

# Revelation

A Guide to Interpretation



# Authorship

- John the Apostle
  - Probably supported by Papias (c. 130)
  - Justin Martyr (c. 140)
  - Melito, bishop of Sardis (c. 165)
  - Irenaus, from Smyrna (c. 180)
  - Muratorian Canon (c. 190)
- According to Gerhard Maier, no NT book has a stronger or earlier tradition of apostolic authorship than Revelation



# Date, Provenance, Addressees

- Possibly dated to the reign of one of four different emperors
  - Trajan (98-117) Dorotheus; Theophylact
  - Domitian (81-96; c. 95 or 96) supported by Irenaus and other church fathers
  - Nero (54-68) Syriac versions of Rev
  - Claudius (41-54) Epiphanius
- Evidence for determining date
  - Persecution of Christians (favors Nero date)
  - Worship of Emperor (favors Domitian) 13:4,15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4)
  - Conditions of churches (favors Domitian)
  - 7 kings of 17:9-11 (favors Nero)
- Provenance: Patmos
- Addressees: churches of Asia Minor



# Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

- revelatory literature
- narrative framework
- mediated to human by otherworldly being
- discloses a transcendental reality
  - eschatological salvation
  - supernatural world



# Works Classified as Apocalyptic Literature

- Select Jewish or Christian writings produced between 250 BC and AD 150
- Canonical Literature
  - Revelation
  - Daniel 7-12 (though Daniel probably dates to 6<sup>th</sup> century)
- Noncanonical Literature
  - 14 Jewish documents (including 1 Enoch)
  - 23 Christian documents



# Key Features of Apocalyptic Literature

- Eschatological Focus
- Revelation of the Hidden
- Heavy Symbolism (particularly complex and strange symbols like bizarre beasts)
- Angelic Messengers and Heavenly Ascents (Revelation 1:1 and 4:1)
- Three Axes:
  - Temporal: Present Age and Age to Come
  - Spatial: Earth and Heaven
  - Anthropological: Wicked and the Righteous



# Apocalyptic Literature and the Political Cartoon (Caird's view)



# Major Approaches to Revelation

- Preterist View
- Historicist View
- Futurist View
- Idealist View





# Preterist View

- View I sees Revelation as a prophecy of the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70
  - Revelation predates AD 70
  - Babylon the Great represent Israel who oppresses Christians
- Weaknesses
  - Daniel suggests pagan nations, not apostate Israel, are focus of judgment
  - Revelation seems to describe final judgment



# Preterist View

- View II holds that Revelation is a prophecy of the fall of the Roman Empire
  - Does not necessitate a pre 70 date
  - Rome is a more probable id of Babylon
- Weakness
  - Revelation seems to describe final, not temporal judgment



# Historicist View

- Revelation predicts major movements of church history up to the time of the commentator
  - Examples: invasions of the Roman Empire by Goths and Muslims, corruption of medieval papacy, the reign of Charlemagne, Protestant Reformation, destruction under Napoleon and Hitler
- Weakness
  - limits prophecies to Western church history
  - has little relevance to original readers



# Futurist View

- Regards Rev. 4-22:5 as referring exclusively to future time immediately preceding the end of history
  - Dispensational futurism
    - literal interpretation
    - order of visions represents chronological order of future events
    - Pretribulational rapture
  - Modified futurism
    - not as literal
    - visions are not chronological (allows recapitulation)
    - Christians will pass through final period of trial



# Idealist View

- Revelation is a symbolic portrayal of the conflict between good and evil, the forces of God and the forces of Satan
- Weaknesses
  - Does not depict any final consummation to history (no final victory for God or judgment of evil)
  - Links no symbol to actual events



# Major Eschatological Schemes

- Premillennialism
  - literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth
  - Second Coming ushers in this reign
- Postmillennialism
  - Millennium represents effectiveness of Gospel in present age
  - Millennium ushers in Second Coming
- Amillennialism
  - 1,000 years are not literal
  - represents entire period between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Comings



# Significant Interpretive Questions

- Tendencies of the Genre: Symbolic vs. Literal
- Temporal Framework:
  - Chronological
  - Telescopic
  - Recapitulative
- Usage of the OT: Actual Dependence upon OT vs. Incorporation of OT Language and Themes



# Hermeneutical Keys

- Humility
- Seek to understand the message of the book as a whole especially as expressed in the introduction and conclusion
- Anchor exegesis in the “inaugural vision” since the inaugural vision summarizes the theme of most apocalyptic works





- Study the OT texts to which John alludes in context and assume that John used them faithfully
- As in the parables, recognize that some details are added simply for “effect” and may not be symbolic. Preach and teach the broad themes and avoid getting bogged down in details.
- Be very hesitant to embrace an interpretation which would not have been sensible to the first century reader



# Tentative Suggestions About the Structure of the Book

- Close examination suggests to me that the three septets involve recapitulation
- Each septet seems to build to a climax of final judgment
  - 7<sup>th</sup> seal: Vengeance for the persecuted saints
  - 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet: Consummation of Christ's Kingdom, see esp. 11:17-19
  - 7<sup>th</sup> Bowl: Utter destruction and judgment of Babylon, the symbol of rebellious sinful humanity



- Similar structures to the septets: series of four, followed by interlude, followed by series of three
- Other apocalyptic literatures describes divine acts as series of sevens. See for example 4<sup>th</sup> Esdras.
- This suggests that the seventh seal, trumpet and bowl all symbolize the final judgment and the preceding events are the events leading up to the end
  - Notice allusion to Exod. 19:16 in each seventh element
  - Compare 6:12ff with 16:18ff and 20:11



- Compare sixth element of each series
  - Each has a tripartite structure
  - Each describes different situation of believers and unbelievers immediately preceding final judgment
- Notice that some elements of the latter series seem to intensify matching elements of the previous series



# Recurring Themes in Matching

## Elements of the Septets

- Second Trumpet:  
1/3 of sea becomes blood
- Third Trumpet:  
1/3 of rivers become bitter
- Fourth Trumpet:  
1/3 of the sun is struck and darkened
- Second Bowl:  
Sea turns to blood of dead man
- Third Bowl:  
Rivers become blood
- Fourth Bowl:  
Sun scorches men w. heat



# Snyder's Chiastic Outline

- A. Introduction: Apocalypse, Epistle, Prophecy (1:1-3,4-8,9-20)
  - B. Vision: Saints on Earth (2-3)
    - C. Heavenly Sanhedrin Convened for Judgment and Enthronement (4-5)
      - D. Seven Seals (6:1-8:1)
        - E. Seven Trumpets (8:2-9:21)
          - F. Theophany: Lord's messenger descending to sea and land (10)
            - G. War against the Saints on Earth (11)
              - G' . War against the Dragon in Heaven (12)
                - F' . Counter-Theophany: Two messengers ascending from sea and land (13)
                  - E' . Unnumbered Series of Seven Proclamations (14)
                    - D' . Seven Bowls (15-16)
                      - C' . Heavenly Sanhedrin Convened for Judgment and the Messianic Reign
                        - B' . Vision: Saints in Heaven (21:1-22:5)
                          - A' . Conclusion: Apocalypse, Epistle, Prophecy (22:6-9, 10-20, 21)



# Views of Rev 12

Walvoord

Beale

Ladd

|                    |                              |  |   |
|--------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Woman</b>       | <b>Israel</b>                | <b>Church</b>  | <b>Church</b>   |
| <b>Dragon</b>      | <b>Satan</b>                 | <b>Satan</b>   | <b>Satan</b>  |
| <b>Child</b>       | <b>Christ</b>                | <b>Christ</b>  | <b>Christ</b>   |
| <b>Michael</b>     | <b>Holy angels</b>           | Angelic defenders of the Church                          | Angelic defenders of the Church                             |
| <b>Casting Out</b> | Beginning of tribulation     | Christ's resurrection destroys Satan's ability to accuse | toppling of Satan through ministries of Christian disciples |
| <b>Eagle</b>       | Flight to wilderness (Petra) | Word enables believers to persevere                      | No historical equivalent; promise of ultimate deliverance   |
| <b>Children</b>    | <b>Jews</b>                  | <b>Believers</b>   | <b>Believers</b>  |

