

The Simple Meaning of the Book of Revelation

Years ago a gentleman chided me for saying that the book of Revelation is easy to understand. My reply to him was that he did not listen to what I had said. My statement was, "The book of Revelation is not as difficult as people make it out to be." I continue to stand by that statement.

Granted, the apocalyptic method in which the book is written does give the reader cause to stop and scratch his or her head from time to time. The abuses made by sensationalists on their television shows and in their books don't help the situation. The willingness of the masses to swallow the interpretations of these false teachers compounds the misunderstanding of the book even further. It's so sad that so many will take what some preacher says as truth without ever bothering to delve into God's Word for themselves. Would that more of us would be like the Berean citizens of old of whom it was said, they "searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." (Acts 17:11).

For at least the few moments that it will take to read this article, please put out of your thoughts the dramatic presentations you might have seen or heard about blood up to horses' bridles or dragons or a heavenly battle. Stop trying to identify the beast as some modern-day heathen and put aside all efforts to assign that number 666 to anyone in our day and time. Go back to the time of the writing of the book of Revelation. Consider the setting and consider the motivation behind the message. Doing so will help clear away much of the confusion that is being foisted upon us by preachers who would perhaps be better suited to writing articles for "The National Enquirer."

As the book opens, we find the apostle John clearly stating that he was writing about "things which must shortly come to pass." (Revelation 1:1). In verse 3 he declares, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand." Since God does not measure time as man does (II Peter 3:8), the original readers could not affix a date to the things of which John would be writing. Unlike some today who are certain that they have nailed down the time of the Lord's return, faithful Christians in the first century did not engage in such folly.

Whenever the events of which John would write were to occur, it's obvious that they were to occur in the lifetimes of at least some of these original readers. My reason for affirming such is that every book of the Bible originally had meaning to its readers. Does that mean that everything in every book happened in the lives of those original readers? No. Does that mean that every reader grasped every concept? No (I Peter 1:10-12). What it does mean is that every book of the Bible originally served a purpose. For example, John's Gospel account was written "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life in his name." (John 20:31). While this tremendous message has benefited mankind through the centuries, it originally had meaning to its first readers. In other words, John did not write to the first readers of his Gospel account of something far off in obscurity. If they had the desire to know the truth, they understood what he said.

Let's apply this principle to the book of Revelation. In the book's setting, Christians were being severely persecuted (Revelation 1:9). Many had been murdered for the faith (Revelation 6:9; 20:4). The pressure was on them to give in to the world (Revelation 13:15). Even some fellow Christians were exerting this pressure (Revelation 2:14,15,20). Faithful brethren needed to hear a message from God. They needed to know that if they would overcome and remain faithful, they would be rewarded in eternity (Revelation 2:10,17,26; 3:5,12,21). They needed to know that God would give the victory (Revelation 21-22). If the events of the book were reserved for 21st century mankind, what type of comfort would that have offered to the original readers? Is John saying, "Be faithful, brethren. Two thousand years from now a beast is going to come along and try to get people of that time to worship him. Those people in the 21st century will be victorious on the earth. I don't know about your situation, but those people two thousand years down the line will come out on top." Is that what John is saying? No; that makes no sense.

First century Christians needed a message of victory. That's what the book of Revelation is all about. It was written in a style that allowed the book to have wide distribution in a political climate that was detrimental to anyone who stood for the faith once delivered. It's about victory. While the ultimate victory in eternity is addressed when the Lord comes in final judgment, victory over the original

readers' imminent trials is also treated. Rather than look for literal fulfillment of the Revelation figures today, we should instead be focusing on the fact that those of all generations who walk with God to the point of death (Revelation 2:10) will be victorious when this life is over.

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