

Johannine Studies

Lecture 10 Study Notes – April 8, 2008

The Book of Revelation

1. **What kind of Literature is the Book of Revelation?**

If I were to ask you: “Could you read?” you would be insulted. But if I asked you if you knew how to read the Book of Revelation, what would be your reaction? One of the many problems that readers of the Bible have is they don’t know how to read it. Not that they cannot read, because most everyone has the reading skills to read it, but how to read it is another matter. Misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is.

2. The first few verses of the book seem to indicate that it is at least three different types of literature: One, verse 1 speaks of it as being an apocalypse; Two, verse 3 says it is a prophecy; and Three, verses 4-6 indicate it is a letter (see handout, page 20: *Charts of the Book of Revelation: Literary, Historical, and Theological Perspectives* by Mark Wilson).

3. **Apocalypse-** The noun “apocalypse” comes from the Greek word (...) which means “revelation.” So, an apocalypse is a book that reveals hidden information. A formal definition of the apocalypse is found in John J. Collins’ book “The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature. In it he says apocalyptic literature is: “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (page 5). According to Collins, this definition can be applied to various sections of 1 & 2 Enoch, Daniel, 2 & 3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, Testament of Levi, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, Jubilees, and Testament of Abraham just to name a few. Of course, we believe that Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature as well.

4. As a historical expression of this specific type of literature, apocalypticism can take on several motifs:

- 1) Urgent expectation of the end of earthly conditions which are troublesome to people
- 2) The end as a cosmic catastrophe
- 3) Periodization and determinationism
- 4) Activity of angels and demons
- 5) New salvation, paradisaic in character
- 6) Manifestation of the kingdom of God
- 7) A mediator with royal functions;
- 8) The catchword “glory”

5. They are also written under someone else’s name, usually someone famous. Apocalypses usually have coded speech in which animals, numbers, and natural occurrences take on special meanings. They also contain a lot of material that instructs individuals how to live based on the secrets given to them.

6. What gives rise to this type of literature? Most scholars believe that apocalyptic literature is a child or offspring of prophetic literature (Mercer Dictionary, page 37). Scholars point to the texts of Ezek 38-39, Isa 24-27, 34-35, 56-66, Joel, and Zech 9-14 as seedbeds for this type of literature.

7. Other scholars believe that apocalyptic thinking arises in cultures or subcultures in which groups of people are deprived of the very things that make life livable and meaningful. When the reality of their

lives becomes too far separated from their hopes and aspirations, hence, external attacks and persecutions, loss of values and moral, and challenges of worldviews tend to cause a rise in apocalyptic literature. In our own culture, people seem to turn toward the study of Revelation when our perception of what is good and right in our society is in jeopardy. Difficult times lead people to seek the message of God in God's prophetic word.

8. **Prophecy-** In the Old Testament, the basic meaning of “nabbi” or prophet is “to speak God’s message” or to be a “speaker for God” (Deut. 18:18; Jeremiah 1:7; Isa. 1:20). He or she is also a “seer” as in “one who sees” what is revealed to them by God. The emphasis is on what is seen and known rather than what is done.
9. There are several key themes in prophetic writings: impending judgment, the terrible day of the Lord; social reform, correcting the injustices done toward their fellowman; condemnation of Idolatry, put away false gods and turn to the true and only God; and the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom.
10. The New Testament idea of the prophet is one who spoke for God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is seen as the revealer, the spokesperson for God who would make known the will and direction of God for humanity. Jesus himself was called prophet (John 6:14; 7:40, 52).
11. In fact, according to Mercer Dictionary (page 714), “Early Christianity began as a prophetic movement, a fact evident both in the earliest historical presentation of Christian beginnings found in Acts (2: 1-42; 11: 27-30; 13: 1-3; 21: 10-11).” The primary evidence for New Testament is found in the Letters of Paul (particularly 1 Cor. 12-14, 1 Thess. 5: 19-20), the Acts of the Apostles and, of course, the Book of Revelation.
12. The essence of New Testament prophecy is to witness of Jesus Christ. Rev. 19: 10 “...Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” For more information on prophecy see: “The Complete Book of Bible Prophecy” by Mark Hitchcock.
13. **Don’t forget that Revelation 2-3 consists of seven letters to seven churches.** Revelation has the elements of a typical Hellenistic-Roman letter: the greeting, 1: 4-5a; the blessing or thanksgiving, 1: 5b-6; body, 1: 7-22: 20; and the closing, 22:21. With everything else going on in the book, it is easy to forget that it is a letter to these seven churches. In Bauckham’s book, “The Theology of the Book of Revelation,” he reminds us that not all the seven churches were receiving the same message.

He writes:

“The messages show that John addresses a variety of situations which he perceives as very different. By no means were all of his readers poor and persecuted by an oppressive system: many were affluent and compromising with the oppressive system. The latter are offered not consolation and encouragement, but severe warnings and calls to repent. For these Christians, the judgments which are so vividly described in the rest of the book should appear not as judgments on their enemies so much as judgments they themselves were in danger of incurring, since worshipping the beast was not something only their pagan neighbors did. Worshipping the beast was something many of John’s Christian readers were tempted to do or were actually doing... (page 15).”