

Views on REVELATION

One of the most difficult books of the Bible is the book of Revelation. A student of the Bible must clearly have a good grip on the teaching and literature of the rest of the Bible before tackling it. The different views surveyed here show both the divergence of interpretation and the difficulties involved in understanding it. They all try to base their interpretation on Scripture interpreting Scripture, and these views are held by many Presbyterian and Reformed pastors and professors.

George Eldon Ladd's Revelation (Eerdmans, 1972) is a commentary written from the Historic Pre-millennial position. He accepts a date for the book A.D. 81-96 based on two statements by 2nd Century Church fathers. He views the book as "primarily concerned with assuring the churches of Asia of the final eschatological salvation at the end of the age, together with the judgment of the evil world powers".

David Chilton's The Days of Vengeance (Dominion Press, 1987) is a commentary written from what we can call the Post millennial position. He dates the book prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He sees in the Book a similar Covenant Structure as is seen in the OT Covenants and in books like Deuteronomy and represents a "Covenant Lawsuit" similar to those in the Prophets. He states: "*The Book of Revelation is not about the Second Coming of Christ. It is about the destruction of Israel and Christ's victory over His enemies in the establishment of the New Covenant Temple. . . . The main focus is upon events that were soon to take place.*" (p. 43).

Most commentators agree on the basic outline however, "the Revelation is so complex that one is tempted to indulge in endless structural analyses." Chilton p. 45

Ladd's Outline:

- I. **Prologue:** 1: 1-8
- II. **First Vision** 1: 9 - 3:22 (Letters to seven churches)
- III. **The Second Vision** 4: 1 - 16:21
 - A. The Heavenly Throne (4:1 - 11)
 - B. The Seven Seals (5:1 - 8:1)
 1. The Sealed Book (5: 1 - 14)
 2. The Six Seals (5:1 - 8:1)
 3. Interlude: Two Multitudes (7: 1 - 17)
 4. The Seventh Seal (8:1)
 - C. The Seven Trumpets 8:2 - 14:20
 1. The Six Trumpets (8:2 - 9:21)
 2. Interlude (10:1 - 11:13)
 3. The Seventh Trumpet (11:14 - 19)
 4. Interlude (12: 1 - 14:20)
 - D. The Seven Bowls 15: 1 - 16:21
- IV. **The Third Vision** (17:1 - 21:8)
 - A. The Mystery of Babylon
 - B. Judgment of Babylon 18:1 - 19:5
 - C. Final Triumph and Consummation (19:6 - 21:8)
- V. **The Fourth Vision:** The Heavenly Jerusalem 21:9 - 22:5
- VI. **Epilogue** 22: 6 - 21

Chilton's Outline:

THE BRIDEGROOM (Christ) (1 - 11)

- I. **Preamble:** John's Vision of Son of Man
- II. **Historical Prologue:** Letters to Churches (also a portrayal of periods of OT History)

III. **Stipulations:** The Seven Seals

IV. **Sanctions:** The Seven Trumpets

THE BRIDE (Church) (12 - 22)

- V. **Succession Arrangements:** The Seven Chalice

Issues that have to be dealt with in Studying the book of Revelation:

1. Its connections with the Old Testament - Though not cited, there are 348 clear OT references in Revelation - 57 from the Pentateuch, 235 from the Prophets and 56 from the Historical and Poetical books according to Merrill Tenney. Chilton suggests that with all the allusions a structure so close to the prophecies of Ezekiel that perhaps Revelation was designed as a book of worship readings to accompany readings of Ezekiel through the Church year, i.e. a lectionary. In the "four sevenfold" judgments, he sees connections to Leviticus 26 and Matthew 24. Students will always have to deal with what connections exist between Revelation and the prophetic books of Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, and the others; Jesus' end times discourse in Matthew 24; Paul's eschatology in I & II Thessalonians; as well as other "End Times" passages.

2. Its system of Symbolism. Certainly there have been many approaches to this. Conservative Scholars always stress the use of the Bible's own system. But there are questions as to the degree these are to be taken "literally." The symbolism is clearly taken from the rest of Scripture. Chilton remarks on its symbolism: "*Biblical symbolism is not a "code." It is not given in a "this-means-that" style: "Biblical symbols are fluid not stereotyped." A Biblical symbol is a collectivity, referring to several ideas at once. Biblical symbolism, like poetry, is evocative language, used when discursive language is insufficient. The Bible uses evocative imagery to call up to our minds various associations which have been established by the Bible's own literary art.*" He quotes Philip Carrington: "*Symbolism is a way of suggesting the truth about those great spiritual realities which exclude exact definition or complete systematization: that is why it is so much employed in worship . . . the symbol is much richer in meaning than any meaning we can draw from it.*" (Chilton, p. 35)

3. Its connections to non-biblical Apocalyptic literature. There are number of books outside of Scripture that are called "Apocalyptic." Most of these were written in pessimism and despairing of hope and looked for an immediate cosmic visitation that would overthrow evil. More liberal scholars tend to emphasize the similarities, conservative scholars point out the differences. "*St. John's approach in the Revelation is vastly different. His symbols are not obscure ravings hatched from a fevered imagination; they are rooted firmly in the Old Testament. . . . John presents history as the scene of divine redemption.*" Chilton, p. 26

4. Its connection to its contemporary readers. Is it a book for first Century Christians, or hidden meanings only to be understood only in latter times. What meaning and purpose did it have the early church? Was it expected to be fulfilled by the fall of Jerusalem, of Nero's Rome, or the fall of a future "Babylon the Great"? Was it a prophecy of the destruction of the Jewish Temple and system? Or was it a picture of Church history until the last times? Are the seven churches real or the letters a "literary construction?" William Ramsey's The Letters to Seven Churches argues for real churches.

4. Theological concerns frequently shape interpretation, especially particular views on the nature of the Kingdom of God and the Millennium. A-millennialism sees the millennial kingdom as a symbolic concept - see William Hendriksen's More Than Conquerors or Mounce, Revelation. Dispensational Pre-millennialism presupposes two distinct peoples of God - Israel and the Church - See Walvoord or Ryrie. Dispensationalism is not accepted by the PCA because it denies the unity of Old and New Testaments and of God's work of Salvation.

5. Contemporary events also often color interpretations - when times seem desperate A-millennial or Pre-millennial positions are strong, when times are more optimistic Post-millennial views seem popular. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948; the events of the Jewish-Arab wars, the current Middle-eastern situation, etc., fire the imaginations of scholars of future events. We should be warned that in every period of history - scholars tend to see their own times as the End Times - and have tended to identify their contemporary history with its events.