

Summary and Analysis the Book of Revelation

In the Book of Revelation, the apocalyptic hopes of the early Christian community find their clearest and most complete expression. Apocalypticism was not a new phenomenon among Christians; it was a well-established belief among Jews, who held that the coming of the kingdom of God would not be brought about by a gradual transformation but by a sudden intervention, when God would end the present age and establish his kingdom in the world made new. This conception of coming events is associated with the belief that prior to this future time, the struggle between the forces of good and evil will become more intense. As the evil powers grow stronger, they will inflict persecution and in some instances even death upon those who follow a course of righteousness. The struggle will eventually reach a climax, at which time God will intervene, destroy the forces of evil, and set up a new order in which the righteous will live for all time to come. The appearance of the Messiah will coincide with the coming of these events.

When the members of the Christian community affirmed their belief that the crucified Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, they necessarily revised their understanding concerning the work Jesus was to do and especially the way in which his work would be completed. Because they were convinced that the work of the Messiah must end in triumph and glory, they believed that this end could be accomplished only by a return of Jesus back to this earth from the heaven to which he had ascended. This second coming, occurring at the time when all the events connected with the apocalyptic program will take place, will inaugurate the coming of the new age, as well as the final destruction of all the forces of evil.

As time passed, many Christians — especially those who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman government — became deeply concerned about how long it would be before these events would take place. Toward the end of the first century of the Christian era, emperor worship was fairly well established, not only in the city of Rome but in the outlying regions that formed a part of the empire. When Christians refused to worship the emperor, they were accused of all sorts of crimes and subjected to the most severe penalties. Some of them suffered martyrdom rather than deny their faith. It was a critical time for the entire Christian movement, and many of its members wondered whether the persecution would ever end, while others were perplexed about the course they should follow. Some were even tempted to abandon their faith or at least to make concessions to Rome sufficient to enable them to save their lives.

Under these conditions, a Christian named John wrote Revelation, addressing it to the seven churches that were in Asia Minor. The purpose of the book was to strengthen the faith of the members of these churches by giving to them the assurance that deliverance from the evil powers arrayed against them was close at hand. John was confident that the great day of divine intervention would occur within a comparatively short time, but in accordance with the apocalyptic literature with which Jewish Christians were familiar, he knew that many terrifying events would take place first. He wanted to warn his fellow Christians concerning these events and thus prepare them for the time when their faith would be put to a more severe test than anything that they had experienced thus far.

In writing Revelation, John follows the pattern that was used in older apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament (such as the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, 1 Esdras in the Apocrypha, the Book of Enoch in the Pseudepigrapha, the Assumption of Moses), and many other well-known writings, including sections of the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament and portions of the Synoptic Gospels. In all of these writings, events appear as though they were predicted long before they actually took place. The revelations are usually through dreams or visions in which coming events are symbolized by strange figures, the meanings of which are sometimes disclosed by an angelic messenger who was sent for that particular purpose. The apocalypses were produced in times of crises, and they were written for the benefit of people who were suffering hardship and privation at the particular time when the writing was done.

At the beginning of Revelation, John tells us that while he was on the Isle of Patmos, where he was banished because of his religious faith, he heard a loud voice telling him to write what he saw and then to send the writing to the seven churches in Asia. The voice was that of Jesus Christ, who had been raised from the dead and who had ascended to heaven. Christ's messages are addressed to seven angels, each one of which is the guardian for a particular church: Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Christ commends these churches for the good works that they have performed, but for five of them, he also sends a message of warning and reproof. He is especially critical of those who tolerate the doctrines of the Nicolaitans, whose teachings he considers a real menace to the Christian community because they approve of the practice of eating meat obtained from animals that have been used as sacrifices to idols. Although the apostle Paul and other Christians maintained that this practice was not a matter of vital importance and that everyone should be permitted to follow the dictates of their own consciences, apparently John did not share this attitude. As he understands it, the crucial test for all Christians, as it is for Jews, is strict obedience to all laws, and the rules pertaining to forbidden food are no exception. Although it might appear to be relatively unimportant, people's attitudes toward matters of this kind indicate the way in which they will behave toward weightier matters.

Christ commends those churches whose members have endured persecution and, in some instances, even death rather than declare their allegiance to Roman rulers, who proclaimed their own divinity and demanded that they should be worshipped along with the other gods of the empire. He refers to Pergamum as Satan's home inasmuch as it was in this place that the cult of emperor worship was particularly strong.

Christ warns Christians to expect that their persecutions will be even more severe in the immediate future. Nevertheless, they are to remain faithful and regard these afflictions as tests of their character. Those who remain loyal will be delivered from the hands of their enemies, and in the new order of things soon to be established, they will be given a crown of life and the assurance that the new order will last forever. The persecutions that are now taking place will last for only a short time, for the hour of God's judgment is close at hand.

Following Christ's messages to the seven churches, John describes the seven seals, scrolls on which is written an account of the events that are about to take place. The risen Christ, who is referred to as the Lamb of God, is said to be the only one who is accounted worthy to open the seals. When the first seal is opened, there appears a white horse, whose rider goes forth to

conquer. Other seals are opened, and three more horses — a red one, a black one, and a pale one — appear in rapid succession. These four horses and their respective riders symbolize the conflicts that will mark the beginning of the final destruction of the Roman Empire. When the fifth seal is opened, John is permitted to look upon the souls of those who, in the midst of their distress, cry out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" They are told that the forces of destruction are about to be turned loose in the world, and they may have to endure even greater torment, but if they are faithful through it all, they will be among the redeemed whose names are written in the book of life.

Following John's vision of the impending disasters soon to be inflicted upon the world, the scene changes, and four angels representing the four winds of heaven are told to hold back these winds until the servants of God have had seals placed on their foreheads. John then reveals the number of those who are sealed. Drawing an analogy between the twelve tribes of ancient Israel and the Christian community regarded now as the new Israel, he gives the number of 144,000, or 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel. Before the opening of the seals is completed, another series of disasters is revealed in the appearance of seven angels, each one carrying a trumpet. The blowing of these trumpets announces such physical catastrophes as the coming of a great earthquake, the turning of rivers into blood, and the darkening of the sun and the moon, as well as the falling of the stars from heaven. After these physical phenomena, which will indeed be appalling, the wrath of God will be visited more directly upon those who persecute members of the Christian community. Before describing the manner of this visitation, John identifies the power now vested in the Roman emperor with an evil being, who, through the centuries, has been at war against the forces of righteousness.

This evil being is none other than Satan, the archenemy of God, who is now putting forth a supreme effort to destroy the righteous from the face of the earth. He is the Dragon who launched a rebellion against God. John tells us that "there was war in heaven" as Michael and his angels fought against the Dragon and his angels. The result of the conflict was that the Dragon was cast out of heaven and one third of the angels were cast out with him. This same Dragon worked through King Herod in an attempt to destroy the Christ child as soon as he was born. His work has continued ever since, and according to John, he is now trying to accomplish his purpose by working through the Roman emperor. His evil character is manifest in the cruel persecutions that are being inflicted upon Christians.

In characterizing this power that now appears to be gaining mastery over the world, John resorts to imagery used in the Book of Daniel to describe the wicked ruler who tried to coerce the Jews into submission. The author of the Book of Daniel uses the symbol of a great and terrible beast that has seven heads and ten horns. In like manner, John uses a beast to represent the Roman emperor, whose image was stamped on the coins used in the empire. At one point, John is quite specific in his identification of the one symbolized by the beast. He says, "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666." John is seemingly referring to the Roman emperor, but he is also personifying the forces of evil, and his condemnation of the emperor is due to the fact that John believes Satan is incarnate in the actions of the empire, for Satan and the empire are linked together for the achievement of a common purpose.

As John sees the end drawing near, he describes the angels of heaven crying with a loud voice. Three angels appear, the first one announcing that the hour of God's judgment has come, the second one crying out that Babylon, which is used as the symbol of Rome, is fallen, and the third one describing the terrible fate of those who worship the beast or its image. As a final punishment, these false worshippers are thrown into a lake of fire, where they will forever be destroyed. Seven more angels then appear, each one carrying a bowl, the content of which symbolizes the wrath of God about to be poured out in the form of the seven last plagues. The plagues will inflict the wicked of John's day, just as a series of plagues inflicted the ancient Egyptians prior to the time when the Israelites were delivered from their bondage. When the first angel pours out his bowl upon the earth, foul and evil sores grow on the men who bear the mark of the beast and who worship its image. When the second angel pours out his bowl on the sea, the sea turns to blood and everything living in it dies. Catastrophes of a similar nature follow when the remaining angels empty their bowls.

The great catastrophic events that bring an end to all the kingdoms of earth will also be the occasion for the return of Christ on the clouds of heaven. As Christ approaches the earth, the wicked people will be slain by the brightness of his coming. For a period of a thousand years, Satan will be bound, and the earth will be desolate. During this time, the righteous will be made safe in the city of God, which is the new Jerusalem. At the end of the thousand years, the city of God will descend to earth. Then the wicked will be raised from the dead, and after making an attempt to overthrow the city of God, they will be destroyed in what John tells us is the second death. The closing chapters of Revelation present a glowing description of the new Jerusalem with its streets of gold, its walls of jasper, its gates of pearl, and the river of life, which will flow eternally from the throne of God. In this heavenly abode, neither sorrow nor crying will exist, for God will wipe away all tears, and there will be no more death.

Analysis

The Revelation of John is the one book in the New Testament that claims John as its author. By the time the writings that are now included in the New Testament were assembled in their present form, three letters and one gospel were also attributed to John. But in the case of these writings, the name of the supposed author was added at a later date, and their respective contents indicate that they were not written by the same John who wrote Revelation.

The Book of Revelation often has been regarded as a mysterious book, quite beyond the comprehension of the average lay reader. Its many references to angelic beings, its elaborate description of Christ as he appears in the heavenly courts, its use of such mystic numbers as three, seven, twelve, and their multiples, the accounts of strange beasts, symbolic names, and definite time periods — all suggest some hidden and esoteric meaning that supposedly can be detected only by an expert. For these reasons, many people have ignored the book, feeling that any attempt to understand it is futile. Other people have taken an opposite attitude and have found in this book what they believe to be predictions of whole series of events, many of which have already occurred and the remainder of which are about to take place in the near future. The basis for these views, many of which sound strange and fantastic, is found in the elaborate symbolism used in the book. The use of symbols has an important place in religious literature, for there is no other way in which a person can talk or even think about that which is beyond the

realm of finite human experience. But there is always a danger that the symbols may be interpreted in a way that was not intended by the author who used them. Only in regard to the content in which the symbols are used can we determine what the author meant.

One source of confusion has been the result of a failure to distinguish between prophetic writing and apocalyptic writing. The prophets used a particular literary form in which they expressed their messages; the apocalyptic writers used a different literary form, one that was better suited to the particular purpose that they had in mind. To understand either group, one must interpret their writings by considering the respective literary form that they used. The characteristics of apocalyptic writing are fairly well known. In addition to the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, a wealth of apocalyptic writing exists in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. A careful study of these writings shows that they have a number of common characteristics: They were produced in times of crises; they describe the conflict between the forces of good and evil; future events are made known through dreams and visions; the end of the conflict is to come shortly; and those who remain faithful through persecution and trial are promised a reward in the messianic kingdom soon to be established. The messages are for the benefit of the persecuted and are usually conveyed by means of symbols that only the faithful can understand.

Interpreted in light of these characteristics, the Revelation of John is comparatively easy to understand. In many respects, it is the least original of any of the New Testament writings. In its style of writing, the number and kind of symbols that are used, and the purpose for which it was written, the book closely follows the precedent established in the older apocalyptic writings. The unique feature about Revelation is the particular occasion that caused it to be written. Toward the end of the first century of the Christian era, the attitude of the Roman government toward Christianity became especially hostile. Nero, the Roman emperor, charged that Christians were to blame for the burning of Rome. Although the charge was false, it was sufficient to cause many people to regard the new Christian movement with suspicion. Jews and Romans alike resented the fact that Christians condemned so many of the things they were doing, and they especially disliked the belief on the part of Christians that their religion was superior to the older faiths that had been honored for centuries. The Christians often held their meetings in secret places, and their critics imagined that they were doing all sorts of evil things. It was easy to circulate rumors of this kind, and along with other things, Christians were charged with plotting against the Roman government. As the opposition to Christianity became more intense, the followers of the new movement were asked to prove their loyalty to the Roman government by denouncing Christ and by worshipping the statue of the emperor. When they refused to do this, they were tortured and even put to death.

Under these conditions, the Revelation of John was written. It would be difficult to imagine anything more appropriate for the members of Christian churches at that time. They needed encouragement and the assurance that their trials would soon be over, that the evil powers of the earth would be destroyed, and that the triumph of righteousness would be established in the world. The message of Revelation was intended for this particular time and set of circumstances. Christians familiar with the older apocalyptic writings would understand the book's symbolism, for practically everything John said to his contemporaries was said before to people who suffered under similar circumstances. It is a mistake to suppose that John was predicting events that

would take place in the later centuries of Christian history. Writing to the people of his own day about events that would happen while they were still living, he states that Christ will return while those who put him to death on the cross are still living. The permanent significance of Revelation lies in the author's conviction that right will ultimately triumph over evil.