PARALLEL GUIDE 34
The Revelation to John

Summary

The last book of the New Testament canon is the Revelation to John. This chapter examines not only the usual questions of authorship but also the style of this work as a letter and the genre of apocalyptic literature. Finally the chapter explores some of what scholars believe to be the meaning that lies behind the imagery of this complex work. This chapter also marks the close of your studies specifically related to the New Testament and your second year in EfM.

Learning Objectives

• Read the Revelation to John

• Learn the structure of the Revelation to John

• Explore some possible interpretations of the symbols of the Revelation to John

• Discover the use of apocalyptic literature by the early church

• Explore the misuse of apocalyptic literature, especially in the Revelation to John

• Learn the historical debates about the Revelation to John, its appropriateness, its usefulness, its meaning

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Make a list of the symbols and metaphors in the Revelation to John that you have heard in the past, but did not necessarily associate with this document.

2. What does this document teach about times of crisis and distress on a local, national, or international scale?

3. Select a situation of crisis with which you are familiar and try to think of how you might express a response to that crisis in the form of a letter that is like the apocalypse.

Preparing for Your Seminar

Come to your seminar prepared to discuss how the Revelation of John gives hope. How might it give hope to you as you conclude the second year of EfM? How might a theology of hope be more productive than using the prophecy as a prediction or forecast? As you close your second year of EfM, how does this support what you have learned and what you are and will do with your ministry?

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Chapter 34
THE REVELATION TO JOHN

This book is also sometimes called "The Apocalypse," an English form of the Greek word apokalypsis, meaning "revelation" or "unveiling." Even people who have studied theology tend to speak about the difficulties of understanding the Revelation to John. In fact, it is not among the most difficult books of the Bible. It yields to the same kinds of critical questions that are appropriate for other portions of the Scriptures.

Genres and Literary Characteristics

The Revelation to John is a combination of two genres:

1) It is a prophecy. This is what it claims for itself (1:3; 22:19). the Book of Revelation is manifestly and consciously written in line with the work of Israel's ancient prophets. It is filled with echoes of them, as is evident to anyone who simply checks the references to the prophetic books that crowd the margin of any

cross-reference Bible. It also understands the prophecies to have culminated in Christ.

2) It is a Hellenistic letter. Thus it can quite be divided as follows:

1:4-8—An opening epistolary salutation to “the seven churches”

1:9-22:20—The body of the letter

1:9-20—Personal introduction

2:1-3:22—Individual messages to “the seven churches”

4:1-22:20—General message to all

[22:18-20—Possibly a personally written section]

22:21—A closing epistolary greeting

Revelation is a rather long letter, but there is plenty of precedent for that. Those who have read the Letter of Paul to the Romans are hardly likely to find Revelation particularly lengthy.

Prophecies and letters alike are addressed to specific situations, although they may also be universal in their implications. Israel’s prophets regularly commented on Israel’s life as they saw it in their own time and place, in the light of God’s Law and God’s promise. John also does this. His words are both about the church and the world as he saw them in his own time, and also about the church and the world in the light of God’s promised final dispensation.

Revelation is also an example of the type of literature that modern scholars call “apocalyptic.” There are other examples of this literary type in the Bible (e.g., Dan. 7 and 2[4] Esd.), and in extra-biblical literature (e.g., 1 Enoch). For the ancients, however, what we call “apocalyptic” was simply a continuation of prophecy. That does not mean that modern observers are completely wrong in the distinction they draw, for “apocalyptic” is “prophecy” in a very distinct style. While apocalyptic writings, like all prophecy, claim to reveal divine truth, they generally do so in the framework of a narrative in which an otherworldly being or beings give information to a human recipient. The information is about transcendent realities involving

salvation and the heavenly world. It tells of matters such as the final confrontation of good and evil, the woes that will precede the messianic age, and the final judgment. Generally, apocalyptic writings seem designed as prophetic literature for groups in crisis. They offer hope and exhort to faithfulness with divine authority. All this is true of the Revelation to John.

Apocalyptic writings are also marked by certain obvious characteristics of style. They abound with symbols: beasts, angels, cosmic portents, and the like. They use symbolic numbers. Seven is the number of divine activity (cf. Rev. 1:10, 12, 16, 20; 2:1; 3:1; 4:5; 5:1, 6). Twelve represents completeness and hence the people of God or Israel (Rev. 7:5-8; 12:1; 21:12, 14, 16, 21; 22:2). Half of seven, in such forms as 1+2+1/2 (e.g., 1260 days, 42 months [i.e., one year plus two years plus half a year]) represents the supremacy of evil (see Rev. 11:2; 12:6; 13:5).

The use of symbols expresses an evaluation of what is symbolized. The beast of Revelation 13, representing the Roman Empire, is clearly modeled on the beasts of Daniel 7. They in turn are modeled on other images in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Job 9:13; 26:12). Behind them lie images and symbols manifested not

only in Israel's literature but also in that of its neighbors. These lie deep in the human psyche.

The portrayal of Rome as the beast does not merely mean that Rome is evil. In Revelation the beast is seen (like the beast in the ancient creation myths of Canaan) as seeking to be a rival to God. The beast aspires to universal dominion and claims divine honors. This, in the view of the author of Romans, is the real problem with Rome: that it claims divine honors. Therefore the supremacy of Rome is ultimately terrifying, not just because it means unjust government or the persecution of Christians, but also because it means the dominion of chaos.

The Revelation to John is also interesting because, although its grammar and style are idiosyncratic, it is perhaps the most self-consciously literary text in the New Testament. Thus the letter form, not generally used in Jewish apocalyptic/prophetic literature, may suggest (in view of the obviously influential Pauline precedent) some self-consciously Christian literary awareness. The author begins, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3). The text is to be read in the community, and those who listen and obey are blessed, because they are hearing and obeying the prophecy. In other words, the text and the prophecy are identical. The author goes on to describe his commission, "Write in a book what you see and send it . . ." (1:11). The acts of writing and sending are integral to the prophetic commission, not a consequence of it or a way of carrying it out. There is no "oral prehistory" to be imagined here; the text is envisaged from the beginning.

John writes,

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book;

if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (22:18-19)

There is not the slightest need to dignify this, as have some critics, as a "canonization formula." What is at issue here is the problem of book production and distribution in the first century. Once a book was issued, it was out of an author's control. It could be copied in whatever way the copyist chose. The most an author could do was to plead or warn against tampering with what had been written (van Unnik 1949). In view of the significance of the number "seven" (cf. Rev. 1:4) it is perhaps obvious why the author of Revelation chose to address his words to seven churches. We may ask, however, why the author chose these particular seven churches. There were, after all, other Christian communities and other important cities in the same region. W. M. Ramsay's answer still seems best: each was a natural center of communication, suited to assist promotion of the work among churches of the Asian province and beyond (1904, 171-196). Probably, as David Aune has suggested, the text was entrusted to "prophetic colleagues and envoys" for distribution among them (1989, 103-116).

When Was Revelation Written?

The strongest external evidence for dating Revelation is provided by the church father Irenaeus (ca. 130-200), who claimed that the Revelation was seen at the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian (81-96), that is, presumably about 95-96 CE. The clearest internal evidence is the equation of "Babylon" with Rome (e.g., 18:2), which for obvious reasons is a characteristic of Jewish literature after the fall of Jerusalem.

If Irenaeus is correct, we should assume (1) that the "king who is" (17:10) is Domitian and (2) that the prophecy that the Temple will be preserved from Gentiles (11:1-2) is a source that John has taken over and adapted in light of a later situation than that of the fall of Jerusalem. This is perfectly possible.

Many critics, however, see a difficulty in dating Revelation under Domitian. The book portrays a savage hatred of Rome, in which "was found the blood of prophets and saints" (18:24a). Naturally, such hatred is generally associated by commentators with "the fierce persecution of Christians" under Domitian (Turner 1962, 1045). The problem is that, apart from the Revelation itself, historians of the period actually see little evidence that there was any systematic persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities during the reign of Domitian.

The solution to this difficulty probably lies in the fact that there is not much evidence of systematic persecution in Revelation either. Only verses 1:9 and 2:13 clearly refer to attacks on Christians that have already taken place, and what they describe could be the result of sporadic outbreaks of trouble such as those described several times in the Book of Acts (cf. Acts 16:16-24; 19:23-41). The statement in verse 13:15 about the beast causing "those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed" and trade sanctions following refusal to wear the "mark . . . of the beast" (13:17)

probably represent a Christian view of the tendency of cities in Asia Minor to support the imperial cult. Obviously such support was not specifically aimed against Christians, but it must have made things very difficult for them. It is worth noting that, even in the case of the so-called "Neronian persecution" of 64 CE, when Christians were undoubtedly singled out as a group, the actual charge appears, according to the Roman historian Tacitus, to waver between arson and "hatred of the human race," rather than Christianity itself (Tacitus, Annals, 15.44.2-8). Tacitus admits this despite his own obvious dislike of Christians.

An examination of the text of the Revelation to John suggests that the author is anticipating trouble rather than actually experiencing it. At the same time, it is not difficult to see why the writer should anticipate trouble. The period would probably have been perceived as a time of crisis for Christians for a number of reasons: 1) Worsening relationships between Christians and the rest of Judaism and their being perceived as different by outsiders would perhaps lead to a crisis of identity for many who found themselves rejected by Jew and Gentile alike.

2) The Christians would also share in the general resentment of Roman rule and taxation that existed in the East. It is evident that there were elements of intellectual unrest among the literate and social unrest among the poor. Thus Revelation criticizes the Laodicean church for relying on wealth (3:14-22) and Rome itself for its greed and wealth. It is ironic that, in the twentieth century, Revelation is used so much by groups with very right-wing political agendas, since arguably the most striking characteristic of Revelation (apart from its belief in the nearness of "the end") is its social radicalism.

Who Wrote Revelation?

In one way Revelation differs from other apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic books are usually pseudonymous: for example, those attributed to Daniel, Esdras (Ezra), or Enoch. The Revelation to John is not. It claims simply to be written by "John" (1:1, 4, 9). Nothing is claimed for or about "John" except that he is a "servant" of Jesus Christ (1:2 NRSV; Greek: doulos, literally "slave") and "brother" to the Christians whom he addresses (1:9). It is clear, however, that "John" is known by his readers and speaks with authority.

Is "John" of Revelation the apostle? There are elements in the Revelation that would certainly fit with the character of John as reflected in Luke 9:54. The church father Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-ca. 215), however, observed that the writer of Revelation could hardly be the writer of the Gospel According to John or of the Johannine letters. This seems fairly clear from even a cursory glance at the style. It is also not inconceivable that there may be some connection between Revelation and the other "Johannine" writings of the NT. We have no way of knowing what, if any, may have been the relationship between Revelation and

other productions of a Johannine beit ha-midrash, if there was such a relationship.

The Book of Revelation—Introduction—1:1-3

The introduction brings a message of hope—"soon" (1:1; cf. 1:3). It also makes clear that Revelation is not pseudonymous (see above).

An Opening Epistolary Salutation "To the Seven Churches" 1:4-8

John's epistolary opening is close in form and content to Paul's. Like Paul, John links God and Jesus together as the source of "grace and peace" (1:4). Like Paul, he develops the formula in directions that will meet his particular concerns in this letter. First, he speaks of God as the one "who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4, 8). That this is also the God of the Exodus (cf. Exod. 3:13-15) and the prophets (cf. Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12) is obvious. Such a God is clearly the Lord of history, precisely the point that John makes to his hearers (cf. 4:1-11:19).

Second, John speaks of Jesus in terms of certain key elements in the gospel proclamation—that he was God's "faithful witness," that he is "firstborn of the dead," and that he is therefore "ruler" of the earth's powers—including Rome. These elements are at once the sign of Christian calling—to be faithful to such a Lord—and of Christian hope. For he is Lord. Already through his Resurrection we have the firstfruits of the promised resurrection of the dead that will mark the fulfillment of God's promises (cf. Dan. 12:1-3; Ezek. 37:1-14; Wisd. 3:7-10). Yet he is also on our side: he comes to us not as avenging Lord but as the one "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom" (1:5b-6a). That such a one fulfills the messianic promise of Daniel 7 is evident (1:6b-7; cf. Dan. 7:13-14). Therefore the Christian may be confident even in the face of Roman power. In these few lines John has laid the groundwork for all that is to follow.

The Body of the Letter—1:9-22:20

In verse 1:9 there seems to be a reference to a form of legal exile as might have been imposed by a provincial governor. Perhaps John's "testimony" was viewed as subversive. In view of his general attitude toward Roman authority this would hardly be surprising.

A Personal Introduction 1:9-20

From verse 2:13 we gain the impression that one person, "Antipas my witness, my faithful one," has been killed specifically for being a Christian. It is not clear whether this was a formal execution after legal proceedings or the result of a sporadic outbreak of anti-Christian violence. We have examples of these (e.g., Acts 19:23-41). The latter seems more likely.

Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia 2:1-3:22

The general tone of the seven letters implies a need for readiness and endurance in the face of what Christians are about to suffer (2:3, 10, 19, 25; 3:8, 10-11). At least as John sees the situation, poverty and weakness will accompany the imminent persecution (2:9; 3:8). Indeed, any among the Christians who seem rich or strong are clearly compromising their positions (3:1, 17). All present values will soon be reversed (1:17-18).

A General Message to All the Churches—4:1-22:20

Seven Seal and Seven Trumpets; The Meaning of History 4:1-11:19

We are to hear about history, but history is at once made relative by being set in the context of the heavenly liturgy (4:1-5:11). The first thing that John sees in heaven is a "throne" (4:2). "From first to last John's vision is dominated by this symbol of the divine sovereignty. The final reality which will still be standing when heaven and earth have disappeared is the great white throne (xx. 11)" (Caird 1966, 62). To those who live under the threatening shadow of earthly powers there is no greater

consolation than to know that there is a greater throne above. Overarching the throne, moreover, is a rainbow (4:3), the sign of God's everlasting covenant with the whole creation (Gen. 9:8-17).

The description of "the scroll" (5:1-2) is based on Ezekiel 2:9-3:3, where its content is God's judgment on Jerusalem. In short, we are now to learn of history and God's judgment upon history. The scroll contains God's gracious purpose, whereby creation will be redeemed. Unless the scroll is opened, the purpose cannot be achieved. Who is worthy to open it? "Then one of the elders said to me . . . the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll. . . . Then I saw . . . a Lamb" (5:5-6). "The Lion of the tribe of Judah" refers to the Messiah (cf. Gen. 49:9-10); "the Root of David" refers to the ideal king who was to rule Israel and be a sign to the nations (Isa. 11:1, 10). Israel's hope is to be fulfilled. But the Lion is a Lamb. What is more, the Lion is a Lamb slain: "For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). This is the one who will open the scroll.

The first thing we learn is that history on a human level is filled with the evils of power politics: conquest, war, economic oppression, and death (6:1-8, the first four seals). Persecution of God's people is also a major element (6:9-11). "The altar" indicates, however, that their suffering has meaning. It, too, is a part of the liturgy. And what of the human power play? It leads to disaster for everyone, but especially for the powerful, "the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful" (6:15a). All of them perceive "the wrath of the Lamb" (6:16).

Next we return to the liturgy of heaven and to the celebration of All Saints (7:1-8:5). The "servants of God" are enumerated by tribes in a military roll call, like the lists in 1 Chronicles (cf. 1 Chron. 7:11-40). The culmination of the liturgy is the prayer of the saints on earth. This is why the singing ceases and there is silence in heaven (8:1). According to rabbinic tradition the angels sing throughout the night but are silent by day so that Israel's praises can be heard.

The seven trumpets seem to sound in response to the prayers of the saints. In Jewish liturgy trumpets are blown especially on Tishri 1, the day when "God judges all humankind" (b. Rosh. 16a). The consequences of the judgment are horrific (8:6-9:20), yet idolatry remains (9:20-21).

Then the seer must prophesy (10:1-10) about the people of God. In the tradition of God's prophets he consumes a scroll (cf. Ezek. 2:8). What was perhaps originally a prophecy about the inviolability of the Temple against the Gentiles has become a prophecy about the ultimate vindication of God's people in persecution and the immunity of the heavenly Temple. (We learn from Josephus that such prophecies were made—see his Jewish War 6.283-286.) In the earthly Temple, on one day in the year, the High Priest entered the holy of holies. By contrast, in the heavenly Temple the veil is drawn aside so that all may see the symbol of God's presence and judgment (11:19).

The Meaning of the Incarnation 12:1-17

“The woman and the dragon” is a magnificent portrait of cosmic war, yet all leads to verse 12:17. The suffering and harassment of little congregations in Asia Minor is more significant, and part of a greater plan, than any might have guessed!

A Vision of the Present Tribulation 13:1-19:10

In verses 13:1-18 the connection of the beast with the worship of the emperor as divine is obvious, even if all the details (such as the precise identification of “666”) are not. We return to the heavenly liturgy (14:1-5). Now we hear of the preparation for holy war, and so, like Israel’s soldiers of old, the warriors must consecrate themselves (cf. Deut. 18:9-10; 1 Sam. 21:5). In the context of this war we hear the judgments: God alone is to be worshiped; “Babylon” is doomed; those who compromise with “the beast” are perishing; “the saints” must endure (14:6-13). The time is ripe for judgment (14:14-20).

The Vision of the Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath

The background remains the continuing heavenly vision (15:2-8). All that may have been intended by the details of the vision is not clear, but its main intention is unmistakable. The judgments are against Rome. They are against all who compromise with Rome, against idolaters, and against all who persecute the faithful (16:2, 6-7, 9, 10, 19). In verses 17:1-19:5 the final judgment is declared against Rome (“Babylon,” “the harlot”)—or, to be precise, not Rome as such, but Rome arrogating to herself divine prerogatives. The “harlot” is clearly a caricature of the goddess Roma. The overthrow of such a Rome causes the powerful, the rich, and the international business community to lament (18:9, 11, 17), but heaven rejoices (19:1-5). As always, the prophet’s vision has returned to the liturgy of heaven.

Ancient Hopes Fulfilled: Conquering Messiah, Millennium, Judgment 19:11-20:15

The king Messiah finally rides forth to conquer (19:11-21). The last battle spells doom for the rich and the powerful, and for all those who have oppressed the poor (19:18). Those opposed to the Messiah are still those who support the state as divine (“the beast”) and their powerful vassals (19:19-21). The devil is bound for a thousand years, and the saints come to life and reign with Christ also for a thousand years (20:1-6). This is the “first resurrection” (20:5). Then Satan is loosed and finally overthrown (20:7-10). There follows the final and universal judgment (20:11-15). “If living communion with God is the foundation of eternal life, the absence of such communion is the basis of non-eternal life” (Harrington 1993, 206).

A New Heaven and a New Earth 21:1-22:20

The vision ends in heaven, with a new heaven and a new earth (21:1-22:5). The first thing we learn about the new heaven and the new earth is that “the sea was no more” (21:1). Other elements of the present order are also dismissed, such as tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. “The sea” is no doubt the mythical sea of chaos: the sea that stands for God’s rule not yet fully accomplished (cf. Gen. 1:2, 6-9). “See, the home of God is among mortals” (21:3). God’s dwelling is the divine presence, which has been anticipated for us in many ways but supremely in the Incarnation. “They will be his peoples” (21:3) is the promise made to Israel at Sinai (Lev. 26:12), renewed by the prophets (Hos. 2:23; Jer. 30:22), and renewed again in the new covenant of Christ (Rom. 9:25; 1 Pet. 2:10). “God himself will be with them” (21:3) is the promise given to Moses at the bush (Exod. 3:12) and enshrined in the prophetic hope (Isa. 7:14; cf. Matt. 1:23). Indeed the entire passage, verses 21:1-22:5, is a catena—a connected series—of visions of hope fulfilled, Paradise regained, and Adam (humankind) restored—the final fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel.

The seer declares what will be. Yet the seer’s last words are for the present just as, in a sense, his whole message is for the present (22:6-17). He emphasizes the nearness of what is promised (22:6, 7, 10) and the

eternal loss experienced by those who are unfaithful (22:15). Above all he speaks again of God's gift, in Christ and through the church, for those who will have it: "Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (22:17). Even now the firstfruits of the final redemption are available for those who will have them. In this sense, too, the redemption of which John speaks is always "near."

Possibly a Personally Written Section 22:18-20

The sense of the "I" changes abruptly from Jesus to the seer himself (who now writes very consciously as author). That the writer does not say "I, John," as at other times (1:9; 22:8) may well be because at this point he himself has taken the pen from his amanuensis to add a closing greeting in his own hand (cf. Gal. 6:11). In that case the change of person will have seemed obvious to him. The words he writes seek to protect the integrity of his work (see above), and continue to stand as a warning to all of us who try to interpret it.

A Closing Epistolary Greeting 22:21

John's final greeting is in the apostolic manner (cf. Gal. 1:18). He prays that "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" may be "with all" (22:21). Despite the NRSV choice, ("all the saints"), this is the reading to be preferred (see Metzger 1975, 766-767). No less a concern than with "all" is finally possible for the one of whom John has spoken, who is "Alpha and Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come" (1:8).

The History of Interpretation

A major problem in interpreting the Revelation to John is to decide whether it is meant to be taken literally or symbolically. Controversy from early days revolved around verses 20:1-6. Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian believed that the section prophesied an earthly kingdom of Christ that would follow his second advent and last for a thousand years. Such a view is called "chiliasm" (Greek: chilioi, "a thousand") or "millennarianism" (from Latin: mille, also "a thousand"), and those who hold it are called "chiliasts" or "millennarians." Origen, by contrast, taught that hope for an earthly kingdom was an indulgence of lust. He argued that the prophecies of the end should be interpreted figuratively.

Augustine compromised by arguing that verses 20:1-6 referred to the ministry of Jesus, because in that ministry Satan was bound. The reign of a thousand years, Augustine held, was the age of the church, which would be followed by the second coming of Christ. Augustine identified the beasts of Revelation 13 with the evil world and human hypocrisy rather than with any specific political institution. In time Augustine's view prevailed and ended most of the debate. Gradually even the number "one thousand" came to be understood symbolically rather than literally. In the twelfth century, however, the idea of an earthly reign of Christ was resurrected by the mystic Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1132-1202). From that time onward it has burgeoned at various times and in various forms.

Modern arguments about Revelation are related to those of the early church. They still involve "literal" as opposed to "symbolic" interpretations. They still tend to

revolve around the meaning of verses 20:1-6. The teaching of the main denominations (Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic) continues more or less to be based on Augustine.

From this point of view Daniel and Revelation suggest the inner meaning of our universe and of the human experience of that process. The biblical apocalypses are viewed not as forecasts of what is to be, but as interpretations of how things were, are, and ought to be. Their purposes are to inform and to influence human life by means of the values and insights expressed in symbolic and narrative form. (Collins 1986, 231) By contrast, those who look for the literal reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years call themselves

premillennialists because they emphasize Christ's return before ("pre-") the reign. They describe the teaching of the Christian churches as a-millennial because it does not ("a-") include an earthly reign between the second advent and the final state.

As we might have expected, particular interest was aroused in the last century of the second millennium by premillennialists who expected the end to be soon. Such a point of view often includes more or less precise speculation about the date of the second advent (contrast Acts 1:6, which expressly forbids such speculation). Pre-millennialists believe that the end will be the consummation of a series of events, and that these events can be known by studying biblical prophecy. In other words, the events are described in coded form in the books of Revelation and Daniel. All that is necessary is to relate the figures in the Bible to the events they represent. The work of the scriptural interpreter is to do this and to show where we are at present on the biblical timetable.

Among the fundamental principles of the premillennialists is belief in the unity of all scripture, so that interpretation is made by comparing scripture with scripture, and the belief that all scripture must be interpreted literally. Premillennialists generally accuse the churches of inconsistency because they interpret some parts of scripture literally, but not others.

In recent years a leading representative of premillennial thinking has been Hal Lindsay. Many have read his book The Late Great Planet Earth. Following the principle of the unity of scripture, Lindsay interprets The Book of Daniel and Revelation together. The fourth beast of Daniel is Rome. Revelation speaks of the second phase of its power (i.e., the twentieth century) when it appeared as a ten-nation confederacy: the European Economic Community. The beast of Revelation 13 is the antichrist, whom Lindsay calls the "Future Fuehrer"—a Roman dictator who will take over the EEC. The antichrist will be recognized when he recovers miraculously from a fatal wound.

There is much ingenuity in work such as Lindsay's, and it is not surprising that many who know nothing of biblical study are deceived by it. There are, however, a number

of serious flaws in its approach. To begin, we must point to the error of insisting in all cases on what is alleged to be a "literal" interpretation of scripture. This insistence is itself simply the imposition on scripture of a dogma for which scripture gives no warrant. Indeed, one biblical writer points out that God spoke "in many and various ways" by the prophets (Heb. 1:1). The implication is that we may not assign biblical literature to any single category, including that of literal history.

Closely linked to this baseless (indeed, false) dogmatic assumption is the failure of Lindsay and others like him to take seriously the historical character of the scriptures, which is an essential aspect of their character. The fourth beast of Daniel 7 represents a historical entity extremely important to those who first composed and heard the prophecy some time early in the second century before the coming of Christ. No doubt the symbol they used informed and provided a model for the author and first hearers of Revelation in the situation in which they found themselves nearly three centuries later. As we know very well, the second group faced a different situation and therefore needed a new prophecy.

Failure to take seriously the historical character of the biblical revelation means that, although Lindsay is not wrong to "compare scripture with scripture" as a means of interpretation, he cannot actually do what he sets out to do. Why? Because he has not paid his texts the courtesy of taking them seriously in themselves. If he had, he would know that the beast in Daniel 7 and the beast in Revelation 13 do not refer to the same historical entities and that his allegedly "literal" interpretation therefore has no "literal" basis.

To this point what Lindsay "alleges" has been spoken of as literal interpretation. In fact, his interpretation is

not literal at all. It is allegorical. An obvious characteristic of the allegorical approach is that it is entirely without control. For centuries writers like Lindsay have played the sport of casting those they disliked as the villains in Revelation. The Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, Martin Luther and the Protestants, Napoleon and the French Empire, Hitler and the Third Reich, and more recently (how could we be surprised?) first the Ayatollah Khomeini and then Saddam Hussein have all been candidates. Such "interpretation" is not interpretation at all. It is simply a more or less ingenious form of self-indulgence.

Problems and Significance of Revelation as Scripture

How then does the church approach the Revelation to John? Clearly, appropriating the book as scripture is not without its problems. Revelation's place in the canon of the NT has generally been more tenuous than that of any other book. Many of the church fathers rejected it. Luther in his 1522 "Preface" said bluntly, "I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it. . . . Christ is neither taught nor known in it." He relegated it to the appendix of his Bible. Although he reversed himself in 1545, his first thoughts on the question are still powerful. Thomas Cranmer omitted Revelation from the daily office lectionary of the Church of England. More recently C. H. Dodd wrote that "the God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognized as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A recent interpreter of Revelation, Adela Yarbro Collins, states the problems frankly and clearly. The dualist division of humanity into those with the mark of the beast and those with the seal of God is problematic because of its lack of credibility. More important, she says, such imagery is

. . . self-destructive and dehumanizing. One's enemies, including large numbers of unknown people with whom one supposes oneself to be in disagreement, are given a simple label associated with demonic beings, and thus are denied their full humanity. The act of denying others their full humanity diminishes the actor's humanity as well. (1984, 170)

If many Christians talked as Revelation does, we can see why Tacitus accused them of "hatred of the human race" (Annals 15.44.2-8). It is true that the faithful in Revelation "are called to endure, not take up arms. The violent imagery was apparently intended to release aggressive feelings in a harmless way. Nevertheless, what is cathartic for one person may be inflammatory for another" (Collins 171). We cannot fail to note that some contemporary sectarians, heavily influenced by the Revelation to John, are evidently ready to contemplate with equanimity the creation of a nuclear holocaust. Insofar as Revelation suggests an ultimate achievement of dignity for the oppressed only by a reversal of roles and the degradation of others, "it works against the values of humanization and love" (172). Such imagery may embody attitudes that are necessary in the struggle for justice "under certain conditions." Nevertheless, they also "have a dark side of which interpreters of the Apocalypse must be conscious and whose dangers must be recognized" (172). In this connection there are difficulties with some of the use of feminine imagery in Revelation. Of course the picture of the harlot in Revelation 17 and 18 is symbolic. Nevertheless, to put the matter bluntly, the picture of a woman being beaten up and then killed (Rev. 17:16) is not edifying even as a symbol of judgment. The use of other feminine imagery, such as that of the church as the bride (21:2), goes some way toward redeeming this, but not all the way.

With this difficulty granted, however, Collins also points out that Revelation's symbols of dragon, beast, and harlot can serve to stimulate our thinking on the nature of evil and provide a valuable corrective to the weaknesses of some contemporary religion. This is particularly true of our tendency to emphasize the present at the expense of the future, and the individual at the expense of social and political commitment (174). Revelation reminds us by its imagery that sin and evil are not simply matters of individual choice. We can be caught up in collective processes with evil effects, such as societies that subordinate some members on the grounds of race or sex, or the buildup of weapons by the superpowers. Revelation arouses the church to name

those “beasts” and so to ally itself with “those tendencies in society which hold promise of movement towards the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of the Bible—freedom, peace, justice and reconciliation” (175).

The absolute goods and bads of Revelation also serve to remind us that even our proximate choices are ultimately serious, making contributions for or against life

or death. In terms of our own salvation or the good of our neighbors there may be something so important that we must give up everything else for it. In the end we can have either the penny or the bun, St. George or the dragon, the bride or the harlot, the Lamb or the beast. We cannot forever have both. Revelation raises the question of damnation more theatrically—though not necessarily more acutely—than any other book in the New Testament.

This may be the point to mention another difficulty that some readers have with Revelation: namely, that the seer of Patmos was simply wrong. Rome was not destroyed. In fact, the city of Rome stands to this day, one of the greatest cities of the world. What then? The real question is: What is the nature of prophecy? Prophecy is not fortunetelling. Prophecy is insight. We have already pointed to the example of Jonah, who prophesied the imminent destruction of Nineveh, which then repented and was not destroyed. The analogy with John is apt. John did not attack Rome per se. John attacked a Rome that claimed for itself the prerogatives of divinity. When Rome accepted Christianity, it abandoned that claim to divinity.

John’s concern with the Roman state’s claim to divinity furnishes the element of justification for those who then apply his teaching to other states and other times. Wherever nations or other institutions claim for themselves the prerogatives of divinity, they need to hear the warnings and judgments of the seer of Patmos. No doubt in the United States and Western Europe we would do well, rather than judging others, to begin asking how far our own interests in power and wealth tempt us to claim for ourselves more than we should. While Dr. Johnson’s dismissal of patriotism as “the last refuge of a scoundrel” (Boswell, Life of Johnson, vol. 2) may not always be fair, it remains important for us to remember that God did not create even the universe to be eternal, much less a nation or political system. The final question here (and part of Revelation’s greatness is that it does not allow us to avoid it) is “Who rules the world?” Rome’s claim is explicitly denied, but implicitly all human claims to divine authority or insight (national, ecclesial, or personal [cf. Gen. 3]) are denied. God’s sovereignty leads to life, freedom, and joy. All other sovereignty leads to bondage, chaos, and death.

The Revelation to John pays us the compliment of taking our response to grace very seriously. It does not allow us to avoid the tension between Romans 3:24 (we are “justified by [God’s] grace as a gift”) and 1 Corinthians 9:27 (after preaching to others, I may myself “be disqualified”).

While we must concede that something of the writer’s own sinfulness has crept into Revelation’s portrait of sinners, it is only fair to note the ravishing beauty of its portraits of redemption—the bride and the heavenly city. How many mourners have been comforted by its promise of renewal: “God shall wipe away every tear”? It is this sustained vision of heaven, undergirding and finally overwhelming all other themes, that in the end qualifies the Revelation to John as Christian testament.

End of chapter