

B.O.S.S. Study Guide
Week of March 22, 2010
Studies in the Book of Revelation

What do you think of when you hear about a study in the Book of Revelation?

For some it might be, “not another study in The Book of Revelation.” For others it might be, “Great, my first study in The Book of Revelation.” For many it carries ideas of confusion, questions and doubt as to whether it can be understood. For others it’s a fascination with the future that compels an on going study of the Book.

From Sunday’s outline, was there anything that was significant to you as the book was introduced? Why?

Let’s take a bit of time to review the 4 major ways that this book has been interpreted over the centuries.

From your outline what were they?

Preterist View

According to this view, Revelation is to be seen as related to what happened in the time of the author; as to the time of its writing, it is a contemporary and imminent historical document. So the main contents of chapters 4-22 are viewed as describing events wholly limited to John's own time. This approach identifies the book with the Jewish apocalyptic method of producing "tracts for the times" to encourage faithfulness during intense persecution. The beasts of chapter 13 are identified respectively as imperial Rome and the imperial priesthood. This is the view held by a majority of contemporary scholars, not a few of whom are identified with the liberal interpretation of Christianity. As a system, it did not appear till 1614, when a Spanish Jesuit named Alcasar developed its main lines.

Historical View

As the word implies, this view centers on history and its continuity as seen in Revelation. It started with Joachim of Floris (d. 1202), a monastic who claimed to have received on Easter night a special vision that revealed to him God's plan for the ages. He assigned a day-year value to the 1,260 days of the Apocalypse. In his scheme, the book was a prophecy of the events of Western history from the times of the apostles (in some varieties, from the Creation) until Joachim's own time. A short time after his death, the Franciscans considered themselves the true Christians of his vision. They interpreted Babylon not only as pagan Rome but also as papal Rome. In the various schemes that developed as this method was applied to history, one element became common: the Antichrist and Babylon were connected with Rome and the papacy. Later, Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers came to adopt this view. That this approach does not enjoy much favor today is largely because of the lack of consensus as to the historical identification it entails. The distinguished exegete Henry Alford (1810-71) held a guarded version of this view.

Idealist View

This method of interpreting Revelation sees it as being basically poetical, symbolic, and spiritual in nature. Indeed, it is sometimes called the spiritualist view--not, of course, in reference to the cult of spiritualism, but because it "spiritualizes" everything in the book. Thus Revelation does not predict any specific historical events at all; on the contrary, it sets forth timeless truths concerning the battle between good and evil that continues throughout the church age. As a system of interpretation, it is more recent than the three other schools and somewhat more difficult to distinguish from the earlier allegorizing approaches of the Alexandrians (Clement and Origen). In general, the idealist view is marked by its refusal to identify any of the images with specific future events, whether in the history of the church or with regard to the end of all things.

Futurist View

This view is that, with the exception of chapters 1 to 3, all the visions in Revelation relate to a period immediately preceding and following the second advent of Christ at the end of the age. Therefore, the seals, trumpets, and bowls refer to events still in the future; the beasts of chapters 13 and 17 are identified with the future Antichrist, who will appear at the last moment in world history and will be defeated by Christ in his second coming to judge the world and to establish his earthly millennial kingdom.

Variations of this view were held by the earliest expositors, such as Justin Martyr (d.165), Irenaeus (d. c.195), Hippolytus (d.236), and Victorinus (d. c.303). After nearly a ten-century eclipse, during which time the allegorical method prevailed, the futurist view was revived in the late sixteenth century by Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit. He held that the beast was the Antichrist of the end time and that Babylon was not Rome under papal rule but a degenerate Rome of a future age. This futurist approach to the book has enjoyed a revival of no small proportion since the nineteenth century and is widely held among evangelicals today. The chief problem with it is that it seems to make all but the first three chapters of Revelation irrelevant to the contemporary church. This objection is pressed more strongly when adherents to the futurist view affirm, as many do today, that the church will be removed from the earth before the events described in 6:1 ff. occur.

(It is because we have presupposed that the Bible, as a whole and this Book specifically, is to be interpreted literally or normally, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, that we come to the later view.)

“If one follows the plain, literal, or normal principle of interpretation, one concludes that most of the book describes what is yet future. No judgments in history have ever equaled those described in chapter 6, 8,9,16. The resurrections and judgment described in chapter 20 have not yet occurred. There has been no visible return of Christ as portrayed in chapter 19.” Charles Ryrie, “Revelation”

Revelation 1:3 “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”