

TEACHING AND PREACHING FROM REVELATION

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Revelation is without question the most complex, and least understood, book in the Bible, and as a result there is lots of bad preaching from this book. Understanding the genre of this literature is more important than understanding this or that exegetical conundrum in the book (e.g. who is Mr. 666). This means that the real problem for preaching is that it will not be sufficient to pick this or that favorite passage or even to follow the lectionary in preaching Revelation. There will need to be either an orienting sermon or two, and teaching sessions before diving into this or that passage in the book.

Furthermore, one needs to bear in mind that what we have in Revelation is a combination of things--- epistolary elements in Rev. 2-3 and Rev. 22, a narrative of end things, and apocalyptic prophecies of a visionary sort. It is of course the visions which dominate the book, and make it impossible to simply treat it as either an ordinary book of classical prophecy, or a collection of letters, or an ordinary narrative. Because Revelation involves a continuous narrative, beginning at least in Rev. 6, if not before, there is always the problem of how to deal with an ongoing narrative when you are preaching a small portion of the story. It is all these things and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Did I mention that the focus of the book is on complex eschatological matters?

THE NATURE OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic literature is not simply prophecy in the classical sense. The word **apocalypsis** refers to the unveiling of things otherwise hidden or secret. The basic assumption is that without revelation most of the profound mysteries of life and salvation cannot be understood. Unlike old school wisdom literature that suggests one can be a student of nature (“go to the ant and learn...”) and human nature and so of general revelation and figure most things out, the fundamental assumption behind apocalyptic literature is that the world is out of joint, and only a revelation from above can help someone to figure it out. So one of the things one can do to orient people to this literature is preach on the nature of divine revelation. You can show that all of the NT writers are in agreement that they are living in dangerous and eschatological times, and that

revelation from God is necessary to understand it (see e.g. what Jesus says in Mt. 11.25-27).

Secondly, apocalyptic literature is Jewish minority literature that assumes a lot of the reader or hearer. In particular it assumes a considerable knowledge of the Jewish prophetic tradition. Revelation is the most Scripture saturated book in the canon, though it seldom directly quotes the OT. It prefers to simply allude to, echo, or draw images from the OT to create a new whole. The apocalyptic images and metaphors are especially malleable, and this makes clear that John of Patmos is not attempting to describe things literally (compare for instance the differences in the throne chariot vision in Ezekiel 1 and the vision of John in Revelation 4).

Jewish apocalyptic literature is literature that began in the exile with figures like Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah, and continued thereafter. Humanly speaking what generated it was the profound realization that justice was not going to be done in this lifetime for many of God's people, the audiences of these prophets. Apocalyptic literature then in a broad sense addresses the issue of theodicy--- how can the God of the Bible be in control of history and be a good of justice, and these things be happening to God's people? God's people are being persecuted, prosecuted, exiled and executed. Why? And how should God's people respond? One of the most profound insights that John of Patmos wants us to remember is that "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay." In other words, despite the way many modern TV preachers have used Revelation, it is not a book that encourages Christians to beat their plowshares into swords and go fight the battle of Armageddon. To the contrary, Revelation says leave the justice issues in the hands of God. Ironically, the one's called conquerors in Revelation, the real over-comers, are those who have submitted to martyrdom, not those who have taken up arms. Revelation is not a book that involves a call to arms, in fact it could be called "a farewell to arms". This is because John of Patmos believes that just as there is true revelation from heaven, so also there will be divine intervention from heaven by the Rider on the white horse, and he will sort out the bad guys. Armageddon in Revelation 20 is when the Rider calls down fire from heaven and the wicked are destroyed--- there is no battle between human armies, and current struggles in the middle east have nothing to do with that final cataclysm.

A definition of apocalyptic literature is in order--- “ *a genre of revelatory literature within 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 (envisioning eschatological salvation and judgment in the end), and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. It is Jewish minority literature written for those in some sort of social distress--- persecution, prosecution, exile, facing execution.*” This certainly describes Revelation quite adequately.

A central feature of this type of literature is that it is **analogical** by which I mean it draws lots of analogies between unlike things to make some point. If one was to go back to Ezekiel 1 and just notice how many times the prophet says “it was like... it was like... it was like...” and then notice the same thing when John is relating his visions, you will get the point. Here is the point--- the visionary can relate much of what he hears *verbatim* but he must also describe what he sees, and in mundane terms, hence the need for analogy. The Ancient of Days had hair that looked like white wool, but of course it was not white wool. The descriptions are not literal, they are largely metaphorical in apocalyptic literature. However, and this is a big however, *the descriptions are referential*. By this I mean the descriptions are referring to something the prophet believes is real. The vision is not some subjective experience happening in the overheated imagination of the prophet. The vision is being broadcast from heaven on Revelation cable to the prophet’s brain, and what he is seeing is taken as real—whether it is a vision of heaven, or the future. Lots of modern readers of revelation have a hard time distinguishing between ‘metaphorical’ vs. literal and imaginary vs. real. In conservative Protestant circles it is often assumed that if you are not saying it is literal, you are not saying it is real. A moment’s reflection shows this is false. The parables of Jesus are literary fictions. Yet they are referential. Similarly with apocalyptic visions and descriptions.

The second major thing to be said about the definition above is that apocalyptic literature is mediated literature---- read Rev. 1.1-4 here. God told the Son who told the angel who told John, who told the churches. This reflects the fact of the assumed distance between heaven and earth, between God and his alienated and sinful people, and the like. Revelation has to leap the gap between a holy God and unholy humankind.

If you read Revelation in the context of lots of other early Jewish apocalyptic literature (for example the so-called parables of Enoch which are alluded to in the book of Jude), you quickly see that there tend to be two kinds of books--- those which focus on what is up there in heaven (and so one gets a guided tour of heaven), and those which focus on what is out there at the eschaton (and so the focus is on the future). Revelation is one stop shopping in that it gives us some of both--- describing both what is up there and what is out there and *John expects a corporate merger of what is up there with what is out there, between heaven and earth, eventually*. What is true now in heaven, will one day be true on earth in the new creation. Apocalyptic literature is not just otherworldly literature, but it is suggesting that this world is ultimately controlled from Control Central which is heaven and that one day the Kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdoms of our God. Jesus will return, the new Jerusalem will descend, and the final destination of the Christian is not heaven, but new creation. Notice for example how cranky the saints under the altar in heaven are in Rev. 6—bemoaning things and asking “How long O Lord?” They are given new choir robes and told to hush.

One of the more puzzling features of apocalyptic literature is its use of *multivalent symbols*. By this I mean that wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, signs in the heavens, false prophets, bad predictions, messianic mentalities have been characteristic of every age of human history. These are hardly specific signs that only happen at the end of things. Then too, John and the writers of the NT believe that we are already in the end times--- they began with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The end of the end could come sooner..... or later, and so one needs to be good Boy Scouts and “be prepared” at all times. Multivalency means that a text is what we would call genuinely generic—it could have a variety of referents. The anti-Christ for earliest Christians was some sort of Nero back from the dead figure--- like Domitian who is probably Mr. 666 in Revelation. But other gnarly megalomaniac world rulers like a Hitler or a Stalin or the like could sit for this portrait. This is why generation after generation of interpreters have thought Revelation was relevant to their own time, and it is. We are still in the end times. John however does not in any way encourage us to engage in theological weather forecasting, since the symbols are not specific enough to be able to pin down to one particular series

of crisis events. *And this is intentional.* I like to put it this way--- *God reveals enough about the future to give us hope, but not so much that we do not need to live by faith.*

Apocalyptic prophecy is not intended to tell you everything you always wanted to know about the future but were afraid to ask. It is meant to give you a sketch or outline about what is up there, what is out there and where it is all going, and then it intends to inculcate trust in the sovereign God, and belief in a robust Christ-centered afterlife, both out there, and then after the resurrection back down here in the end.

PREACHING AND TEACHING TIPS

Firstly, though highly symbolic the least complex part of the book of Revelation are the little letters in Rev. 2-3. Here is a good place to do a sermon series, on the character of churches and church life and the accountability God holds us to. It is important to note that John depicts Christ doing an inspection tour of his churches in his own day, not merely at the final judgment (behold I stand at the door and knock). Secondly, I have found that one can do a nice long series on images of Christ in the book of Revelation (the Alpha and Omega, the slain but living Lamb etc.). Thirdly, there is so much in Revelation on worship, that a series on pictures of worship in Revelation perhaps beginning in Rev. 4 and 5 will not go amiss. Fourthly, if you are going to preach on this book's vision of the future then five points are crucial: 1) Jesus is coming back; 2) the final destiny of Christians is the new creation, heaven is just a very clean bus station on the way there; 3) judgment should be left now and later in the hands of Christ, who alone is worthy to open up the seals and send judgment on the earth; 4) Revelation depicts a church which, while protected from extermination during the final tribulation, is not beamed up out of this world (see Rev. 12). Christians of the final generation should no more expect to be exempt from suffering, even unto death, than any other generation of Christians have been. 5) we have no idea when the end of the end times will happen. There has been an 100% failure rate throughout church history whenever one has made a prediction. We are called to have great expectations, and not let that faith degenerate into bold calculations; 6) there is a very robust theology of both heaven and resurrection and so of the afterlife in this book. There is so much Christian mythology about heaven that this book provides a good opportunity to set forth some clear markers on what is and isn't said in the NT; 7) the Christocentric focus of this book is clear. It is all about Christ the

judge and Christ the redeemer. This subject never grows old and in our own tough economic times can provide considerable solace. God is in control of things, including our economy. It is time to trust God more, not less.

FOR FURTHER READING

In preparation for this seminar the participant ought to read several of the following. There are many good commentaries now on Revelation and I can commend the following: 1) Witherington Revelation, (Cambridge U. Press, 2003); 2) C. Keener, NIV Application Bible Commentary. Revelation, (Zondervan 2000); 3) G.R. Osborne, Revelation, (Baker, 2002).

I also suggest the following secondary literature: 1) Craig Koester, Revelation and the End of all Things, (Eerdmans, 2001); 2) Witherington, Jesus the Sage and the Progress of Prophecy, (Hendrickson, 2001); 3) Craig Hill, In God's Time. The Bible and the Future, (Eerdmans, 2002); and N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, (Harper, 2007).