr, who conquers precisely by losing his life.

The Bride of the Lamb is the holy city, new Jerusalem, a coming-down-out-of-heaven from God kind of city of pure gold—which is transparent as glass (!) (vs. 18 and 22). Its light is the glory of God and its lamp, the lamb (vs. 23); and now, if we are thinking prosaically, comes a surprise. We should surely have thought the nations were destroyed in the plagues of chapters 6-20: but here they are, healed by the leaves of the tree of life (22:2a), to bring their glory into the holy city—i.e., the genuine achievements of civilization are not scrapped in God’s fulfillment. So much for the nations. We have already commented on the destiny of the individual ("his servants shall worship him, they shall see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads"). They will reign with Christ forever (22:5).
In Daniel 12:4, the writer is told to seal up what he has written; here, in a reversal of apocalyptic usage, John is told not to do so, for he is told, “surely I am coming soon”, repeating the “soon” of 1:1 and the “time is near” of verse three.

### Structure of the Book of Revelation

| 1:1-9 | Intro.: Source, Content, Blessing  
|       | Greeting to the seven Churches  
|       | Vision of the Son of man in the midst of the Churches  
| 2-3 | Letters to the Seven Churches  
| 4 | Prologue in Heaven: the heavenly worship  
| 5 | Vision continued: the linking of heaven and earth  

11
THREE VISIONS OF JUDGMENT

I. The Seals
1) 6:1-2
2) 6:3-4
3) 6:5-6
4) 6:7-8
5) 6:9-11
6) 6:12-17
Interpretive Vision, ch. 7
7) 8:1-5

II. The Trumpets
1) 8:6-7
2) 8:8-9
3) 8:10-11
4) 8:12
5) 8:13-9:12 = 1st Woe
6) 9:13-21 & 11:13-14 = 2nd Woe
Interpretive Vision, 10:1 - 11:12
7) 11:15-19 = 3rd Woe (?)

THREE VISIONS OF CONFLICT

A. War in Heaven, ch. 12
B. War on Earth, ch. 13
C. Vision of Victory, ch. 14
III. The Bowls

Introductory vision, ch. 15
1) 16:1-2
2) 16:3
3) 16:4-7
4) 16:8-9
5) 16:10-11
6) 16:12
Interpretive Vision, 16:13-16
7) 16:17-21

THREE VISIONS OF DOOM

A. On the City of the Beast, ch. 17
   Taunt Song on Earth, ch. 18
   Taunt Song in Heaven, 19:1-10
B. On the Realm of the Beast
C. On Satan

22-22:5 Vision of the Consummation
22:6-21 Epilogue:
   Authentication of Book
   Blessing and Warning
   Farewell
   (cf. 1:1-9)
The Revelation to John: a few interpretive notes.

Chs 2 & 3 The letters to the Seven Churches are a mixture of the empirical and the symbolic. Seven = the whole church.

Chs 4& 5 Here are set forth the two theological principles for the interpretation of history: sovereign, creative power (4:11) and sacrificial, redemptive love (5:6, 9-10)

Chs 6-8:5 The Four Horsemen of 6:1-8 are War, Rebellion, Famine, and Death. The first series of judgments (the Seals) affect but a part of the earth (6:6, 8)

Ch 8:6 ff. The Trumpets series: judgments also limited (8:7, 9, 1), 12; 9:5)

Chs 10-11:12 Eating the bitter & sweet book = learning the prophecy of destruction and redemption

Measure the Temple but not the outer court: the preservation of the faithful from spiritual harm, but unbelievers given over to the power of the adversary.
The Two Witnesses: identification debated—Moses & Elijah? Law and Prophets? Israel & the Church? The Church in its priestly and regal functions?

Chs 12-14 The Woman: the messianic community. The Child: the Messiah. The Dragon: Satan. The Beast from the Sea: the Roman Empire. The Beast from the Earth: the Imperial cult

Ch 18 The Taunt song on earth: compare the Song of Deborah in Judges

Ch 19:19-21 The Beast: the Empire (or the Emperor). The False Prophet: the imperial priesthood

Ch 20:1-10 The millennium: Satan restrained, the Messiah reigns

11-15 The Last Judgment

Ch 21:25, 27 The glory of the nations received up into the heavenly Jerusalem: the genuine achievements of civilization are not scrapped

Ch 22:1-5 Those who will dwell in; the New Jerusalem

vs. 2 The healing of the nations
3 His servants shall serve him: the fulfillment of human possibility

4 They shall see his face: unmediated communion with God and his name shall be on their foreheads: the lost image of God in man is restored

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